

2023 Kan'ichi Asakawa Award
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Aiming for a world where we move forward in unison

CHIBA Akino, Third Grade

Aizumisato Takada Junior High School

“Akun (Thank you)”.

Radiant, white-toothed smiles were directed at our family as we shopped in the market. This sight in Cambodia left a lasting impression on me.

When I was eleven, our family visited Cambodia in summer. While shopping at a market, we noticed a lot of insects were on the fish on display. It made me think that even a fish in this condition was considered a valuable food source there. Looking at the locals and their way of life, I could immediately recognize the state of poverty. In spite of this, everyone greeted us with beaming smiles. Although we couldn't understand the local language, some tried broken English, showing their effort to communicate with my parents. I remember that witnessing their hard work made me want to help them in any way I could. This trip ignited my passion to do something for people suffering from poverty around the world.

One billion. This figure represents the population living in slums around the world. It would be fair to say that the population is growing every year, considering it was around 760 million in 2000. I was also surprised to learn that this 1 billion figure represents one-eighth of the world's population, because I wasn't aware that the number was that large.

Why do slums form? I figured I could find out the cause by studying the history of the country, so I started researching Cambodian history right away.

When talking about Cambodia, the renowned tourist spot Angkor Wat comes to mind. I visited the temple myself and was overwhelmed by its grandeur. The temple, a masterpiece of Khmer architecture, took 30 years to build during the Khmer Empire. Unfortunately, the empire faced a downturn. It was caused by internal instability and an external invasion by another ethnic group. The empire reached out to France to break free from control. In response, France provided protection to the kingdom. Following a period of Japanese occupation during World War II, Cambodia achieved independence in 1953. Despite efforts to develop the country by building factories and roads, it fell under the dictatorial regime of Pol Pot, who carried out genocide. Through forced labor and repeated acts of mass extermination, up to 1.7 million of its citizens were eventually killed, which I learned was

a quarter of the population at the time. I was surprised to learn that the carnage took place so recently and felt a deep sadness. I also wanted more people to know about it.

This mass killings are said to have contributed to slums and poverty in present day Cambodia. I also share the view that such acts of genocide and war often give rise to poverty, which leads to the formation of slums. It made me think that the major causes of the emergence of poverty are factors such as civil wars, conflicts, and domestic political instability, which can be seen worldwide.

Currently, one in ten people on Earth is living in poverty.

Last year, I was introduced to a story about the decline of the culture that created the Moai statues on Easter Island in my Japanese Language textbook. I learned that tribal conflicts, stemming from a food crisis, led to the extinction of the state and its culture. As I read on, I discovered that the story drew comparisons between the history of Easter Island and current global situations, revealing striking similarities. I also learned that currently a total cultivable area on earth could only feed a population of mere 8 billion, making me feel that the phenomenon of a global food crisis, which I initially thought would be facing soon had been already put in motion.

Shortly after learning about this in class, I came across the news that the global population had reached 8 billion in November last year. It reminded me of the growing seriousness of food and poverty issues in the world today.

"How long will these price increases last?"

I have been hearing this phrase often these days, and I think one of the reasons for the price hikes is the ongoing war in Ukraine. I recently found myself wondering, "What does Japan, where I live, have to do with Ukraine? It's far away from here, so why does it matter?" The conflict between the major grain and oil producing nations reduced imports significantly, leading to inflation. Air transportation of seafood to avoid Russian airspace has led to increased costs due to longer flight distances, ultimately causing prices to rise. It is evident that the war in Ukraine and the COVID-19 pandemic have triggered the existing food crisis. In the face of this situation, I feel deeply concerned about how it will impact the people already suffering from poverty.

Looking at the global distribution of population, two-thirds now live in communities with a declining birthrate. Half of the population growth is taking place in areas where many people live in poverty in Africa and Asia.

Junior high school students often feel distant from serious issues like poverty and famine worldwide. I was one of them, saying phrases like “I don't like it” and leaving a meal unfinished, or discarding purchased food just because the expiration date has passed, without much consideration. Food loss is a serious issue in Japan, especially in the context of the global food crisis. That’s why I believe that we need to be keenly aware of what's happening around the world, and keep up to date with the news. By being well-informed about global situations, we may spontaneously find ways we can contribute to helping others.

I learned about child labor in Ghana, Africa, during my social studies class. Children are employed to harvest the cacao cultivated in Ghana. The cacao is used to make the chocolate we eat in Japan. The price of the chocolate made from the cacao they export to Japan is so low that it wouldn't improve the living conditions of these children. Poverty will never end. But I also learned about the concept of “fair trade” in the class to help them. It left a strong impression on me and made me think, “There is something we can do.” It may not seem like a big deal, but there is a way to help those living in poverty with something as small as “fair trade”.

Currently, I am living in a favorable environment in Japan. I believe that it is because we are in such a privileged environment that we should never allow ourselves to only care about ourselves. “If we only have little food, share it with everybody”. This holds true within families. But can it be applied between countries? It may be challenging, but failing to do so, as families do, would only lead to a future of hunger, conflict or decline. The first goals of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are “End poverty in all its forms” and “Zero Hunger”. Japan is providing food and technological assistance to achieve these two goals in the international community. I aspire to take small steps within my capacity little by little, seeing things with broader perspective. I will become more aware of global affairs and actively explore issues that make me think.