

The Yen to Help

Industrialized countries like Japan have been under great pressure to "help" underdeveloped regions. Japan's phenomenal growth in economic terms has led its neighbors and trading partners to urge Japan to lessen its trade surplus by buying more and selling less, and to increase its share of the burden of maintaining peace in the region.

Responses to this call have been manifested in different ways. The Japanese government has, on one hand, pledged to increase the amount of official loans and grants that it gives to poor countries. It has dispensed with its symbolic limit on defense spending and increased its budget for military expenditure.

On another level, non-government organizations are also actively doing their share in heightening Japan's presence in the Third World. More and more young Japanese volunteers are seen in remote villages and communities in countries such as Sri Lanka, Nicaragua, and Kenya.

What sort of impact has this two-pronged approach at "helping" created in a country like ours?

As the Philippine experience has shown, increased loans and grants from Japan have not meant a corresponding increase in economic productivity or in the improvement of economic conditions. On the contrary, a large part of the official funds went to the pockets of a favored few, particularly under Marcos. Under the present administration, funds from the Japanese government have continued to come in, but a closer examination of Japanese-funded programs would reveal a proliferation of projects that are ultimately oriented to the needs of the Japanese market. An example is an agriculture-related project that involves using grants from the Japanese government to purchase fertilizers and pesticides from Japanese companies for local distribution. Another is a livelihood-generating project which unwittingly assures Japanese consumers of regular supplies of prawns, seaweeds, and fish cake. Of course, it has not been too long ago when we transformed vast tracts of fertile lands in Mindanao into banana farms in response to a culinary fad in Japan. Japanese fashion has since then shifted to mangoes, but we still haven't learned our les-

son: we are still dependent on their yen and whim.

Nowhere is this attitude more clearly reflected as in the behavior of our own government officials. They repeat the refrain about the need to have foreign investments and foreign aid in order for our country to develop. Even Cory is asking for more loans to finance our growth projections. Since when has there been meaningful loan-fuelled growth?

In this sense, our officials are not so different from foreigners who think that a little money will make us happy. Charity, however, is not meant to alter iniquitous social structures. It only relieves some of the agony.

In the meantime, NGOs are getting greater exposure due to media coverage of their activities and increased interest among academics and students.

In a materially abundant society such as Japan's, NGO activities would seem to be extraordinary and self-sacrificing. Young NGO workers go to poor villages in Third World countries to distribute old clothes, medicine, funds. Closer to home, affluent students from private universities would visit prominently poor areas in the Philippines such as Tondo's Smokey Mountain, Negros' haciendas, or other showcases of poverty, and live there for a couple of weeks. Upon their return home, they would glowingly talk about "how interesting" Negros or Tondo was. (To pay a visit to such places would seem to be a must among those who want to be known as being concerned about problems of the underdeveloped world.) To listen to them talk like this, however, has always made someone from the Third World feel like a specimen in a social laboratory, scrutinized by curious eyes, and then dissected in a remote environment, far removed from its natural context.

To be sure, there are individuals who sincerely want to help. Yet, most often this is translated into how much yen they can collect from fellow Japanese and distribute among our poor. Such an approach must have led Japanese to think that as long as they give up and give us some of their yen, they are already doing their share in addressing the world's problems.

This attitude, however, has not been very helpful for us. On the contrary, it has reinforced the mendicant mentality which we have been trying to eradicate. It has not helped our relations with foreigners, either. Some Japanese friends have complained that whenever they go to Negros, people expect to receive money from them!

The point is, just because we are poor doesn't mean receiving alms is good for us. Far from it.

Indeed, it will be better if the Japanese government, if it is really sincere in wanting to help us, thought of more creative ways of doing so. For example, instead of giving us more tied aid, it can perhaps open its doors legally to our manual workers. There are tens of thousands of Filipinos who are helping the economies of Japan and the Philippines by doing dirty, labor-intensive jobs for cheap wages, yet who are constantly trying to protect themselves from Japanese police.

At the same time, NGOs will be able to help

us more, not by increasing its yen donations, but by doing more consciousness-raising activities among the Japanese themselves. It is so easy for affluent people to dig into their pockets, give up some money, feel good about it, and promptly forget about how the rest of the world survives. It is more difficult to make them change their way of thinking, so that they may look at their white and colored neighbors in the same light; so that they may pay more attention to their government's activities; so that they may give more thought to their neighbors. It is more difficult to make them change their way of life, so that they may be more protective of other countries' forests, not just of their own; so that they may begin to lead less wasteful lives.

These are more difficult ways of manifesting the yen to help, which our powerful officials might not even approve of. Yet, these are what we, ordinary people, would appreciate more, from this part of the world.



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