

Grass Roots Aid for NGOs

By Ato Ekusa

The Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications (MPT), which is playing a leading role in the shift to an information-oriented society, has started making contributions to the global community by supporting Japan's official development assistance (ODA) and overseas assistance programs carried out by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

The ministry's fiscal 1992 provisional budget includes an ODA funding of ¥591 million, up 47% over the previous year, provided mainly for helping to meet the cost of sending technical experts to developing countries to improve their broadcasting and communications technologies and for feasibility studies of the satellite communications system in Asia-Pacific countries.

The ministry's move to promote its ODA funding is not at all surprising, considering its nominal contribution to Japan's fiscal 1992 ODA budget, which totals ¥952.2 billion. But what stands out is the idea of using its postal savings system and network to subsidize the activities of NGOs.

The MPT's Postal Savings Bureau started a program called "Voluntary Deposits for International Aid" on January 4, 1991. In this program, the ministry sets

aside, as a donation, 20% of the after-tax interest paid every April on ordinary deposits of those depositors who have voluntarily agreed to make this donation. The ministry allots the funds obtained in this way to NGOs with head offices in Japan which are running various overseas development programs.

According to data compiled at the end of 1991 by the MPT's Voluntary Deposits for International Aid Office, there were already more than 5.9 million registered depositors, and the number was expected to top 6 million by early 1992. The accumulated sum of donations came to ¥1.1 billion (\$8.46 million at the rate of ¥130/\$) at the end of March 1991. By the end of last year, 102 NGOs had received a total of ¥1.01 billion in donations for their overseas assistance activities.

There are some striking examples of aid already extended. In northeastern Thailand, only one in five children has the financial means to attend junior high school; the Mekong Fund in Hokkaido is building school farms to earn money to help children continue their education. Financial assistance was given to a program sending medical teams to Vietnam to fight contagious diseases among children. One daily chore of children in Kenya is to carry water, a difficult job



Photo: Japan International Volunteer Center

Funding from the "Voluntary Deposits for International Aid" program will help building wells like this where they are needed.

now made easier since volunteer organizations have started digging wells, with the funding from the voluntary deposit program.

The total donation at the end of March 1992 is estimated at ¥2.5 billion (\$19.2 million), which means that the assistance by the voluntary deposit program for NGOs will be two and a half times more than the ¥1 billion allotted in the fiscal 1992 provisional budget for NGO assistance by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the ministry in charge of international cooperation. In fact, the Japanese NGO Center for International Cooperation, a coordinating organization for NGO networking, prefers funding from the Voluntary Deposits for International Aid program, saying there are fewer strings attached than with the aid from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Anybody can open a voluntary deposit account at any of the 24,000 post offices located throughout Japan. This reflects the remarkable presence of the MPT, with its outlet network reaching into every nook and cranny of the country. Haruki Matsuno, director-general of the Postal Savings Bureau, says that the project is causing much more reaction from the public than expected.

The ministry intends to promote this project further using pamphlets and promotion videos provided in post offices. Indeed, this project has demonstrated that international aid can be effectively accomplished by nongovernmental cooperation at the grass roots level.

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People who agree to donate part of the interest from their savings in post office accounts to developing countries learn how the money is spent through newsletters.