

INTERVIEW

Interview with Misako Konno

Ms. Misako Konno

After graduating from Keio University with a degree in literature, Misako Konno debuted in the movie "Ogon no Paatonaa" (Golden Partner). While appearing on television, film, and stage, including in the starring role in NHK's series "Niji wo Oru" (Weaving the Rainbow) she was also active as a writer. In 1998, she was appointed as a United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Goodwill Ambassador. Since then, she has been active as a UN Goodwill Ambassador, participating in observation tours to Cambodia, Palestine, Bhutan, and Ghana. In 2005, she appeared on stage in "Sasameyuki" (Fine-flaked Snow).

Development assistance that leads directly to improvements in poor people's lives

...First of all, please tell us what you thought of Vietnam, which you visited as a UNDP Goodwill Ambassador.

Konno: In contrast to Palestine and East Timor where I visited before, I could feel a sense of energy in the people in Vietnam, just like in Japan during its period of high economic growth. Also, I met with a number of government officials involved in development, including Vietnam's deputy prime minister, JBIC personnel, NGO staff, and Japanese government officials. Many of them were young, and they were all openhearted and easy to get to know.

...What about the ODA loan projects that you went to observe, the Pha Lai Thermal Power Plant Project and the Rural Infrastructure Development and Living Standard Improvement Project?

Konno: I visited the Rural Infrastructure Development and Living Standard Improvement Project, and I learned for the first time that a lot of small-scale development is being implemented on a regional basis through Japanese ODA loans. Providing the infrastructure such as electricity and water, which is the most necessary thing for life, to many regions leads directly to improvements in poor people's lives, and I think that is very meaningful. I think this steady, ongoing development assistance is not very well known in Japan at all, and so I hope to do something about this through public relations activities.

Also, I am concerned about environmental problems such as air pollution that accompany development, but I understand that the environmental aspects were also taken into consideration at the Pha Lai Thermal Power Plant Project. It looks like the lessons that Japan learned during its own high-growth period concerning pollution problems, etc., are being applied in Vietnam.

Creating good partnerships

...Development projects are causing enormous changes in the lives of people in the region, including changes in the environment. JBIC conducts ex-post evaluations that assign ratings of A, B, C, or D in order to assess the effects of the projects and to utilize the lessons learned in subsequent projects. The Rural Infrastructure Development and Living Standard Improvement Project which you observed is one of the projects being evaluated this year*, and in the ex-post evaluation, what points do you think should be included?

*The evaluation is scheduled for public release in FY2006.

Konno: Well, I think that the point really is the ways in which people's lives have been improved. It's difficult to imagine this in Japan, but I understand that there are very



At the Pha Lai Thermal Power Plant

many children in the world who die from drinking unsanitary water. I would certainly like for the evaluation to be conducted at the level of real people's lives, for example how much people's health has improved through water purification projects, and how much extra time people have for housework because they no longer have to go a long way to get water. Also, it may be difficult to express it in an indicator like rating, but another important factor is what sort of improvement there is in the quality of the relationship between the country that provided the assistance and the country that received the assistance following the project. It would be ideal if assistance from Japan led to business success and development in the loan recipient country and if the two countries could build an equal partnership while each making use of the development experience over the long term.

...Since the mechanism in the case of Japanese ODA loans is that funding assistance is provided for development projects conducted with the budget of the recipient country and repayment is made over a long period after the project's completion, it may be easy to build partnerships through projects.

Konno: When selecting the form of assistance, it is important to consider the outlook and the values of the people in the country concerned. Having observed projects in several countries, I really feel that development assistance is something that requires steady effort and perseverance; time is required for the results to become visible, but it is a very important undertaking. This may sound presumptuous, but I think there are some similarities with raising children. You can't force them to be grateful by telling them, "This is for your own good," but if you take too much of a hands-off policy, the support and the labor of the lending country may be wasted. It would be good to have a relationship where each party understands the other party well and they patiently supports each other, with the child and parent influencing each other for the better and growing together.

...One of the purposes of Japanese ODA loan project is to deepen mutual understanding between countries. We would like to continue to work on building even better partnerships henceforth. Thank you for taking the time to speak with us today.

