

Japan- Liberia Relations: An Examination of JICA's Interventions in Liberia's Post-war Development 2006-2016

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ABSTRACT

This paper examined the Japan International Cooperation Agency's (JICA) interventions in Liberia's post-war development and asked the question: what implications have they had on national reconstruction for Liberia in the period 2006 to 2016? The scanty body of literature on Japan-Liberia relations, despite over six (6) decades of diplomatic engagement, poses a particularly important challenge to research which this study sought to overcome through in-depth review of diplomatic correspondences between the two countries, archival review, and interviews of statesmen and diplomats from both countries. The research findings helped to fill an important gap in the literature on Liberia's diplomatic history, Liberia-Japan diplomatic relations, and political science more generally. It was qualitative research guided by central research question of "How has Japan's aid to Liberia impacted Liberia's post-war reconstruction?" The study interviewed 12 individuals knowledgeable of the subject, comprising past and present public and civil servants at Liberia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Views of officials from the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) were taken in key Informant Interview (KII). The study found out that the establishment of the Liberia-Japan Policy Dialogue was a major event that helped define the nature of both countries' relations as it eventually led to socio-economic benefits for them, especially for Liberia. Consequently, it was strongly recommended that considering Japan and China geopolitical rivalry and Liberia enjoying diplomatic relations with both countries, Liberia, through its Ministry of Foreign Affairs should manage its relations its relations with both countries through adept diplomacy and tactfulness.

Keywords: Foreign policy, aid, international development

INTRODUCTORY SESSION

Background

Liberia and Japan have upheld a long and close alliance marked by cordial relations, mutual regard, and frequent visits by dignitaries of both countries. Japan is Liberia's longest-standing Asian ally, having forged diplomatic ties in May 1962 (Sirleaf, 2013). Through numerous high-level exchanges across multilateral and bilateral diplomatic engagements, the friendly relationship between the two countries has been bolstered over time. The Japan International Cooperation Agency (2021) revealed that mutual cooperation between Liberia and Japan has been strengthened mainly across five thematic areas, which include: training skills, agriculture, health, infrastructure and energy sectors.

More so, in a speech delivered by former Liberian President Madam Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (2013), it was stated that Liberia- Japan relations have yielded mutual benefits for the two countries with Liberia receiving remarkable development assistance in grants and technical assistance. Japan's support has manifested itself in the construction of several pre-war and post-war projects, including the Liberia-Japan Friendship Maternity Hospital, constructed in the 1980s at the John F. Kennedy Medical Center, and most recently a 13.2KM long Japanese Freeway formerly the Somalia Drive.

Statement of the Problem

Notwithstanding the long and productive history of Liberia-Japan relations, there is only a scanty body of literature that speaks to the many years of cooperation between the two countries. In another words, there is

clearly an information and knowledge gap, and such gap leaves academics and foreign policy experts in both countries with limited information to inform policy analysis and decision-making. It also tends to undercut external influence, in this case Japan, in Liberia's national healing and reconciliation. Noticeably, a good amount of foreign policy literature on Liberia only focuses on Liberia-US relations and relatively recently, Liberia-China diplomatic relations, thereby making Liberia-Japan relations a poignant and unexplored research terrain. If this gap in the academic literature continues to persist, vital knowledge and information on Japan's important post-war engagement in Liberia will be obfuscated and remain hidden from researchers and foreign policy experts, thus undermining credible foreign policy development in this important sphere of Liberia diplomatic relations.

Theoretical Support and/ or Assumptions

This research employed a post-positivism theoretical framework to assess Liberia-Japan relations. Post-positivism is a research approach that deep-delves into existing perspectives and intellectual prisms in the social sciences on a particular subject, without a pre-conceived notion of a singular objective reality (Creswell 2009). In the case of Liberia-Japan diplomatic relations, foreign aid and post-war national development, a post-positivist approach implies an embrace of new non-traditional understandings of development within an African context. The ever-expanding literature on foreign aid and development continues to grapple with this ontological dilemma. For example, in relatively recent times, dependency scholars and others from the Global North and South, respectively, criticized most types of aid as weapons of exploitation and tools of political manipulation, according to Peter Burnell (as cited in Vandana Desai & Robert B. Potter, 2008). These scholars questioned international aid's potential to alleviate poverty in the Third World, pointing out that aid mostly benefits wealthy and donor countries. In a more pointed way, Dambisa Moyo (2009) argues that aid serves the interest of the donor country than the recipient state. In fact, Moyo insists that aid particularly to African nations, leads to the underdevelopment or retrogression of these African states. J. Matunhu (2011) also argues that aid, with associated conditionalities, does not benefit developing nations, but instead promotes dependent ties among the Core and Periphery nations of the Global North and South. Arguing contrarily, Kema Irogbe (2015) suggests that it is not aid that is necessarily causing the drawbacks on low-income countries, but corruption and other ineffective uses of aid. In support of this argument, Susan Rose-Ackerman (as cited in Vandana Desai & Robert B. Potter, 2008) claims that the lack of strong policies and functional institutions in Third World nations prevents economic progress even when help is plentiful.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because its findings helped to fill an important gap in the literature on Liberia-Japan relations specifically. Additionally, the potentially new development paradigm these findings represent offers an important contribution to our understanding of existing post-conflict development in an African context. Hopefully, it would be a reference guide for scholars in both countries (Liberia and Japan) as they forge diplomatic friendship and development cooperation. The finding of this study are relevant to development actors - national and international, peace building experts and political scientists.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to highlight a potted history of Japan-Liberia diplomatic relations and unearth Japan's interventions in Liberia post-war development. In doing so, it sought to ascertain about major historical events in both countries' relations as well as contribute more broadly to scholarship on Liberia's foreign relations.

Research Questions

The following questions constituted the research questions:

1. What events helped define the nature of Japan-Liberia diplomatic relations?
2. How have JICA's interventions in Liberia between 2006-2016 contributed to Liberia's post-war development?

3. How have JICA's interventions impacted Liberia's post-war development paradigm?

Scope (limitations and Delimitations) of the Study

Martyn Denscombe (2012) pointed out that all study has flaws and that researchers who fail to acknowledge their own limits, risk inaccuracy and misrepresentation. In light of this reasoning, the study acknowledged the constraints, one of which was limited access to diplomatic records which were deemed sensitive national documents, and thus restricted to free public access. However, interviews with leading diplomats and players in Liberia-Japan relations helped to mitigate the lack of access to official diplomatic records.

The study is delimited (i.e., research boundaries) by the geographical focus – which was Liberia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and JICA's representative in Monrovia. Accessing diplomats in Japan was beyond the limits of the study.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Liberia's foreign policy

According to Liberia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2009), Liberia's foreign policy is founded on the country's liberal democratic political and economic systems. Liberia's Afro-American founders, who were once enslaved or freed blacks, modeled the country after the United States of America in the early 1800s. Maintaining national security and protecting Liberia's territorial integrity have been the cornerstones of Liberia's foreign policy. The country's foreign policy has also been about developing national unity, encouraging international peaceful accord based upon the principles of mutual respect and non-interference in the internal affairs of other states, and defending its national sovereignty.

Prior to the presidency of President William V.S Tubman (1944-1971), preserving the nation's independence was Liberia's topmost foreign policy priority. However, under the Tubman's administration, Liberia consistently prioritized fiscal, political, and social growth as a top foreign policy. During much of the 20th century, Liberia's relations with other countries (especially the West, China, and its neighbors in West Africa) were relatively cordial. This cordiality, however, suffered significant strains at the height of the Cold War when, under President William R. Tolbert, Liberia's support for the US (and Western interests) waned, and Liberia joined the Non Aligned Movement (Dunn, 2009). Following the post-war era (2003 to present), Liberia embarked on development diplomacy.

Japan's foreign Policy

Since the end of World War II and Imperial Japan's defeat, the country has followed a policy of pacifism and peaceful diplomatic relations, while maintaining national security (Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2007). This policy has included a commitment to maintaining security ties with the United States and the maintenance of the minimum self-defense force permitted under the Japan's new constitution. The Japanese government has actively sought to foster international dialogue and collaboration. Japan's rising prominence on the global stage has also prompted calls for the country to begin to shoulder a greater share of international responsibility for ensuring global stability and growth, especially in the realm of the economy.

The United Nations has had Japan as a member since 1956, as well as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) since 1964. Despite giving up the ability to declare wars, the country still fields a military that is among the most powerful in Asia and the world. Japan's security partnership with the USA includes robust trade and military ties (ibid). The USA is both a large consumer of Japanese goods and a significant supplier of Japanese imports. The United States also has treaty commitment with Japan to aid it militarily, evidence by the presence of large American military facilities there.

Japan's foreign policy is mostly guided by economic diplomacy, according to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (1992). Uncertainty over the current international order is pushing Japan to reconsider its pacifist stance, especially because of rising US-China tensions and the present Russia-Ukraine crisis, as well as the emergence

of interstate competition in the fields of politics, economics, and the military. At the same time, Japan is facing a few important challenges, including in the economic sphere, such as its shifting domestic and global economic structure, the rise of protectionist policies, and trade disputes. Despite these, Japan is pushing ahead with economic and social efforts to boost economic diplomacy.

Liberia- Japan Relations

Liberia and Japan formally established diplomatic ties in September 1961. Since then, the two nations have worked together on issues ranging from commerce and infrastructure development. Liberia and Japan have upheld a long and close alliance marked by cordial relations, mutual regard, and frequent visits by dignitaries of both countries. Japan is Liberia's longest-standing Asian ally. Through numerous high-level exchanges on a variety of multilateral and bilateral diplomatic levels, the friendly relationship between the two countries has been bolstered over time. In this regard, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) has played a significantly important role (2021). Through JICA, cooperation between Liberia and Japan has been strengthened affecting five thematic areas: training skills, agriculture, health, infrastructure and energy sectors.

In a speech delivered by former Liberian President Madam Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (2013), it was revealed that Liberia- Japan relations has yielded mutual benefits for the two countries, and that Liberia was receiving remarkable development assistance in grant aid and technical assistance, as well as support for the construction of several pre-war and post-war projects including the Liberia-Japan Friendship Maternity Hospital constructed in the 1980s at the John F. Kennedy Medical Center, and most recently a 13.2KM long Japanese Freeway highway along the formerly Somalia Drive.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND KEY FINDINGS

Research Method(s) of Data Collection

This investigation was qualitative, John Creswell (2009) argued that qualitative research is conducted to discover how people see a social or human issue. Therefore, this qualitative study utilized with key informants Interviews (KIIs), as well as tapped into secondary sources, such as joint communiques, memoranda, literature, meeting minutes, speeches given by leaders of state, papers, and official records.

Research Design

John Creswell (2009), argued that research designs are the strategies and processes for doing research, including everything from overarching assumptions to specifics of data collection and analysis. Consequently, this study employed a qualitative design seeking to unearth in-depth perspectives of Liberia-Japan relations that otherwise would not be obtained through a quantitative approach.

Target Population

The target population for this study was all former and current public officials and senior civil servants of the Department of International Cooperation and Economic Integration, the Afro-Asian Bureau, the Department of Legal Affairs, and the Department of International Organization at the Liberia's foreign ministry, who, given their professional proximity to the subject, were presumed knowledgeable of the two countries' diplomatic history and development cooperation. A limited review of diplomatic records and exchanges between officials of the two nation was also considered for the period under review.

Sample and Sampling Techniques

To get to the bottom of an issue and answer a research question, qualitative studies often focus on a small number of carefully chosen persons or venues (ibid). With this logic, the sample size for this research was 12 people who once worked or are currently working in the above departments/bureau at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It also involved the office of JICA in Liberia for its perspective and information. The Sampling technique was purposive sampling, which means the researcher selected only those knowledgeable of the topic.

Data Collection Instrument(s)

Semi-structured interviews containing open-ended questions were used. The interviews were conducted face-to-face. This interview was preceded with interviewees accepting to voluntarily participate through signing an informed consent form.

Data Collection Procedure(s)

The procedure of data collection was the conduct of Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) containing five open-ended questions. Instead of relying on a single data source, qualitative researchers collect a variety of data, including conversations, observations, and documents (Creswell, 2009). Therefore, the researcher also went further to make observations as well.

Data Analysis Procedure

Data analysis procedure was done through corroborating the responses and establishing themes in them and using such themes to draw conclusions.

Ethical Consideration

Participation in the research was voluntary. Participants were given an informed consent form stating the topic and nature of the study, and the purpose for which it was carried out. More importantly, the data subject rights of the participants including the right to confidentiality, right to withdraw at any time from the interview, among others, were clearly laid out and explained to participants. Only those who signed the consent form participated, and data collected from them are kept in a safe for five (5) years preservation. In effect therefore, the study was conducted in consonance with the principle of "Do no harm."

KEY FINDINGS

The study found out that the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1961 and the establishment of the Liberia-Japan Policy Dialogue at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Liberia are two major events that helped to define the nature of both countries' relations. The study also found out that both countries relations have ensured mutual benefits. For Japan, there are several economic benefits gained from these relations, including the importation of ores and other resources from Liberia; and politically, the exercise of soft power on Liberia leading to Liberia's support of Japan's candidates and interest at the United Nations and the African Union.

For her part, Liberia benefited from several infrastructure and material projects, some of which include: the construction of bridges in Grand Cape Mount County, the ten (10) Megawatt generator provided prior to the rehabilitation and functioning of the Mount Coffee Hydro Power Plant, pavement of the Liberia-Japan Freeway- a major project that immensely reduced traffic congestion on that route thereby contributing to road traffic safety and revenues for the government. The construction of a new Stockton Creek bridge, the repair of the old Double-Bridge, the US\$731,000 grant support to the Foreign Ministry for capacity development, the donation of medical supplies to Liberia during Ebola, and the provision of bilateral scholarships among others.

Consequently, it was frequently stated by participants that Japan-Liberia relations is of seminal importance to both countries especially Liberia, and that Liberia should deepen this relationship further; and it was strongly recommended that considering Japan and China geopolitical rivalry and Liberia enjoying diplomatic relations with both countries, the Republic, through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs should avoid taking a side in their geopolitical rivalry and manage its relations with both countries strategically through adept diplomacy and tactfulness

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