

# A Thai View of ODA

By Surichai Wun'Gaeo

Japan has been very serious about attaining its quantitative aid targets in the past few years. The government has even designated October 6 as "International Cooperation Day," based on the day Japan first joined a donors' group called the Colombo Plan in 1954. A friend of the Japanese people could not but applaud these important efforts. Moreover, Japan has been the leading donor to Thailand for the last 10 years.

But does this increase in ODA itself imply that Japan has fulfilled its world responsibility? I am afraid not.

Here let me introduce the results of a public opinion poll carried out under the auspices of the Chulalongkorn University Institute of Asian Studies with partial support from the Japan Foundation. The survey was conducted in the second quarter of 1987 covering 500 respondents from 12 provinces of Thailand.

Judging from the survey, Thais as aid-receivers view Japanese aid in a very different manner from the Japanese themselves. In response to a question about the donor's expectations or aims for aid, as many as two-thirds of the respondents said it is for Japan's own benefit. Some 30% thought that mutual benefit was the prime aim, while less than 3% thought the donor did it to benefit ordinary Thai people.

Those who considered Japanese aid to be for Japan's own benefit ranked the top gain for Japan to be the marketing of Japanese goods (37%), followed by influence on the Thai economy (23%). These two groups felt that aid is not a form of charity, but rather an instrument of cold economic and political strategy. Aid was perceived as a tool for mutual relations by only 15% of the respondents.

What benefit does the recipient expect to get from Japanese aid? More than one-third (38%) of respondents cited technology, nearly a quarter (23%) employment opportunities, and 7% budgetary gain. But it is notable that the real beneficiaries at the Thai end of the aid tunnel



Trainees from Thailand receiving instruction at a Japanese electronics firm

were perceived by more than half the survey sample (57%) to be Thai-Japanese joint ventures, while little more than a quarter (26.5%) said the beneficiaries were the politicians involved, and only 2.2% said they were laborers and 2.5% farmers.

What does the recipient side lose, if anything? Almost two-thirds saw the negative effects of aid as greater economic dependence on Japan and about one-fifth the loss of projects for Thai companies which in principle and practice cannot join the bidding. This also adds up to a perception of a not particularly caring benefactor in pursuit of its own economic gain.

In reply to the question, "What can be done to improve aid from Japan," more than half the respondents did not seek quantity, but were very clearly looking for higher quality in relation to the target groups, together with technology transfers and economic self-reliance. Still, one-fourth also said they wanted to see more quantity as well, while nearly one-fifth sought rather to limit and lessen Japanese aid, which they felt had so far proved mostly negative and feared could even cause a loss of national dignity through certain projects. With respect to the target beneficiaries, nearly 80% wanted the aid system to be clearly targeted on ordinary people, including the unemployed and poor families in both urban and rural areas.

For those who see "aid" as good in and of itself and give little thought to how a supposedly good thing can have negative effects given a different set of realities, this perception of Japanese aid seen from the other side deserves serious consideration. An irresponsible reply could come from either side. On the donor side, one might ask why these unsatisfied people do not ask their own government to stop accepting such aid. This response, however, assumes an understanding of democratic participation which is not necessarily present. On the recipient's side, some might suggest disregarding these perceptions as trivial, saying let us continue the business and get quantity first, and quality will come later.

Yet should Japanese taxpayers allow the former, or should the Thai public allow the latter, the aid system would continue to pour in huge amounts of aid without any process or mechanism for public accountability, even, in some cases, when clearly to the detriment of both Thai and Japanese public interests. And the harmful effects, both human and environmental, would continue unchecked.

A respectable sense of world responsibility calls for knowledge of both the positive and negative effects of big aid projects, and an appropriate and timely response to problems. For this, an open socio-environmental impact evaluation system is needed. A commitment to the accountability of both public and private factors for improving the ODA system is of the utmost importance. To this end, the public participation of nongovernmental organizations, citizens' groups and development anthropologists and sociologists as "third parties" in aid decisions is indispensable.

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