

Japan is Committed to Africa's Development

By Shinzo Abe

Securing Japan's economic recovery has been my priority since returning as the country's prime minister at the end of last year. We have made progress and, as this newspaper has observed, Japanese companies and individuals alike are starting to feel the benefits.

The nature of the global economy, however, means that "Abenomics" cannot simply be a domestic endeavor, nor can it be about short-term gain. Japan's economic strength has been built on a cornerstone of cooperation and trade internationally, while our foreign policy is founded on the belief that peace and prosperity abroad contribute to peace and prosperity at home. This stance is also reflected in Japan's approach to global development challenges.

On my first official visit to Myanmar this month, I was able to see the process of democratization in action. It struck me that developed and developing countries face the same challenges in ensuring that economic policy benefits citizens in a direct and tangible way. This is an issue that is central to efforts to eradicate poverty and promote developments, and one that I will address alongside African leaders and other colleagues at the Fifth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD V) on June 1-3.

The conference, now in its 20th year, is jointly organized by the government of Japan, the African Union Commission, the United Nations, the U.N. Development Programme and the World Bank. It brings together development partners, donor countries, private companies and nongovernmental organizations to discuss development in Africa. The forum is founded on an approach that seeks to avoid the "top-down" hierarchy of the donor-recipient model and to opt instead for African "ownership" and international "partnership."

Japan has a unique perspective on poverty reduction and development for a variety of reasons, not least because of the lessons it learned from its own path to modernization. A lack of natural resources prompted a focus on our most important resource: our people. Growth is not simply fueled by natural resources. It is spurred and sustained by people—through skills, education, training, innovation and social cohesion.

Japan has a strong track record of development assistance through bilateral and multilateral channels, and while our approach has evolved considerably, a focus on human-resource development is central to our philosophy.

What exactly does human-resource development mean within this context? I was fortunate to discuss these issues with Professor Joseph Stiglitz of Columbia University earlier this year, and we agreed that a crucial foundation was "inclusive growth," whereby the benefits of economic growth must be felt by all people within a country and not just a select few.

Human-resource development also means fostering democracy and recognizing the importance of human dignity and development at an individual level. Japan's model seeks to ensure that individuals feel empowered and proud of the contribution they make to society. This includes a particular focus on young people and women who, when provided with the necessary education, will become the engine for the development of their countries, and can be empowered to transform political and social systems.

Alongside human-resource development, infrastructure also plays a critical role in enabling linkages between markets that allow the benefits of trade to spread. It is the combination of infrastructure and human resources that provides the foundation for greater private-sector investment.

Japan's commitment to Africa and the TICAD is a primary example of this approach. This year's conference focuses on creating robust and sustainable economies and inclusive and resilient societies underpinned by peace and stability.

There is also a strong emphasis on public-private partnerships and enlisting private-sector support to ensure that African countries and communities have efficient markets on a nation-wide, region-wide and continent-wide scale—an essential precondition to improving living standards, reducing poverty and boosting employment.

The positive legacy of TICAD projects can be seen across Africa. The Smallholder Horticulture Empowerment Project in Kenya, for instance, explains the benefits of market efficiency to ensure that farmers grow what they know they can sell productively and profitably. The project tackles the need to strengthen farmers' access to markets and includes aspects of marketing, as well as production. The project has now been implemented across Kenya.

Africa has experienced impressive growth in recent years, averaging over 5% per year. However, deepening economic integration is an important prerequisite for further growth. TICAD projects such as the "One Stop Border Posts" initiative have helped expedite customs procedures between African countries, promoting mobility and regional development. Following initial success on the Zambia-Zimbabwe border, the Japan International Cooperation Agency is now supporting the introduction of similar schemes at over 13 different borders across the continent.

Japan keeps its promises. Japan has achieved its pledge made at TICAD IV in 2008 to double its five-year average of direct investment in Africa, which had already tripled at the end of 2011. TICAD V's targets will be ambitious but equally achievable. As with the economic challenges Japan faces today, a quick fix will not be adequate. What is needed is a genuine commitment to ensure inclusive and sustainable economic development. This begins with human-resource development, creating an environment where skills can be improved, women and young people can be empowered and communities can flourish.

This year Japan pledged a further \$550 million toward stability, peace and development in Africa. Japan is also committed to providing on-the-ground support across the continent, for example conducting operations to prevent piracy off the east coast of Africa and to provide humanitarian assistance in the Sahel region, including Mali. Japan recognizes the need to contribute at a global level and cooperate with our international partners. It is my sincere hope that a more dynamic and resilient Japanese economy can bring significant benefits in Africa and beyond.

Mr. Abe is prime minister of Japan.