

Impact of Japan's official development assistance on Vietnam's socio-economic development⁽¹⁾

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Abstract. This topic was presented by Nguyen Xuan Thien and Nguyen Viet Khoi at the Second International Conference of The Japanese Studies Association in Southeast Asia titled "Japanese Studies in Southeast Asia : The Past, Present and Future" held on 22-23 October 2009 in Hanoi, Vietnam. Official Development Assistance (ODA) plays an important role in Vietnam's socio-economic development. Amongst all of Vietnam's ODA donors, Japan has been the largest bilateral one for the last two decades. This report mentions the following: Overview of ODA and Japan's ODA to Vietnam; Analysis of the impact of Japan's ODA on Vietnam's socio-economic development; Recommendations to attract and increase the effectiveness of Japan's ODA in Vietnam.

1. Overview of Official Development Assistance and Japan's Official Development Assistance to Vietnam

Before 1989, Official Development Assistance to Vietnam mainly came from the Soviet Union, Eastern European countries, some Northern European capitalist developed nations and international organizations such as the United Nations. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and East European socialism, Vietnam lost an important source of foreign aid. However, with the opening of the economy and the start of the process of world integration, Vietnam has started to receive ODA again from developing countries and international organizations since 1993.

Lobbying and the signing of ODA contracts are carried out in donors' conferences, including mid-term meetings in the middle of

the year as well as an official conference at the end of the year. These conferences were at first organized in foreign countries but now mostly take place in Vietnam so that donors get the chance to understand Vietnam's developing situation better and are able to meet domestic partners such as the non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the private sector and community representatives. It presents a good opportunity for Vietnam to show its achievements in economic development and brings the image of the country closer to international friends. From 1993 to the middle of 2009, Vietnam held up to 16 official conferences and 17 mid-term meetings of this kind. After these meetings, donors pledged to provide Vietnam with over 42 billion USD worth of ODA - 15-20% as non-refundable aid and the rest as preferential loans.

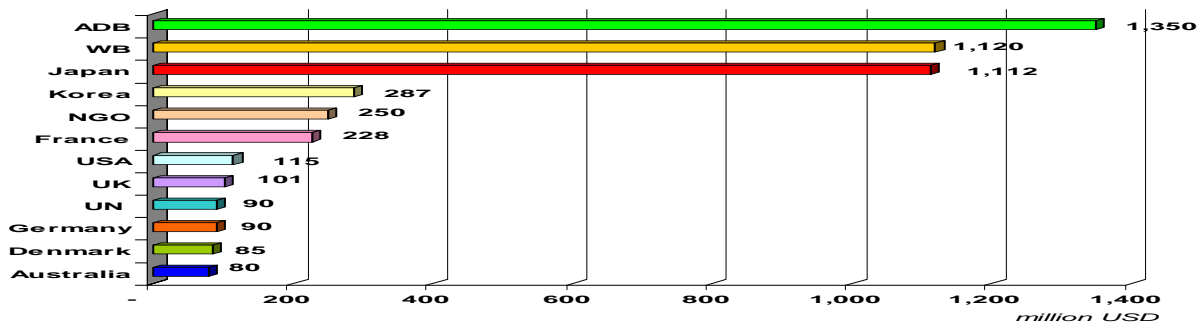
Up to now, Vietnam has had relationships with 25 bilateral donors such as Japan, Korea, Australia, Sweden, Switzerland, France, Canada

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and England, 22 of which are annual donors. Vietnam has also established multilateral relations with 15 international organizations such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the World Bank (WB), the European Commission (EC) and the International Finance Corporation (IFC). Besides, Vietnam also cooperates with more than 350 NGOs which provide an average of 80 million USD in non-refundable aid. Our major donors are Japan, the WB and the ADB, whose funding is approximately 70% of total committed ODA. Japan alone accounts for 40% of total aid. Other

partners such as the EC, UNDP, France and Oxfam (Great Britain) have also carried out effective activities in various fields, especially centering on poverty reduction, community development and human resource improvement.

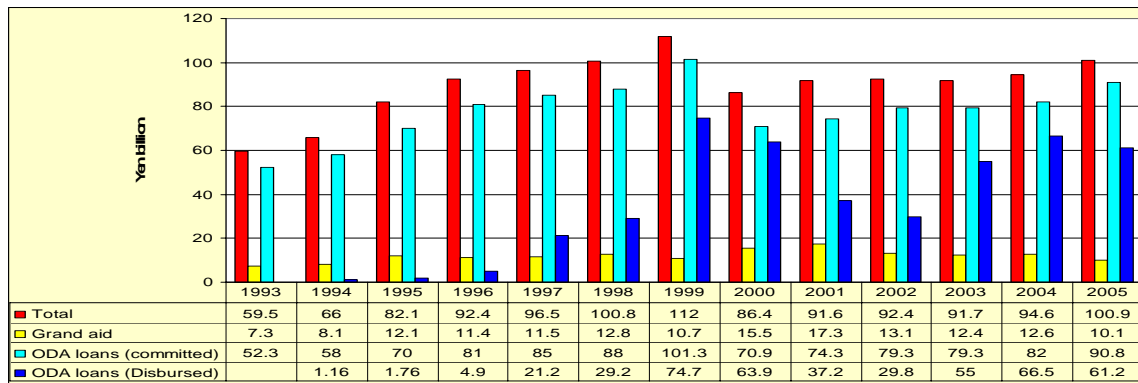
As mentioned, Japan is the largest donor to Vietnam since 1993. Japan's total ODA in the period 1993 to 2005 was 1,167.1 billion yen of which 13.27 % were in the form of grants and 86.77% in the form of preferential loans. The rate of preferential loan disbursement was 40.15%.



Source: Vietnam ministry of planning and investment
Figure 1: The Top ODA Donors in Vietnam in 2008.

Vietnam also receives aid from Japan through technical assistance between Japan-ASEAN, Japan-GMS (Greater Mekong Sub-region), and Japan-Indochina agreements. For instance, Japan financed 20 million USD for the Indochina

triangle's development scheme (the junction of Vietnam-Laos-Cambodia) via the Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund, which was committed at the Japan-Mekong Foreign Ministers' meeting in January, 2008.



Source: Vietnam ministry of planning and investment
Figure 2: Commitment and Disbursement of Japan's ODA to Vietnam.

At the moment, Japan's aid to developing countries has declined due to ongoing economic problems. In the meantime, however, Vietnam remains Japan's preferred aid recipient.

Japan's new policy on providing ODA for Vietnam in the upcoming years will focus on the following areas:

- Promoting growth including: improvement of the investment environment, development of small and medium enterprises as well as the private sector, transportation, energy and power, telecommunications, human resources, and economic reforms such as the reform of state-owned enterprises.

- Improving living standards and conditions including the areas of education, healthcare, rural development, urban development, environmental concerns and living standards and conditions.

- Enhancing institutions including improvements in the legal system and administrative reforms.

2. Analysis of the impact of Japanese Official Development Assistance on Vietnam's socio-economic development

In recent years, ODA has been an effective source of support for Vietnam's development, especially as Vietnam is still a poor country and needs to attract outside capital to achieve its economic goals, namely the processes of innovation, industrialization and modernization. Between 1996 and 2000, Japan's ODA accounted for 12% of total social investment capital, the equivalent of 24% of total investment capital from the budget or 50% of state credit capital for development and investment. (An overview of ODA in Vietnam, Ministry of Planning and Investment, Social-Economic Information 2003).

ODA to Vietnam has two main goals: supporting socio-economic development, poverty alleviation and administrative reforms.

3. Supporting socio-economic development and poverty alleviation

ODA has played a vital part in the considerable success of Vietnam's socio-economic development and poverty alleviation. These goals are also highly agreeable with the international donor community and governments, for example, Vietnam's comprehensive strategies on growth and poverty alleviation and millennium development objectives between 2001 and 2010. To achieve these goals, ODA's allocation should focus on the following areas:

a) Infrastructure development

On a large scale, ODA has been intensively invested in both national and local constructions such as national highways, provincial roads, port upgrades, hydropower plant systems and high voltage power transfers.

Until the end of 2003, ODA projects have helped Vietnam to restore, upgrade and build 3676 km of highways, about 1,000 km of provincial highways, and 188 main bridges on the national highways with a total length of 33.7 km. Among these projects, many are very important such as the No. 5 route linking Hanoi to Hai Phong, and the national highway 1A from Hanoi to Vinh and Ho Chi Minh City to Can Tho and Nha Trang. Other major projects have also been implemented such as My Thuan Bridge, the Hai Phong and Sai Gon seaport upgrade, the Cai Lan deep-water port construction, the Tien Sa and Da Nang port restoration, the construction of many electric factories such as Phu My 1, Phu My 2, Ham Thuan-Da Mi, Song Hinh, Nhim, Pha Lai 2, Tra Noc et cetera, and the 500 kV North-South line as well as the 220KV line installation from Playku-Phu Lam to Tao Dan-Nha Be.

According to joint research conducted in 2003 between the Japanese School of Policy Research and the Vietnamese Ministry of Planning and Investment, major ODA projects conducted in the 90s greatly impact economic growth and poverty alleviation by connecting development centers to rural areas of Vietnam. In fact, these connections enable the rural access to social services and attract investment, stimulating economic growth in rural areas.

At the local level, small ODA projects such as the development of power, roads, schools and stations or water supply and waste treatment projects are very practical and helpful in improving local standards of living. ODA also helped to renovate 10,000 km of roads and 31 km of rural bridges and expanded the electricity network to over 30 provinces and cities. Besides support in the development of simple infrastructure, ODA projects have helped to develop many key and modern constructions such as the upgrading of Bach Mai Hospital (Hanoi) and Cho Ray Hospital (Ho Chi Minh City). Moreover, ODA has effectively supported many programs related to urban development such as transport infrastructure upgrades, safe water supply, and sanitation and waste treatment.

b) Development of education and training and implementation of social programs

ODA projects are mostly used for important social programs such as population and development programs, vaccination programs, children's nutrition programs, initial healthcare programs and HIV/AIDS and drug prevention programs.

Until the end of 2003, ODA projects for education and training reached about 550-million USD (accounting for 8.5% of total expenditure on education), which has helped improve the quality and effectiveness of Vietnam's education system and enhanced technical facilities. Such assistance progressively modernizes Vietnam's education system in order to help it catch up with education standards in the region. Particularly, most ODA projects for education and training were provided

in the form of non-refundable aid through independent technical cooperation projects. (An overview of ODA in Vietnam, Ministry of Planning and Investment, Socio-economic Information, No.12 (24) 2003, p. 24).

With regards to social development, at a world conference on social development organized by the United Nations in Copenhagen in 1995, Vietnam joined The Idea 20/20, which allocated 20% of the total budget and 20% of total ODA for basic social services. These efforts were reconfirmed by developing countries and the international donor community in the Hanoi Consensus meeting on the Initiative 20/20 on June 10th, 1998. Vietnam became one of the first developing countries to increase investment in basic social services, especially on healthcare and education programs.

In implementation of the Idea 20/20, a report in 1999 on basic social services in Vietnam, compiled by the UNDP and the Vietnam Government, indicated that the state budget for basic social services had continuously increased since 1990 and had reached 17.1% in 1997 (8.5% of the UN's standards). Assistance in basic social services reached 10% of United Nations standards in 1997 (UNDP, UN and Government Joint effort to protect basic social service spending, 10 December 1999).

c) Socio-economic development in agricultural, rural and areas of extremely difficult circumstances

Investment in agriculture and rural development in Vietnam mainly comes from the following sources: 1) Taxes on agricultural land used for construction in rural areas 2) Capital funding from the locals for the construction of infrastructure in rural areas, and 3) ODA from foreign countries.

Thus, it can be clearly seen that ODA is an important source of funding for agricultural and rural development. Up to early 2004, there have been 156 new projects funded by a total amount of more than 1.4 billion USD of ODA, especially in the forms of preferential credit

granted to farmers to create side employment, encourage agriculture and fishing and develop rural infrastructure. (A general view on ODA in Vietnam, Economy - Society News, 12th (24) publication 2003, page 24)

ODA has positively supported hunger elimination and poverty alleviation programs including priority programs such as Program 135 on economic development for communities existing under extremely difficult circumstances, Program 133 on the development of northern mountainous provinces, the 5-million-hectare Forest Program, the Initiative of Central Provinces on Lightning and Natural Calamity and so on.

4. Supporting reforms

The second biggest aim of ODA is to support holistic reform and innovation to create an open market economy in Vietnam. This has always been the priority of sponsors such as Japan. For example, according to the framework of the Miyazawa Initiative, Japan granted ODA to Vietnam to support private area development, audit state-owned enterprises, and convert non-tariff trade barriers into tariff trade barriers. Under Vietnam's operation strategy in 1995, the ADB regarded policy reform and institutional development as its first priority while most of ODA granted by the World Bank was in the form of structural adjustment credit.

Since 2001, in addition to regular aid, all sponsors have pledged to a special kind of aid to enhance and stimulate reform in Vietnam. In general, ODA supporting reform in Vietnam focuses on the following fields:

a) Policy and institutional aid

The goal is to plan a method of deployment, progress assessment, and supervision of the process of policy implementation, especially that relating to reform efforts as well as hunger elimination and poverty alleviation. For instance, ODA helps to carry out the studying, planning and assessment of socio-economic

development programs, holistic strategies on growth, hunger elimination and poverty alleviation, and Vietnam's millennium development goals. Moreover, this activity also helps to evaluate the efficiency of aid projects and programs, especially with respect to community participation in policy design for development.

b) Structural adjustment and economic reform

The main point of this particular target is to provide technical support and advice on planning and deployment of the first stage of reformation projects for state-owned economic, banking and private sectors, especially for small and medium developing enterprises.

c) Administrative and legal reform

Administrative reforms are the biggest concerns of the ADB, UNDP, Denmark, Sweden, Germany, and Holland, among others. Many projects on technical and financial support are proposed and deployed to assist administrative reforms in Vietnam, including the planning and implementation of general programs on administrative state reforms over the 2001 - 2010 period. Two basic aspects of this program are exchange of traditions and customs and policy dialogue.

In the field of legal reform, sponsors are positively supporting a general strategy on legal reform to be issued in 2007 which focuses on the following four aspects: 1) Principles and framework to be used in developing the economy and civilian society 2) Institutions and the Constitution 3) Law education and specialized training 4) Income transparency and diffusion of information on the law. (Report on Vietnam development in 2002: Implementing reform to poverty alleviation and quicker growth, World Bank Vietnam, page 64, 2003)

Together with support in the planning process for the general program in state administration and legal reform programs for the 2001 - 2010 period, ODA also helps to reform and upgrade the quality of the administration and law system by assisting in staff development, promoting good

practices in budget allocation, clarification and simplification of administrative procedures, issuing legal documents, encouraging the community to take part in the planning of development policy, and promoting dialogue and development-partnership mechanisms among sponsors, community, non-governmental organizations, enterprises and the government.

3. Recommendations to attract and increase the effectiveness of Japan's ODA in Vietnam

3.1. ODA management

The ineffective administrative system is the main obstacle to ODA management, which slows down the implementation of investment projects. There are several common concerns including:

- Slow land clearance due to improper planning, inappropriate compensation and corruption.

- Lack of reciprocal capital or late allocation of reciprocal capital. The main reason for this is inadequate budget. However, due to misallocation as well, there is still inessential spending on attracting ODA measures, which require funds.

- Late procurement due to lack of transparent organizational processes and the "request-give" regime resulting in time-consuming and under-table lobbying.

- Incomprehensive administrative procedures in ODA projects, especially with regards to tax procedures.

- Personnel inefficiency

- Failure to provide seamless access to capital, especially for the private sector due to the centralized management of ODA

However, there are also some problems on the part of the donors, such as:

- Incompatibility of priorities or regulations on types of aid with Vietnam's situation and conditions. Many donors make decisions

without referring to Vietnamese partners or conducting studies into feasibility. Some are motivated by political interests.

- Difficulty of fund allocation when different donors have different priorities. There are repeat receivers and transportation cost increases dramatically due to diseconomies of scale.

- Unclear sponsorship regulations of some donors

- Although almost all donors have pledged to invest in the private sector and provide assistance to every organization, most projects are actually executed only by the government and its offices. In contrast, NGOs and companies in the private sector have few chances to cooperate with donors, except by participating in meetings.

- The donors have not found specific methods to assess the effectiveness of projects, leading to dishonest acts by some partners and incomplete programs. Most projects do not take into consideration long-term issues and lack of coordination.

In dealing with these problems, the Prime Minister signed the 17/2004/CT-TTg decree on speeding up ODA disbursement. This paper mentioned two issues: ODA institutional reform based on reviewing the 17/CP decree on managing and using ODA and the establishment of an intra-ministerial working group to evaluate the implementation of ODA projects. There are also other suggestions to improve the quality of managing and using ODA in Vietnam. The following are some measures focusing on basic issues:

- Enhancing ODA management capacity: focusing on officers' qualification and administrative reform from the central to the local level. The Ministry of Planning and Investment is trying to complete a program to strengthen ODA management capacity, which attaches special importance to institutional reform and human resources.

- Diversifying forms of funding: in addition to aiding through projects, other forms of non-project funding in long-term programs, which

embrace all fields and link with other areas, should be encouraged and attracted.

- Besides the function of an important source of capital for development assistance capital, ODA should be exploited in terms of providing policy consulting for the government by donors such as how to write policies, decentralize power, reform the economy and allocate budgets prudently. It is a useful tool for Vietnam's development in the long term.

- Avoid a passive attitude of dependence on foreign assistance, step up the effectiveness of using ODA and fight against corruption.

- Harmonize and simplify capital management and disbursement processes. Vietnam should work out an appropriate model of practice to those involved including government, donors and receivers.

- In particular, Vietnamese authorities should narrow the gap between donors and Vietnam in order to attract more capital. Though the main target of international assistance is hunger elimination and poverty alleviation, most donors and the Vietnamese government emphasize on the sustainability of such capital as well as the quality of economic growth. Foreign donors are often very interested in Vietnam's effort in reforming the economy, particularly in state-owned companies and the banking system.

- Finally, ODA should be made available to private businesses, NGOs and community organizations. This is because these groups are in real need of capital. This also contributes to the anti-corruption process and the removal of red tape from the administrative system.

3.2. Measures for attracting and speeding up Official Development Assistance disbursement

Attracting ODA has many advantages such as a stable political and social environment, high economic growth, and integration into the world economy and the region as a full member of the WTO. Besides, the institutional and legal environment has been improved to gradually

meet international standards, subsequently consolidating and expanding cooperation between Vietnam and international donors.

The achievements in cooperation and development have been extremely encouraging. However, the speed of implementation of ODA projects has still been very slow and the disbursement has not yet met given requirements. It is expected that total disbursed ODA in 2007 was about \$2 billion, surpassing the target of 5%. Yet, in comparison with the requirements of ODA disbursement, only \$3.9 billion was disbursed from 2006 to 2007, the equivalent of 32% of the total expected ODA disbursement in the period 2006 - 2010. This implies that there is a need to work out suitable methods to speed up the process in the remaining three years so as to reach the planned total of \$11.9 billion of ODA.

This situation has brought about concerns voiced by the Vietnamese government and donors. Regarding policies, the government has issued guidelines to attract and use ODA so that ministries, branches and localities can mobilize ODA based on these guidelines to achieve preferred targets. A legal system on ODA management and use has been developed in a fairly complete, consistent and synchronized way. Implementing the Hanoi Core Statement, donors comply with the plan of developing Vietnam's economy and society when providing ODA, which is consistent with branches' and localities' orientations in development.

However, attracting and using ODA have not lived up to these expectations because of some shortcomings. Firstly, Vietnam's process and internal procedures for ODA management and use are still complex and not transparent which hinders the projects' preparation and implementation. Secondly, some regulations of the Vietnamese government and donors are not congruous, especially in matters of immigration, land clearance and bidding. Thirdly, the capacities for managing and

organizing projects are still weak, especially at the local level. These current weaknesses are challenging to the authorities in the context of a strongly decentralized evaluation and approval process of projects at the Ministry and provincial People's Committee level.

While these shortcomings have been overcome, there are still insufficiencies that need to be resolved to achieve breakthroughs in the implementation and disbursement of ODA.

3.3. Using Official Development Assistance to enhance the capacity of implementing projects

In most ODA projects, strengthening capacity of implementation always plays a vital role in achieving projects' targets. Today, except in infrastructural projects, the rate of spending for enhancing capacity is always approximately 50% of total budget for the whole project or even higher. It appears that this trend may continue in the next five to ten years.

Strengthening capacity in ODA projects always comprises two closely related issues: management capacity and technological capacity (including both technological skills and non-technological job skills). Other researchers have added other kinds of capacity, such as interpersonal skills and the ability to work with agencies and social organizations. Thus, different types of capacities can be divided into many ways based on different approaches and standards of classification.

Enhancing capacity also consists of improvement in people's awareness and building skills for all officers in the whole system. To achieve this target, there should be a comprehensive environment in which everybody has a chance to show their skills and their ability to apply them under pressure. This environment should also create favorable conditions for the process of capacity transfer between individuals in the community/organizations. It will motivate everyone to improve themselves constantly

based on essential skills they have been trained in directly or indirectly.

Therefore, capacity should be seen from different aspects. Improving capacity is a highly systematic process which takes a long time. Only when the comprehensiveness and multi-dimensional nature of implementation of projects are guaranteed can this target be reached. Until now, while much research has been carried out to define the standards of evaluation of a successful project, there are still very few studies about good criteria of enhancing the capacities of the above-mentioned.

Capacity enhancement targets in most ODA projects are detailed by principles and ratios which are decided by experts. The ratios focus on the following fields:

- The capacity of key individuals involved in the project, mostly referring to their improved intellect and awareness as well as their attitudes and behaviors.

- The capacity of organizations related to or in charge of the projects, for example: recipient organizations and those supplying goods and services for the project's activities.

- The working environment of individuals and organizations including their coordination mechanisms and newly-established relationships in the project.

ODA projects have truly provided offices and organizations with projects which have been improving their capacity in many fields. Still, there are some weaknesses:

- Many of the capabilities that came about or were improved by projects dissipate or become redundant.

- In many organizations, new capabilities did not complement each other and thus, could not be promoted.

- Activities to improve capacity are not maintained regularly. Therefore, the outcome of these activities is hard to predict.

- Many of the improved elements prove to be incompatible with current situations of recipient organizations and lead to wastage of resources or even become a liability to the organizations.

- In some cases, the improvements are not compatible with the true demands of organizations which have accepted and benefited from the projects.

The causes of the weaknesses listed above include:

- Inaccurate research and evaluation processes of demands lead to wrong evaluations of demand which can result inaccurate planning of projects such as impossible targets and solutions.

- Unsuitable project management mechanisms not only in administration and implementation but also the initial conceptualization and reflection of the project. Some staff are stated to be the best in their field for the respective projects as assigned by their organizations. However, sponsors refuse to give aid to these very staff, which prevents smooth coordination. Still, many organizations providing goods and services are able to be employed and improve themselves in the progress of the project. When the project ends, these organizations work for other organizations, causing a decrease in relative capability of the organization taking over the project.

- Capacity improvement projects did not come up with solutions to ensure compatible conditions for the organizations subsequently taking over the projects in order to maintain and develop capabilities produced after the end of the project.

- These projects only focus on improving a single organization at a time. Recently, sponsored aid based on programs seemed to have made better improvements and a more systematic way of solving problems. However, in order to improve and make use of its capacity, more improvements are needed with respect to the systems utilized in projects.

The exploitation and use of these capacities depends on many other factors especially the environment, targets set and methods of utilization. In order to level up the effectiveness of improvements in capacity of ODA projects, organizations that take over the projects need to:

- Decide on the key element to focus on (with respect to the subject of improvement). Today, the ability of basic units is considered the center of the project. According to the current situation in Vietnam, focusing on improving key units and staff does not mean ignoring other elements, but concentrating on maximizing the usage of resources. Therefore, when carrying out projects, organizations need to analyze the capabilities of the whole system to highlight the strongest and weakest aspects. This is however less of a concern in today's projects.

- Choose the right factor to improve. For different individuals and organizations, the need to improve capabilities can be different. On a practical level, technical abilities, new technology and knowledge are necessary. On a strategic level, general ideas and strategic issues and approaches are needed (in the form of the way to approach and solve problems within the scope of the responsibilities of those involved)

- In designing projects, targets for improvement need to be clear, suitable, detailed and practical. Besides, the supervision and evaluation of individual and organizations' activities are also important to help management keep track of the results of the usage and implementation of the various capabilities.

- Build and implement management improvement programs at the same time (including administrative innovation) to enable officers to apply knowledge and skills that they have been trained in. Besides, these officers need to be aware of the importance of the project so that they themselves can see the effectiveness of these measures.

- Improving the ability of selected individuals is an important target of many ODA

projects in Vietnam. However, in recent years, these activities have not worked out as expected. In order to level up the effects of these projects, besides improving ability and administration, there needs to be a greater awareness on the part of individuals who wish to improve. This ought to be distinguished from other needs including a system's ability, the ability to evaluate technical, administrative and communicative abilities as well as other elements including knowledge, skills, awareness and motivation of those related correctly.

4. Conclusion

The Japanese government is Vietnam's number one bilateral donor. Its ODA has greatly contributed to Vietnamese economic development through poverty alleviation processes. In 2010, GDP per capita in Vietnam may reach 1,000 USD, taking Vietnam off the list of low-income countries. Yet, Vietnam is still at the bottom of poverty line and has to deal with many challenges in developing the economy due to the consequences of past wars. It is hoped that the Japanese government continues to provide large amounts of ODA to Vietnam in the next decade. Non-refundable aid could be decreased gradually but it should be substituted by increase in other types of favorable loans for infrastructure construction

such as highways and the North-South railway in Vietnam.

The increase in ODA from Japan will strengthen trade relationships between the two countries and draw more Japanese FDI to Vietnam as well as boost sustainable and long-term, mutually beneficial strategic partnerships.

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Tác động của nguồn vốn hỗ trợ phát triển chính thức của Nhật Bản đối với sự phát triển kinh tế - xã hội Việt Nam

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Nguồn vốn hỗ trợ phát triển chính thức (ODA) đóng một vai trò quan trọng đối với sự phát triển kinh tế - xã hội của Việt Nam. Trong hai thập kỷ vừa qua, Nhật Bản là nước cung cấp nguồn vốn hỗ trợ phát triển chính thức lớn nhất cho Việt Nam. Bài viết này đề cập tới những nội dung chính như sau: Đánh giá chung về tình hình nguồn vốn hỗ trợ phát triển chính thức và nguồn vốn hỗ trợ phát triển chính thức của Nhật cho Việt Nam; Phân tích tác động của nguồn vốn hỗ trợ phát triển chính thức của Nhật đối với sự phát triển kinh tế - xã hội Việt Nam; Đề xuất khuyến nghị thu hút và nâng cao hiệu quả nguồn vốn hỗ trợ phát triển chính thức của Nhật tại Việt Nam.