

Building the Foundations of the World's Newest Country

*There are many Japanese women working in UN organizations and NGOs in developing countries. The Japan Journal's Osamu Sawaji spoke with one of them, **Azusa Chiba**, who works in the Republic of South Sudan, the 54th independent nation in Africa.*

On July 9, 2011, the Republic of South Sudan was born after Africa's longest-running civil war. That day, the capital, Juba, was filled with shouts of delight.

"Literally everyone throughout the city, regardless of nationality or color of skin, greeted each other with a smile and shared their joy. Me too, of course," says Chiba.

Chiba has been working in Sudan since January as a Monitoring and Evaluation officer for the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS). Until last year, she was a staff member of a Japanese NGO, and had worked for disaster relief in fourteen countries, including Zimbabwe, Indonesia, Myanmar and Haiti. Chiba managed a repatriation project in Sudan from 2006 to 2008, helping thousands of South Sudanese refugees returning to their homeland.

"I lived in a rural village and worked closely with local people. It was an exciting project and great grassroots level experience. However, I also witnessed a bitter reality. In those two years, returnees lost hope for their country's future because of the lack of social development. No roads were built; no schools constructed. The situation led some of them to become refugees again. For South Sudan's nation building, the acceleration of infrastructure development would be crucial to provide safety and stability for the people, who are the foundations of new country. I developed a keen interest in the UN and their national-level development approach."

Last year Chiba signed up for the UN's Junior Professional Officer Programme, and started to work for UNOPS, an organization which operates on the front line, providing management services for life-saving peace-building and humanitarian and development operations. In the last six years, UNOPS has constructed forty-eight schools, 475 kilometers of road and thirty police facilities in South Sudan. Chiba's position with UNOPS entails making sure that the UN funds provided through various countries and donors are utilized effectively, efficiently and appropriately. Experience shows that there had been many failed cases of infrastructure devel-



Azusa Chiba with children of Sudanese refugees in 2007, when she worked for a Japanese NGO in Sudan

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opment: a school without teachers; a school built in a community where no one knows how to repair damage. Chiba's role is to monitor and evaluate projects, in line with donors' requirements, using various indicators. The goal is to ensure a project's sustainability, which includes community ownership, female participation and construction skill transfer to locals. In particular, women's empowerment is one of the key factors in UNOPS projects. In a paternal society like South Sudan, women's voice had been neglected. "It is a big advantage that I am myself female. I am very approachable for South Sudanese women, and I can collect their straight opinions," says Chiba.

Pride of the South Sudanese

Chiba was amazed at the sudden changes that occurred in South Sudan after it gained independence. The wetlands in front of the airport were turned into a parking lot, the main streets became lined with streetlights, and even pedestrian paths were constructed. Two and three story buildings are going up everywhere.

During all of this, Chiba has met a number of people who are proud to be South Sudanese. Some women working on a road construction site told her, "Right now we are making money thanks to this construction work, but when construction ends, so will our income. Now everyone in this area is trying to keep its cash flow within the community, so that our local economy will be sustained."

Chiba says, "I was so touched. Before, I saw many aid-dependant South Sudanese claiming free food and job opportunities. Now, I see people trying to create jobs. And I see strong women, who have carefully analyzed their current situa-



Azusa Chiba, Monitoring and Evaluation officer for UNOPS, with merchant women she interviewed in a local market, June 2011.

COURTESY OF AZUSA CHIBA

tion and are planning for their children's future. I am convinced since there are such self-dependent mothers, South Sudan will develop.

Chiba says she was also very moved by everyone's sympathy when the Great East Japan Earthquake struck. News of the disaster was carried widely, so many people of all different nationalities inquired after her family and friends' well being. Good news was also shared. The media gave a lot of coverage to the FIFA Women's World Cup. On the day after Japan won the championship, everyone who met Chiba said, "Those Japanese women are amazing!" "Congratulations!" or "Japan, oh yeah!" (a parody of the shout that people greeted each other with on South Sudan's independence day, saying, with one hand raised, "South Sudan, oh yeah!")

"For many years I've wanted to help people who've faced life-threatening danger to return to a normal way of life. I'm incredibly happy that I now have the chance to do," says Chiba. "My term of deployment in South Sudan is two years. From the second year I'd like to have South Sudanese staff to work as my successors, and give them full training as M&E officers. This is their country, and ultimately the South Sudanese must be able to do everything themselves. That's something that we, as internationals, have to keep in mind." 