

What Japan Should and Could Do for Development Aid to Africa

By IRIYAMA Akira

The Fourth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD IV) ended without a hitch. The Prime Minister Fukuda had meetings with forty heads of African states, allocating to each fifteen-minute slot. Meetings were probably through an interpreter, since it is quite doubtful that Mr. Fukuda has a good command of English, French and/or Swahili. Accordingly, if we exclude the time of interpretation, each meeting must have been virtually seven and a half minutes long. Thus, only three minutes and forty five seconds were allowed per person for his or her remark. I do appreciate that hard work. The development aid from Japan will be doubled. And infrastructure development, whose importance I have been underlining for years, was emphasized at the beginning of the declaration. It seems that the Conference worked out pretty well, thereby showing off Japan's presence. Or did it not?

Broadly speaking, African economy seems to have recovered from the prolonged doldrums and now got on the right track, marking economic growth rate of slightly less than 29%. However, such growth mainly relies on natural resources, including gas, petroleum and mineral resources. As a detrimental consequence of this kind of economic growth, all benefits flow only to a handful of the privileged and the impoverished state of general public is hardly improved, due to the malfunction of wealth distribution system. We can see everywhere such familiar scene as foreign luxury cars passing and skyscrapers towering against slum areas which teems with trash scavengers, while countries poor in natural resources are still suffering from dire poverty.

I do not intend to ruin one of those rare bright news about Africa, much less to criticize the aid policies expressed by the Japanese government at the Conference. In fact, in contrast to countries scrambling for natural resources or making prodigious profits by arms sales to both parties in a civil war, Japan's stance is much to be praised. Nevertheless, more often than not, the road to hell is paved with good intentions. You know the common tale that aid supply merely fills the pocketbook of some ruling class, but that is not all. It is quite possible that whimsical speculation would bring about unintended consequences, as is shown in the case of our rice crop support in Africa, or miracle rice called "NERICA (New Rice for Africa)," which is hailed as a success of Japan's development aid in Africa.

Indeed, "NERICA" is yielding remarkable results. Yet, the population in sub-Saharan Africa living on rice account for less than 30 % of the whole population in Africa. The remaining 70 % of the population live on maize. Besides, their agriculture overwhelmingly relies on rainwater. Rice crop requires far more water per unit of crop yields. This is not to say that the promotion of "NERICA" is a misdirected way of aid. Instead, we should warn against the assumption that "NERICA" is a panacea for starvation in Africa. Africa has no future without the increase of productivity in agricultural sector, along with the economic growth led by natural resources. Hopefully, the wealth yielded by the natural resources should be equitably distributed and spent for the promotion of basic agricultural sector. But we should refrain from such kind of nincompoopery.

Therefore aid is crucial. Although aid by itself cannot save Africa, it could have a pump-priming effect for shaping their policy-orientation. Or, we should say it is the only promising resource for us. Therefore, we must count on well-devised aid policy which is based on calculation rather than unintended evil brought about by goodwill or sincerity. I believe Japan is almost the only country capable of doing it.

(This is the English translation of an article written by Mr. IRIYAMA Akira, Guest Professor of Cyber University, and Executive Research Advisor of International Development Center of Japan, which originally appeared on the BBS "Hyakka-Somei" of CEAC on July 26, 2008)