New Partnerships, Old Ties

Taiwan is enhancing direct cooperation with its Pacific allies to promote regional development.

BY DENNIS CHANG
PHOTOS BY HUANG CHUNG-HSIN

When ophthalmologist Ho Hui-chun (何慧君) speaks of taking part in a recent medical mission to the Marshall Islands, she singles out the treatment of an elderly patient there. The man was a former civil servant who had been nearly blind for three years, but was able to see the world clearly again after treatment for cataracts. “He said that he never dreamed he’d have the chance to regain his eyesight for the rest of his life, and that our arrival really brought him hope and lit up his life,” Ho says. “There were happy tears of gratitude in his eyes.”

Ho was part of a medical team from Taipei Municipal Wan Fang Hospital that provided treatment to the Micronesian nation of atolls and islands in the middle of the Pacific Ocean in March this year. “Just a few days of my time can alleviate or even put an end to ailments that have tormented cataract patients for years,” she says. “What could be more meaningful than that to a doctor?”

The Marshall Islands was also the first stop in a series of state visits by Republic of China (ROC) President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) from March 21–27 this year that also took him to the ROC’s five other diplomatic allies in the Pacific Ocean, namely Kiribati, Tuvalu, Nauru, the Solomon Islands and Palau. This marked not only the president’s first trip to the Pacific since assuming office in May 2008, but also the first time that an ROC
The president has visited all six of the nation’s Pacific allies in six days.

While none of these six countries is large, they all play an extremely important role by supporting Taiwan’s fishing industry, helping the ROC maintain its international status and fostering interaction between the ROC and the region,” Ma said at the airport before his departure. “The ROC maintains close cooperative relationships with these nations in the fields of medicine, agriculture, fisheries and education, and these relationships are a very important reason for this visit.”

In the past, Taiwan often held multilateral summit meetings with its Pacific allies, but that approach is changing. “General discussions can sometimes lead to a loss of focus,” explains Matthew S. Lee (李世明), director-general of the Department of East Asian and Pacific Affairs under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA). “We now prefer to engage in more direct and effective interaction with our Pacific allies, and a better understanding of each nation can be achieved through visits to each, rather than a single, symbolic round-table discussion.”

During the trip, Ma spoke with leaders of the six allied nations about six cooperative ventures, namely medical care, fisheries conservation, vocational training, agricultural development, green energy and cultural exchanges. Although Taiwan has worked in close cooperation with its Pacific allies in various fields over the years, these initiatives are particularly significant as they aim to concentrate resources in order to establish fully functioning model programs, which could later be copied by other nations in the region.

“When drafting bilateral cooperative programs with these countries, we hope to expand and deepen cooperation based on the current foundation,” Lee says. “Our Pacific allies are all facing a number of similar problems, such as insufficient jobs, imbalanced diets, and a lack of adequate medical resources. Therefore, while these cooperation projects were tailored to meet their practical needs, it’s hoped that each successful venture can become a model that can be copied by the other five countries.”

In May 2009, MOFA released the ROC’s first White Paper on Foreign Aid Policy, which embraces...
Above: President Ma, front right, extends an invitation to a Tuvaluan seaman to receive training in Taiwan under the Regional Observer Program.

Above right: President Ma enjoys lunch with local schoolchildren in Nauru, where the ICDF is promoting its Kitchen for Diabetics Project.

President Ma, front right, visits the Ambo Aquaculture Station in Kiribati.

the principles of appropriate goals and procedures, as well as effective implementation when extending foreign aid. “We’ll concentrate our efforts on promoting cooperative initiatives that promise to produce tangible results, thereby improving the living standards of the peoples of our Pacific allies,” Lee adds.

In the Marshall Islands, for example, the focus is on cooperation in medical care. Since 2006, Wan Fang Hospital has been holding free clinics twice annually for the medically needy in that country in cooperation with the Taiwan International Cooperation and Development Fund (ICDF), a non-profit foundation established by MOFA in 1996 to consolidate the planning and implementation of the ROC’s international cooperation
programs. Currently, the ICDF has 46 technical missions operating throughout the world, involving a number of cooperative schemes in fields such as medical care, agriculture, environmental protection and vocational training.

Previously, mobile medical teams from Taiwan included doctors, nurses and pharmacists from various fields such as surgery, pediatrics, dermatology, orthopedics, ophthalmology and gynecology and obstetrics. In March this year, however, the medical mission provided only specialized eye-care services to locals. “With the short stay of each mobile medical team, rapid and positive results can be better achieved through specialized medical care,” says Lee Liang-ming (李良明), deputy superintendent of Wan Fang Hospital and the leader of the medical mission. During its stay, the mission not only treated 294 cataract patients, 53 of whom required surgery, but also donated an array of medical equipment and supplies to the Marshall Islands, with the aim of raising the quality of medical treatment available there. Some 150 pairs of free eyeglasses were also distributed to those in need in the country.

Ho Hui-chun, an ophthalmologist from Wan Fang Hospital

Cataracts are a common malady facing people in the Marshall Islands, as well as other Pacific nations, given the strong year-round sunlight and traditional outdoor lifestyle. In fact, many people there are in need of a range of medical care, but lack the means of obtaining treatment due to the limited medical facilities available. Conditions such as cataracts thus often go untreated for many years, worsening such that they do not respond to basic treatment.

Giving Back

“In the past, Taiwan received medical assistance from abroad, and it has accumulated experience and built up strong medical services. Taiwan is now an exporter of medical care rather than an importer, and it’s time for us to pay back the international community with our advanced medical technology,” Wan Fang’s Lee Liang-ming says.

“Our medical mission was well received by cataract patients in the Marshall Islands, and we’re now planning to dispatch two other missions for treating cataract patients in other Pacific allies in the latter half of this year,” adds John Jean (簡正義), chief executive officer of Wan Fang Hospital’s International Medical Service.

Establishing good dietary habits is the goal of two ICDF projects in Nauru. During his visit, President Ma announced an initiative dubbed the “3-6-0” plan, so named because the goal is to take three years to equip Nauru to produce six types of agricultural and livestock products, so that the nation can achieve zero dependence on food imports.

“Our technical missions have been carrying out agricultural assistance in these Pacific countries for some time, but we hope that by focusing our resources in Nauru, this plan will play a pioneering role in promoting agricultural development throughout the region,” says Tsai Shiang-wu (蔡祥吾), division chief of the ICDF’s Technical Cooperation Department.
Tsai Shiang-wu, division chief of the ICDF’s Technical Cooperation Department

Tsai also stresses that in conjunction with the 3-6-0 plan, the ICDF is also promoting its Kitchen for Diabetics Project, which was launched in Nauru in March 2009 to provide local schoolchildren with free, nutritious meals as part of a balanced diet. “As the result of high meat consumption, many Pacific islanders suffer from illnesses such as diabetes and high blood pressure. Therefore, our goal is not merely to teach them how to grow fruit and vegetables, but also help improve their eating habits and become healthier,” Tsai says.

In Kiribati, a nation of islands spreading across an area of ocean spanning more than two million square kilometers, fish represent the bulk of production and exports. As an extremely important fishing ground, this country is also vital for Taiwan’s deep-sea fishing industry, as Taiwanese vessels are licensed to fish in Kiribati’s waters. One project has already seen the establishment of the Ambo Aquaculture Station in the island nation, which is operated by the ICDF’s technical mission and features the breeding of milkfish. The current plan is to transform the station into a regional fisheries incubation center.

“Our fishery cooperation with Kiribati highlights a recovery program for milkfish. Since last year the ICDF technical mission there has helped airlift the fingerlings from the station to the outer islands of Kiribati to boost the species’ recovery,” the ICDF’s Tsai explains. During President Ma’s state visit there, MOFA Minister Yang Chin-tien (楊進添) donated thousands of milkfish fingerlings to Kiribati on behalf of the ROC government. “Our technical mission has done its best to increase fishery resources in Kiribati, hoping that this would help replenish dwindling fishery stocks in Kiribati, as well as in the Pacific region,” Tsai says.

As to the cooperation project in Tuvalu, the ROC announced a Regional Observer Program to provide citizens of its partner country with training in fishery monitoring, seamanship and other job skills. Seven trainees from Tuvalu were invited to come to Taiwan in July to participate in seminars and workshops, which were designed to train them to serve as fisheries observers. “Neighboring countries like Australia and New Zealand are willing to offer job opportunities to the people of our Pacific allies, but they’re required to have received vocational training for some period of time before they can apply for an employment visa,” Tsai says. “Therefore, the primary goal of our vocational training programs for people there is to equip them with the skills they would need to meet such prerequisites.”

Each year, the ICDF also works with local colleges in Taiwan to hold around 20 seminars and workshops targeted at helping people from developing countries learn from Taiwan’s developmental experiences. Training courses include international trade, agribusiness, fisheries development and tourism promotion. “We heartily welcome the people from our Pacific allies to join us in these activities to improve their work skills,” Tsai adds.

Natural Resources
Taiwan is also helping the Solomon Islands make good use of the abundant sunlight in the region to resolve power shortages by donating photovoltaic power equipment. During Ma’s stay in the Solomon Islands, the ROC president jointly unveiled a plaque marking the installation of a solar power supply system at the Solomon Islands Office of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. The
system was donated by the ROC through the MOFA. Ma expressed his hope that the move would inspire more government agencies in the Solomon Islands to use alternative energy resources for power generation.

In 2009, Taiwan successfully helped the Solomon Islands launch a solar power development program by donating solar panels to schools in rural areas. “The ROC intends to promote solar power projects in each of these allies, so that their residents can spend less money on energy, their quality of life will be improved and the ideal of reducing energy consumption and carbon emissions can be approached,” MOFA’s Matthew S. Lee says.

According to anthropological research, ancestors of the Austronesian peoples now living on islands in the Pacific Ocean emigrated from Taiwan around 4,000 years ago. In Palau, which was the last leg of Ma’s state tour, an exhibition featuring the cultures of Taiwan’s indigenous peoples was held to bolster cultural and artistic interactions between Taiwan and the region’s Austronesian peoples.

“The ROC government has planned a broad variety of cultural and youth group exchanges, with particular attention to the linguistic, artistic and academic aspects of the Austronesian heritage common to Taiwan and its Pacific neighbors,” MOFA’s Lee says.

The Formosa Aboriginal Song and Dance Troupe, which accompanied President Ma on the trip, performed traditional aboriginal songs and dances in each of the six Pacific nations. The troupe included members of the Amis, Bunun, Paiwan, Tao and Truku tribes. “I was very surprised to learn that we could communicate with people there in our aboriginal dialects,” says Wadan Dushi, a member of the Truku tribe and the leader of the troupe, explaining that a number of basic words are pronounced quite similarly. “We are really of the same flesh and blood, and many of our troupe members were moved to tears after performing with their dancers.”

Taiwan is wholeheartedly sharing its development experience with its Pacific allies. Different skin colors sometimes create intangible divisions between people, but volunteers from Taiwan have broken through many of those barriers with their caring work. After her return from the Marshall Islands, Ho Hui-chun of Wan Fang Hospital says she did not feel tired, but continued to feel sympathy for people living there because they needed more medical assistance to treat their health problems. “As long as my schedule is okay, I’ll go back again to provide more care for the needy patients there. Our power might be limited, but at least we’ve taken with us the love of the people of Taiwan,” she says. “On the surface, it seems that we’re helping them. But in fact, they are helping us. They help us see another world and treasure what we have now.”