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What I have been taking away

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“Leaving poverty is just like bullying the weak
and taking away their fortune sneakingly.
It is nothing but doing something mean to them.”

I encountered the above phrase in a book. These are the words of the environmentalist, Miyako Maekita. I was taken a back because the words sounded so strong. It is no doubt that developed countries where we live have contributed huge amounts of funds to poor countries and people every year, and have benefitted such countries by consuming their goods. Then what does the phrase, “taking away their fortune sneakingly” mean? What am I taking away from them?

Think of donations. Organizations and companies vigorously collect donations, such as used clothes and electric appliances. I thought it is like killing two birds with one stone because I can make somebody happy with my used goods that I was going to throw away. However, things are different. When I checked the actual situation, I learned that a volume of used clothes in western countries are resold and sent to low-income countries in a form of export. Importing such a volume of cheap used clothes is badly affecting the apparel industry in low-income countries. It affects them so badly that some African countries are planning to ban the import of used clothes. Unwelcome imposition of goodwill has caused the suffering of people in the receiving countries. My younger sister and I often donate used clothes that we do not wear any more. I wonder to where and by what means our clothes are being distributed. Those who donate things have a responsibility to know the destination of such items. Just donating your goods is not at all helping the one in need of them.

Then what about purchasing goods manufactured in developing countries? Isn't it

evident if we consume our favorite fruits and chocolates made in Southern hemisphere countries, that we eventually support people in producing countries by increasing their incomes through our consumption?

Here is another problem. I encountered the phrase, “Cash crop” when I spent a little bit of time on the Internet. Cash crop is a crop which is cultivated for exporting to earn foreign currency. This cash crop is said to cause poverty. The system goes like this. First, countries or companies that are eager to earn foreign currency put a priority on a growing cash crop. Consequently, the volume of subsistence crops to support people’s living become scarce. Countries or companies spend the revenue gained by the export of cash crop to import food, and the people there purchase them by cash. The crop imported is too expensive for poor people to buy. In the end, starvation and poverty are triggered. Further, due to the price competition of such cash crops, more and more workers are required. Then, children who are not able to get proper education will increase. When my grandparents were small, bananas were too expensive to buy except for when they caught a cold. Nowadays, bananas are now sold at prices I can afford with my pocket money. The reason to enable the lower price may account for the trading I mentioned above.

Since I was small, I have seen TV programs about the rain forests in Borneo Island, where many animals and plants were endangered. The rain forests have disappeared. When I studied it, I knew that the rain forests were replaced by oil palm plantations. Palm oil is extracted from oil palms. Palm oil is used for processed products and detergent, and unknowingly has prevailed in our daily lives. Why? Because it can be used in multiple ways, more than other vegetable oil and fat, and its price is relatively low. These factors lead to high demand. Nevertheless, oil palm plantations require a certain environment for cultivation such as a constant volume of rain, and therefore, rain forests suitable for them in Borneo were all extinguished. This is indeed a critical environment for endangered species, and on top of that, indigenous people, who lived with the rain forests, could not continue their way of living the same as before. They were obliged to make money to obtain food. If we term this situation with the scale of developed countries, it may be called a kind of “Development”. Is it really a development?

What are the common problems in the examples above? I think there are two major problems. First, developed countries should never destroy people’s life in developing

countries in order to sustain unsustainable societies for themselves. Consuming and throwing away all goods so rapidly as to use up all resources on the earth for the better thing and more convenient way of life in developed countries — such a society should be corrected immediately.

What can each and every member of these societies do to correct that? For example, at present, I am one of the consumers. Every day, I consume palm oil and cash crop, and clothes I donated are causing trouble to people in an unexpected way. From now on, I will think more deeply when I have goods in my hands. What is this item made of? Where, how and who got involved in this item? I will make it a rule to purchase goods through which I did not take away anything as much as possible. If I have one in my hands, I will consume it very carefully without wasting it. If I give away my goods, I will choose a way to look after the destination of the goods.

The second wrong assumption of people living in developed countries is the assumption that everybody wants to become happy by making money like us, this is the assumption to pity subsistence life from poverty. Isn't such a selfish imposition making people's lives in the low-income countries poorer and more difficult than ever? It is not always right to say that they are living a life worse than ours in Japan where we can consume goods. Therefore, we should not take away an opportunity from them to think what is happiness to them and make decisions by themselves.

We should begin with sharing their perceptions when they are thinking of their happiness. It is the start of assistance to them. Eventually, we will be able to support them in a way that they really require.

I was completely ignorant. What my ignorance took away from them are the opportunities they might have had.

Let's acquire a capacity to absorb knowledge! It is my wish to have the capacity to look what is happening behind the scene of convenience and comfort with a broad view of what we enjoy now. It is also my dream that when societies should change their systems, I can voice productive opinions to participate in the efforts for that change as one of the members of that society.