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【《UH・UR合同シンポジウム》報告】 Japan-Pacific Linkages : A Perspective on Japan's approach to the Pacific aid industry

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《UH・UR 合同シンポジウム》報告

Japan-Pacific Linkages: A Perspective on Japan's approach to the Pacific aid industry

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Abstract

This paper focuses on how Japan approaches development aid in the Pacific region. Although attention is increasingly focused on the rise of China's engagement with the Pacific, Japan maintains a solid presence in the region, though with a dwindling aid budget and development programs that appear too small and apolitical to receive much attention. Along with standard policy approaches that avoid direct engagement with a country's political machinery, Japan's particular approach to Pacific Islands development is shaped by views of Japan's technical superiority, aid agency competition, and perceptions of the Pacific as paradise. I draw from my experience working for Japan's development aid program in Fiji where I was employed full-time as a development officer for Pacific regional programs.

1. Introduction

This paper is based on my experience "in the field" working as a program officer for the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) in Suva, Fiji. In this paper I will discuss some general features of JICA's aid approaches in the Pacific Islands region, these include a fragmented approach to JICA's aid programs, views of the 'Pacific as paradise,' the importance of Japanese innovation and technology, and aid agency competition that requires marketing and selling of aid products. I argue that rather than political or economic agendas, Japan's approach to aid in the Pacific Islands regions where the supply of aid is high but demand is limited, is increasingly shaped by the need for survival in the Pacific aid industry.

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2. Japan's Pacific Aid Context

With a stagnant economy and dwindling Pacific aid budget, Japan no longer receives much attention as a key aid donor to the Pacific Islands region. The media, academia and Western governments are increasingly interested in the rise of China as an aid donor in the Pacific, as Japan is no longer seen as a potential economic threat to the West. However, Japan has a long relationship with the Pacific Islands region from the colonial period, and the experience of the Pacific War also binds the Pacific Islands and Japan together through this shared history. Today, a large number of Pacific islanders have Japanese ancestry, and strong links are maintained through tourism, trade and development aid.

To provide some necessary context, Japan is perhaps the 5th largest donor in the region with Australia, the European Union, China, and New Zealand (and the U.S. in the North Pacific). Japan's ranking might shift depending on the individual country. Japan is among the top three donors to Kiribati, Tuvalu and Nauru along with Australia and New Zealand, and the second largest donor to the Marshall Islands and Palau after the U.S., with its large amounts of aid money allocated under the Compact of Free Association.

Although it did not receive much media attention, Japan recently opened an embassy in Tonga in 2009, a small JICA office in Kiribati in 2009 and will soon station a project officer in the Cook Islands to have an official presence under the Embassy of Japan in New Zealand.¹ There are JICA offices in Fiji, the Federated States of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Vanuatu, and aid programs also cover Nauru, Niue, Tuvalu, and Tokelau.

Japan has several aid modalities that are applied in Pacific Island countries, including:

- Grant Aid (for major infrastructure projects)
- Technical Cooperation (transfer of Japanese technology to government institutions)
- Loan Aid (for major infrastructure projects)
- Training Programs (civil servants are sent to Japan, or trained by Japanese experts in a third country)
- Volunteer Program (Junior and senior volunteers are dispatched to public institutions)
- Grassroots Grants (Administered by MOFA, maximum of US \$300,000 for infrastructure)

¹ The Cook Islands is freely associated with New Zealand, therefore aid is delivered through Japan's New Zealand embassy.

- Grant Aid for Disaster Relief (Administered by MOFA, relief supplies provided in times of natural disaster)

These are separate aid schemes that operate differently. Most of these programs might be considered partially tied aid – certain equipment might be sourced from Japan and projects will always require Japanese consultants, but labor and equipment can also be sourced locally or internationally and are not limited to Japan. Direct cash grants and budgetary support, becoming the ideal aid distribution method particularly for the EU, are never given to governments as it is seen as too risky for inviting corruption.²

3. Focus on Social Services

JICA's general aid approach worldwide is to provide development assistance for basic social services, regardless of a country's political environment. Where democratic structures of government do not exist, JICA avoids direct engagement with a country's political machinery. In the Pacific, JICA focuses on health, education, and environment programs, and does not provide aid for the political sector – elections, democratic nation-building, the judiciary, the legal sector, and the military and in some cases, the police. Since the 2006 coup d'état in Fiji, JICA stopped police training programs and does not cooperate with the Fiji military, but continues emergency services training for the Fiji National Fire Authority.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) operates in consultation with but separately from JICA. Increasingly, MOFA is setting aid policy based on ground level information mainly from JICA officials, but JICA is not directly involved in lobbying or diplomatic activities. After the 2006 coup in Fiji, the Japanese ambassador to Fiji Masashi Namekawa echoed other Western governments saying that Japan would like a quick return to democratic rule [Fiji Times Oct. 15, 2007]. Cabinet ministers and high level military officials were banned from traveling to Japan. But unlike Australia, New Zealand and the European Union, Japan did not stop aid as a result of the coup, other than removing certain training courses that might be too closely connected to the military government.

Contrary to the argument of Sandra Tarte (1998) and common Japanese aid analysis, Masami Tsujita-Levi argues in her dissertation on Japan's aid to Samoa that well known Japanese economic and political interests such as fisheries access, International Whaling Commission support, and support for Japan's UN Security Council membership actually have little to do with Japan's aid strategy in the Pacific. Tsujita-Levi says that aid

² Aid is also disbursed through multilateral institutions such as the UN agencies, Asian Development Bank, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, etc., but this is generally not included in the Pacific Regional aid budget.

pledges “are commonly considered *omiyage* (souvenirs), a part of Japan’s diplomatic rituals” and are not a carefully planned tool of manipulation” [Tsujita-Levi 2011, p.104]. Aid pledges are made as diplomatic gestures, and budgets must then be spent. Indeed, JICA’s aid is not shaped directly by political and economic agendas in the region, but these interests are concerns for Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which operates separately from JICA, but utilizes the image of JICA’s aid programs to cultivate favorable relationships with Pacific Island countries.

4. Ambiguity and Fragmentation

Funding for major programs is determined every three years and announced at the PALM Summit (Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting) in Japan. The most recent meeting was held in May 2012 in Nago city, Okinawa, where US\$500 million was pledged over the next three years to support 1) Disaster Response; 2) Environment and climate change; 3) Sustainable development and human security; 4) People-to-people exchanges; and 5) Maritime issues [MOFA 2012]. At PALM 2009 a similar pledge of US\$500,000 million was made, and a 6.8 billion yen initiative called the “Pacific Environment Community” was launched to provide funding for climate change related projects [MOFA 2009].

But this three-year funding pledge does not mean that aid figures can be easily determined, particularly with technical cooperation projects, or projects that are carried out in more than one country. In one regional project, JICA was asked to provide an additional US\$300,000 that was not in the project budget, but they did so fairly easily with the right official documents. Procuring large amounts of unbudgeted funds is not a normal practice, but illustrates that aid funding is not so cut-and-dried.

Ambiguity about funding is common, in particular with non-grant aid projects. Officials will commonly say, “It is difficult to say how much we are actually spending” (*muzukashii*). In one case, a newspaper reporter asked a JICA official how much they would spend on a newly launched technical cooperation project and the official said it was very difficult to say since the budget might change depending on the needs of the project. He reluctantly came up with a figure to provide to the media.

Aid by sector is even more difficult to determine since JICA uses various modalities in each sector – for example, in the environment sector, one would have to take into account the cost of grant aid, technical cooperation, volunteers, experts, training programs, with overlapping aid cycles and budgets that are subject to change. If a local government or donor organization requests this information it is difficult to get a straightforward response, and cumbersome for JICA officials to provide the information. This reflects a piecemeal and fragmented approach, but JICA is aware of this, mostly due to reporting and aid coordination pressure from Australia and other Western donors, and they are gradually trying to change this approach.

5. The Pacific is no Paradise

JICA officials frequently invoke the ‘Pacific as paradise’ narrative when discussing aid justification and maintaining budget allocations from JICA headquarters in Tokyo. They do not uncritically reproduce romantic touristic images of the Pacific as paradise, but claim that this perception discourages aid commitments from Tokyo. I heard many times that, “Japanese tax payers (including those working at JICA headquarters) think the Pacific is paradise, with plenty of food and resources, everyone is happy and there are no problems. There is no reason to give aid to the Pacific.” Therefore, the JICA Pacific officials say they must work even harder to justify spending and show that there are real “development challenges” for the Pacific Islands region – there is real trouble in paradise.

With more awareness of the impacts of climate change the perception of the Pacific as an untroubled paradise seems to be shifting. Specifically, in JICA’s Pacific headquarters where I worked in Fiji, officials placed emphasis on media campaigns to promote Japan’s aid both locally and in Japan to bring attention to the success of JICA in solving the critical problems facing the Pacific Islands. With the opening of a new embassy and aid offices in the region, this approach might have had some impact.

Worries about the rise of China’s influence in the region is also a potential factor in maintaining aid flows. MOFA officials visit the region with a keen interest in China’s development projects. Japan’s aid is needed so the Pacific does not become a “paradise lost,” either to rising sea levels or Chinese domination.

6. Japanese Technology

Another central theme of Japanese aid is that of Japan’s technological superiority. Most of Japan’s aid projects, whether it is grant aid, technical assistance, or grassroots grants, incorporate a particular type of Japanese branded technology. For example, the Fukuoka landfill management method implemented in Samoa, named after a technique used in the Japanese city of Fukuoka; the Tuvalu coastal regeneration project which is implementing an innovation of a Japanese scientist; aquaculture methods introduced by Japanese experts; vaccine management methods; disaster management; village bridge construction, and almost any JICA project. The appeal of Japan’s technological know-how is important in distinguishing the uniqueness of Japanese aid in order to sell aid programs. JICA relies on the central feature of distinctly Japanese innovation that can be transferred to developing countries in hopes of achieving, at least in part, development similar to that of Japan.

7. The Marketing and Selling of Aid

The Pacific Islands region is a vast geographic area, but land mass and populations are small making the aid environment a crowded space. The reality of international development as an industry becomes very apparent in this context. Competing donors must not only sell their aid products for status and power vis-à-vis Pacific Island countries and other donors, but also for the very survival of their organizations. Japan is no different and must exert even more effort to market their aid than regional “big brothers” Australia and New Zealand.

Interestingly, Japan appeals to Pacific Island countries by invoking a common islander identity. It is common for Japanese to view themselves as an ‘island people’, but less common that Pacific Islanders will view Japan as anything other than an advanced industrialized, urbanized nation. PALM 2012 carried the slogan, “We are islanders! For growing ‘Kizuna’ (strong bonds) in the Pacific” [MOFA 2012]. The PALM 2009 meeting employed a similar theme: “We are islanders! For the future of the Pacific” (See Figures 1&2) [MOFA 2009] The PALM meeting is organized by MOFA, but it was JICA who devised this slogan, and fixed it to a brochure on JICA’s aid programs. The meeting is also usually held in Okinawa, reaffirming a sense of a shared islander identity.

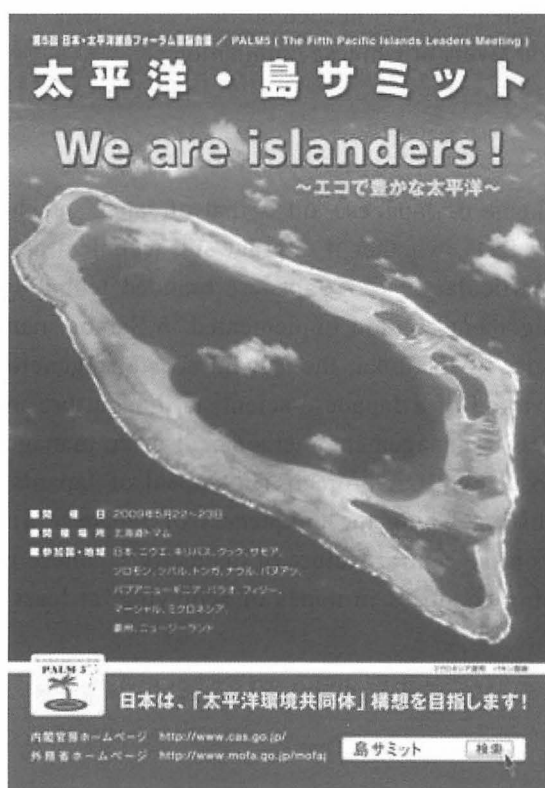


Figure1 : PALM 5 online brochure (MOFA 2009)

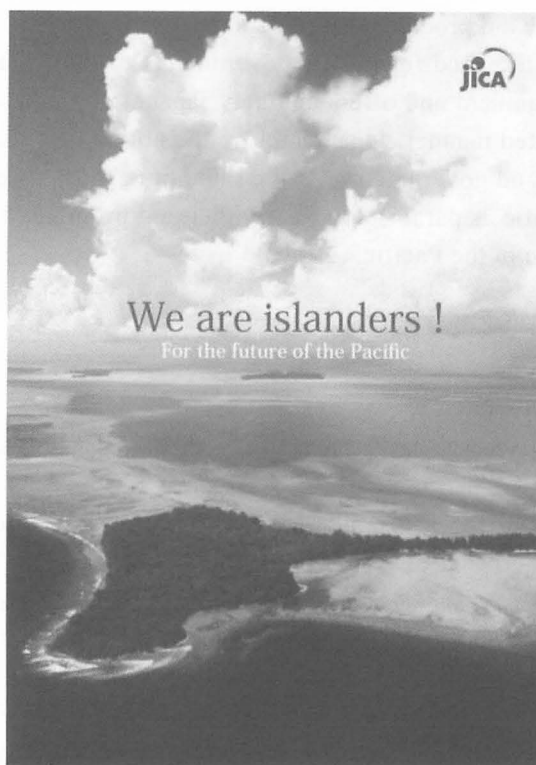


Figure1 : PALM 5 online brochure, English version (MOFA 2009)

JICA officials are mindful of the need to successfully market their aid programs. For example, when JICA staff would find difficulty in obtaining participants for training courses in Japan where there was either a lack of interest, or eligible civil servants had recently attended similar courses in China or other countries, the section head in the office said, “If they don’t take our training courses, if they don’t implement JICA projects, then there is no reason for JICA to exist.” Essentially, JICA staff must market and sell their aid products or the organization will not survive.

8. Conclusion

Since 1970, the independent countries of the Pacific Region received around US\$50 billion in foreign aid, the highest per capita aid flow to any “developing” region. Development critics argue that despite this substantial amount of funding, there has been minimal progress toward achieving development goals [Hughes 2010], particularly the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, and that some aspects of the MDGs may not be appropriate for the Pacific Islands context [Wood and Naidu 2008]. In any case, in the Pacific development industry the supply of aid is the highest in the world, and

development assistance is increasingly becoming not about demand for assistance from countries, but rather the aid products that donors must sell.

JICA is aware of the need for Pacific governments to 'buy' into their aid programs in a competitive environment and offers uniquely Japanese branded aid products, though delivered in a fragmented manner. Japan employs the notion of a shared islander identity to appeal to Pacific Island governments. At the same time, JICA must work to change the perception of the 'Pacific as paradise' to justify their aid programs for the survival of the organization's presence in the Pacific.

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