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My Experience with Grants-in-Aid

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The Key Holding the Future of Scientific Research in Japan

I have long been engaged in area studies, which typically entail going to target areas and doing long-term societal research, making observations and collecting data. Ecological and cultural anthropological studies are among examples of what is called field sciences. Due to the interdisciplinary, collaborative nature of area studies, they tend to consume significantly more funding than other disciplines of the humanities. Established in 1965, Kyoto University's Center for South East Asian Studies was the first research institute in Japan to specialize in area studies. In those early days, most of the funding came from contributions by the Ford Foundation and the Japanese business community, enabling the Center to undertake extensive field studies. With assistance from the then Ministry of Education, the Center was also able to set up overseas liaison offices.

These initial investments made it possible to integrate fields of the humanities and natural sciences through field sciences, thus paving the way for area studies. As it developed in subsequent years, the Grant-in-Aid program became the driving force behind field science investigations. The growth of Grants-in-Aid can be seen from two perspectives: one is support for pioneering, leading-edge research, and the other is expansion of the scope of scientific investigation. As to the latter, an overseas research coordination unit was established with a Grant-in-Aid at the Research Institute for Language and Cultures of Asia and Africa at the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, which has contributed significantly to the development of field science studies. In this vein, I believe that Grants-in-Aid have made it possible to advance field science studies in such disciplines as ecology, anthropology and geography. However, it was in the relatively large-scale Grants-in-Aid categories that paved the way for advancing area studies.

The first opportunity I was given to take part in a large-scale grant project was under a Grant-in-Aid for Research in the Priority Area of Cultural Conflicts, which began in FY1977. After that, new categories of Grants-in-Aid were added in rapid succession, including for other priority and designated areas, new programs, and Centers of Excellence (COEs). During the 1990s, I often served on the selecting, vis-a-vis the receiving, side of the Grants-in-Aid program. In that capacity, I was extremely pleased to witness how Grants-in-Aid have helped area studies to flourish. In later years, a new category of Grants-in-Aid was created for the humanities and social sciences. It provides funding that may be even too generous for these disciplines alone. The configuration of Grants-in-Aid for the humanities and social sciences has long been a topic of debate. It is my opinion that there are components of these disciplines that could be reconfigured to enable researcher participation in interdisciplinary research that integrates the humanities and natural sciences.

The selection process for Grants-in-Aid applications has become increasingly more transparent over the years. Since the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) took over application screening under the large-scale grant categories, this process has unequivocally become fair and evenhanded. Yet, fairness alone is not necessarily enough. What's also need is a system, especially for large-scale grants, to enable oversight reviews. One possible way to establish a broader approach would be to give the selection process a recommendation-based format such as that used in the Creative Scientific Research category of Grants-in-Aid. However, I fear that the general public would not perceive such a process as being sufficiently transparent. Ideally, I would like to see a private entity like the Ford Foundation play a key role in the implementation of Japan's science policy and research-funding mechanism. Unfortunately, however, Japanese foundations appear to lack sufficient capacity to take a lead in this way. Given this factor as well, Grants-in-Aid remain indispensable to the future advancement of Japan's scientific research.

Now, if I may share a bit of my background with you. In 1975, I was fortunate to have taken part in a Grants-in-Aid-funded project titled "Prototypes of Asia". It provided me with an opportunity to move forward my research on Indonesia. In FY 1977, as the representative of a group comprising over ten researchers, I submitted a Grant-in-Aid application for a study titled "Comparative Studies on Islam in Humid Zones". At that time, I recall one of the reviewers asking me whether I really intended to go ahead with the difficult project. In the same year, a new cultural attaché post was created in the Japanese Embassy in Jakarta, to be staffed by an official from the Ministry of Education and Science on secondment to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I was selected for the post and sent to Jakarta as First Secretary. Unfortunately, this meant that I had to step down as the research project's representative and from the study itself.

After completing the term of my assignment at the Jakarta embassy, I returned to Kyoto University where I submitted a Grant-in-Aid application for a 3-year interdisciplinary study, titled "Movements of People in Tropical Insular Areas", to be carried out by a team of over 20 researchers. Fortunately, the application was approved. This was back in 1980. Although technically it was a 3-year research project, the study took five years to complete because the policy back then was that Japanese researchers could work abroad for only one year at a time. Therefore, we conducted our overseas research every other year, while writing up our findings in the intervening years. Marking the beginning of my own joint research endeavors, I believe this study also helped to advance Southeast Asia Islands research at the then Center for Southeast Asian Studies as well as to develop the priority research and COE domains of the Gant-in-Aid program. At the very least, Grants-in-Aid played a major role in creating a modality of joint collaboration that integrates the humanities and natural sciences in the implementation of field research.

Grants-in-Aid hold the key for unlocking future potentialities of Japan's scientific research. It will be imperative to employ different criteria for evaluating projects in the large-scale, medium-scale and basic research categories of the Grant-in-Aid program, and to create a highly-effective system to evaluate applications and assess projects in each category.