



Into Africa

In August, Kenya will host TICAD VI, the first Tokyo International Conference on African Development to be held outside Japan. We asked Kenya's Ambassador to Japan H.E. Mr. Solomon K. Maina for his thoughts in advance of the "Nairobi Summit."

What influence has TICAD had on African development since the Conference was first held in 1993?

TICAD was formed twenty-three years ago at a time when donor fatigue towards Africa was becoming more apparent. TICAD opened a new chapter. The fact that TICAD has five core organizers – the Government of Japan, the UNDP, the World Bank, the African Union Commission and the UN Office of the Special Advisor on Africa – places it in a different dimension from other [nation-Africa partnerships]. TICAD started off with issues of advocacy and moved gradually to issues of mobilization of ODA. The focus now is more on issues pertaining to infrastructure development, health, human resources development, youth and women. These are all aspects which are ingrained in the Sustainable Development Agenda and before that the Millennium Development Goals. The TICAD process is also closely aligned with the African Union's Agenda 2063.

One of the most important issues now is the participation of the private sector. At TICAD VI, we are going to have a plenary session dedicated exclusively to the private sector. In the past, private sector involvement was a side event; this time around, the private sector will engage directly with the heads of state of Africa and Prime Minister Abe

Photo: Yuichi Itabashi

in plenary. So the TICAD process is moving away from ODA-related aspects toward private sector engagement, or in other words from aid to trade. Nairobi will be a turning point as far as that is concerned.

What progress has been made on the Yokohama Action Plan agreed at TICAD V?

TICAD V articulated a five-year action plan for growth centered on six pillars. It's now three years down the line. Africa today is one of the leading continents in terms of economic performance. For example, the economic growth rate in Kenya is projected at 6.0% for this current year. The biggest contributor to our GDP is the service industry, at 61%. It is important to stress that the service industry is people-based. Training in Japan under the ABE Initiative (African Business Education Initiative for the Youth) – a TICAD V initiative – focuses on that aspect. Of the 473 African students who have studied in Japan under the ABE Initiative so far, 97 are from Kenya, which says a lot about our educational capacities. Our literacy rate is 87%. The other African countries are performing as well. If you look at health and issues of universal health coverage, you see that the child mortality rate has been reduced; the deaths of women during childbirth have drastically been reduced. We have

to continue with and conclude the initiatives of the Yokohama Action Plan.

Why has the rotation of TICAD been reduced from five years to three?

This decision was adopted during TICAD V, which sought increased frequency of the Summit and efficacy of decisions. Within a three-year period, it is feasible to set targets which we can easily achieve. For example, if TICAD needs to implement One Stop Border Posts in forty countries in Africa for integration purposes, it is manageable. The frequency of meetings is very important. The G7 meets every year and looks at serious evolving issues. If TICAD had to wait for five years to discuss issues such as violent extremism and terrorism then the TICAD process and its membership would be losing out.

How would you evaluate Japanese private sector engagement in Africa today?

The Japanese business community is probably not aware that a business revolution is taking place in Africa, one driven by ICT and the service sector. In Rwanda and Kenya, for example, children use computers in primary schools. We have seen that the youth with their innovation abilities and start-up programs are able to drive the economies to higher levels. The M-PESA mobile [telephone] money transfer system is a case in point. I have been engaged in a series of lectures, seminars and interviews, an essential diplomatic service, to raise awareness of Africa's potential.

What does the recently agreed Japan-Kenya Investment Agreement mean for both countries?

It's a game changer. Kenya has been a leading recipient of Japanese aid over the fifty years since independence. Japan has stood very firmly alongside us and witnessed that our capabilities and absorption capacity are very high. Last year Olkaria, a large-scale geothermal power plant, began operation thanks to huge investment from major Japanese companies. The Investment Agreement

is intended to open up new avenues of our trade relations with Japan. We are a lower middle income country. Issues of double taxation have been sorted out. Issues of enhancing our energy capacity are encouraging and will boost the manufacturing industry. Meanwhile our flowers, tea, coffee, macadamia nuts and other export products are bound to get better opportunities in Japan. The Agreement will also encourage Japanese investors to focus on Kenya's new frontier, the Blue Economy. We expect the Agreement to open up avenues for bridging the huge trade imbalance between Kenya and Japan.

Do you see many Japanese on safari in Kenya?

I am pleading with the Japanese government to lift the travel advisories. The threat of terrorism is worldwide and requires concerted international efforts to curb it. Tourism for us is a huge revenue generator. We are delighted that hotel occupancy, mostly by European tourists, is on the rise recently, but the numbers from Japan are very low. We need to conclude the Bilateral Air Services Agreement with Japan, the desired goal being to enhance trade and allow easy access for Japanese tourists.

Is Japan listening?

I'm a career diplomat with over thirty years' experience and I'm finding Japan a relaxing [agreeable] post. Accessibility to the Foreign Office is wonderful. [Director General for African Affairs] Ambassador Maruyama is a busy person, but he gives me time. "Come over," he says [laughs]. I'm heavily engaged mostly with the private sector, and I've found our meetings very encouraging. In Japan, the aspect of playing golf is very important [laughs]. A key highlight of my tour so far was when I was invited to make a presentation to the Diet Special Committee on ODA. It is indeed rare for an Ambassador to appear in front of a host country's Legislative Body. It was a great honor for my country, Kenya. 🇰🇪

Interview by ALEX HENDY
