Japan's Contributions to Africa

Sumitomo Chemical's Mosquito Net

By Tatsuo MIZUNO

Realities of Malaria & Poverty

Every year 350 million to 500 million people become infected with malaria worldwide and more than one million people lose their lives to the disease. Of these cases, 90% occur in sub-Saharan Africa, where children under 5 years of age suffer a majority of the fatalities. The annual number of deaths – one million – means one child dies of malaria every 30 seconds.

The great number of deaths is not the only detrimental effect of malaria. The suffering of malaria makes it impossible for people to work as well as for children to go to school. In addition, they are burdened with high medical costs. In the meantime, fiscal constraints make it difficult for governments to implement appropriate anti-malaria measures. As a result, people are stuck in the vicious cycle of remaining beleaguered with poverty. Malaria is said to be responsible for an annual economic loss of $12 billion (¥1.2 trillion) for the entire African continent, making the prevention of malaria vital to Africa's economic development.

Aid to Africa in "Olyset Net"

For years, Sumitomo Chemical Co. has kept close relations with Africa through business deals such as sales of agricultural chemicals and purchases of natural pyrethrum flower in Kenya and Tanzania. From its past experiences, the company is well aware that the spread of malaria has led to a great number of deaths and is a drag on economic development.

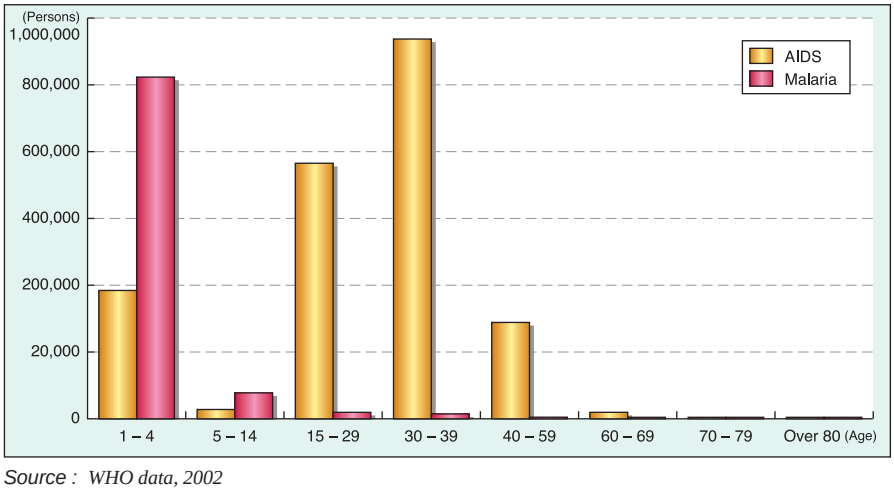
Early in the 1990s, Sumitomo Chemical successfully developed an insecticide-impregnated mosquito net for the prevention of malaria by combining resin treatment technology and insecticide know-how. The newly developed product, which is effective for an extended period of time, is the Olyset Net. The World Health Organization (WHO) had tried immensely to eradicate malaria for years, but it had faced difficulties in attaining that goal due to a lack of effective means and inadequate financial support. In 1998, however, the Roll Back Malaria (RBM) campaign got under way in a renewed move aimed at decreasing the risk of malaria on a global basis. Initially, the method of treating conventional mosquito nets with chemical agents was adopted. However, that method failed to be used in Africa due to the necessity of re-treatment every six months and thus had little effect. This prompted the WHO to employ the Long Lasting Insecticidal Net (LLIN), which is durable and retains its efficacy for years even with repeated washing. The WHO's policy shift helped boost demand rapidly for LLINs centering on the Olyset Net. In 2001, the WHO approved the Olyset Net as the first LLIN with its full recommendation.

In 2003, Sumitomo Chemical provided its Olyset Net technology, free of charge, to Tanzanian mosquito net manufacturer A to Z Textile Mills Ltd. (A to Z). By doing so, local production of the net in Africa allowed low-priced products to be produced, and also it created new employment opportunities. Moreover, Sumitomo Chemical set up a 50-50 joint venture with A to Z – Vector Health International (VHI) – which started production in January 2007. As of now, the joint venture and our partner have annual production capacity of 10 million nets, creating approximately 3,200 jobs.

Up until now, Olyset Nets have been supplied to more than 50 countries centering on Africa through Red Cross and Red Crescent societies, the U.N. Children's Fund (UNICEF) and other international organizations on top of nonprofit organizations (NPOs) and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). From the beginning of 2007 through March 2008, approximately 30 million nets have been provided to Africa. Sumitomo Chemical is also considering using local sewing factories in Kenya, Mozambique, Ethiopia, Madagascar and Malawi and constructing a fully equipped production plant in West Africa. The company is aiming to build up a "By Africa for Africa" business model designed to produce in Africa products necessary for Africa.

Sumitomo Chemical's Olyset Net is a

Chart Annual number of deaths from malaria/AIDS (by age brackets)



Source : WHO data, 2002

Photo: Sumitomo Chemical Co.

Olyset Net-sewing factory

Photo: Sumitomo Chemical Co.

Child hospitalized due to malaria

product of its business spirit based on a long-term viewpoint. The Sumitomo Group maintains the so-called "Sumitomo spirit" that its operations must not only profit itself but must also benefit society at large, a basic policy that has been shared by all group companies. Under this policy, nor only Sumitomo Chemical's executives, but also technological experts and group company workers are working together with international organizations such as the WHO, UNICEF, etc. and cooperating to promote the business, believing that the Olyset Net helps prevent the spread of malaria. Supplying the Olyset Net in Africa is not just a charity project, but also a new type of business. Sumitomo Chemical is trying to create employment opportunities, transfer technology, and help the African economy's self-reliant efforts.

What Japanese Firms Are Challenging

At present, Sumitomo Chemical is promoting the Olyset Net business in the belief that now is a great time to help improve living standards, spur self-reliant economic development, and upgrade infrastructure in Africa. We firmly believe that the public and private sectors should work together to address global issues such as eradicating not only malaria but AIDS and tuberculosis, and that such efforts could constitute an important step to overcome terrorism and other potential threats. We consider furnishing official development assistance (ODA) alone to Africa is not sufficient. While the government's official aid may be seen as important for upgrading infrastructure, we believe it is necessary to boost business investments through the private sector in Africa. Businesses should collaborate with the governments of African countries to improve infrastructure, with funds and official aid from not only Japan but also other countries in sight.

Once employment opportunities are created in African countries, living standards of people working there are certain to be upgraded. As a result, local workers will feel happy and become enthusiastic about raising their standard of living, thus fostering a sustainable, self-reliant economy and living environment. Such a virtuous cycle has now become a reality at VHI. The joint-venture company faced no easy task in setting up a factory and training local employees. However, Japanese engineers stayed and helped out for years, and finally that goal has been achieved. Today, local employees are able to manufacture products by themselves, even without the help of Japanese experts. The outcome is attributed not only to Japanese engineers but to efforts and enthusiasm among local managers and employees. In February 2008, US President George W. Bush and First Lady Laura Bush visited our factory. We are strongly hopeful that other politicians, Japanese businesses, and any individuals will visit our plant.

Sumitomo Chemical's Future Tasks

I took charge of the current job in April 2007 and have visited Africa many times. During my stay in Kenya and Madagascar, I saw mothers and their children suffering from malaria as well as those doctors, nurses and technicians who are fighting against malaria in hospitals. In Madagascar, I was surprised to see no mosquito nets even at beds in hospitals I visited. During interviews with mothers who were nursing their malaria-infected children, their eyes looked filled with joy to learn of the availability of mosquito nets. This experience reminded me of the importance of my job.

Also, I definitely felt that my most important mission is to deliver the Olyset Net to malaria-infected children and their mothers as soon as possible. The Global Fund, the World Bank and other international organizations as well as the health authorities of countries are still slow in their implementation of measures to fight against malaria. In the meantime, a child dies of malaria every 30 seconds.

The next task facing Sumitomo Chemical is to effectively make the Olyset Net available to those children and to their mothers as soon as possible with the cooperation of international organizations. JS

Tatsuo Mizuno, General Manager, Vector Control Department, belongs to the Environmental Health Division at Sumitomo Chemical Co.