

Grass-roots activities key to development

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This year, Japan will play host to major international gatherings, among them the Group of Eight summit in July and the Tokyo International Conference on African Development next week.

These events are being held against a backdrop of waning domestic public interest in international issues. In the face of many difficult problems linked to widening gaps in society and the graying of the population, many people apparently want the government to devote its efforts to solving domestic problems rather than focusing on foreign policy issues.

But it is questionable whether Japan can find fundamental solutions to domestic problems with such an inward-looking mind-set alone. If citizens develop new ties with other countries, I believe they can also find ways to break the sense of stagnation looming over Japan.

In addition to environmental problems, citizens and local governments in Europe have a high level of interest in the Millennium

Development Goals set by the United Nations. The program is intended to help developing countries advance. For example, in Norway, some of the funds of the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation are used to promote exchanges between Norwegian citizens and people of developing nations. The government in Oslo firmly supports school exchanges and cooperation activities organized by nongovernmental organizations and local governments.

In Britain, "linking" activities, modeled on sister city initiatives, are gaining momentum. Through linking, local governments, nonprofit organizations, schools, churches and hospitals form partnerships with local communities in developing countries. This is based on the idea that if citizens take part in exchanges and cooperation with developing countries in everyday life, they will not only support government-led international cooperation but also take the initiative to advance grass-roots cooperation on their own.

What about Japan? So far, the nation's Asian policy has been supported by the trust built between



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its citizens and local communities in China and South Korea, through sister city exchanges.

Looking to the future, we should promote exchanges more actively with African and Middle East countries with which the Japanese people

are, for the most part, unfamiliar. However, local governments that are struggling to make ends meet have no funds to spend on new international exchange programs.

Take, for example, exchanges with Africa. Some people say that there is little interest in Africa among the Japanese public. But is that really so? So far, more than 9,000 people were dispatched to Africa as members of the Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers. Thus, there are many young people who are willing to give a helping hand to promote exchanges with Africa.

Let's say the government allocates 5 million yen a year for three years to subsidize linking projects with Africa. During the three years, sis-

ter schools, sister chambers of commerce and industry, sister agricultural cooperatives and other organizations based in the local community can use the subsidies to promote exchanges using information technology. From the fourth year onward, the organizations are expected to continue exchanges on their own.

If 20 projects a year are implemented for five years, 100 local communities in Japan would have established ties with Africa. The government subsidies serve as a pump-priming measure to build infrastructure for citizen-oriented cooperation in which the participants can see each other.

What is needed is not a vast amount of money but pump-priming funds and a government policy to start and put community-based exchanges on track. Also in order to raise public awareness and interest toward developing countries, I urge the government to invest in grass-roots exchanges.

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