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JAPAN SHOULD PROMOTE "HEART TO HEART" PARTNERSHIP WITH AFRICA

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"Does the Japanese government have an African policy at all?" asked one of the students at Makerere University in Uganda when I gave a guest lecture there. It is true that mutual attention between Japan and Africa is far from keen. In fact, the students in that class at Makerere University were intellectually sophisticated and curious but they did not seem to know much about Japan. When asked to name any Japanese prime minister, there was only one student who could name a few despite the fact that the roads in East Africa are full of Toyotas. At one primary school in a remote

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village in Uganda, no pupil there could say where Japan is located, to say nothing of the name of its capital. On the other hand, images of Africa in Japan are regrettably and mainly the stereotypical ones of civil wars and crying hungry children.

This perhaps should not come as a surprise. I once heard a British lady criticizing Japan's lack of enthusiasm in "helping" poor African people. However, I hardly remember Europeans being particularly helpful in the course of East Asia's economic development. Whereas humans are always driven by mixed motivations, including altruism, it is hard to believe that European efforts to "help" Africans are not related to their historical ties as colonial masters and geopolitical concerns such as refugees and illegal immigration resulting from instability on the continent. Japan obviously does not have any comparable historical and geopolitical concerns.

Should Japan be more serious about Africa for its own economic interests? As is well known, a remarkable increase in the Chinese presence on the continent has been driven mainly by China's growing demand for natural resources there. With very limited natural resources on its own territory, Japan also has a reason to be interested in Africa's natural resources. Unlike in China, though, domestic public opinion will not allow Japan to buy up Africa's natural resources without regard for human rights conditions in the exporting countries and agreements among the international community. More importantly, what Japan needs is not to corral natural resources but rather to maintain access to them at competitive prices in open international markets.


Africa, of course, represents economic opportunities beyond just the supply of natural resources. Economic growth in some parts of Africa has indeed been very impressive. International trade and direct investment actually will be more useful for economic development in Africa judging from East Asia's experiences. Although Japanese ODA must have been useful, sustainable development would have been impossible without increases in international trade. There are diverse views on the prospects of Africa's economic future but, if human capital is the single most important asset for economic growth, for capital and technology can be easily transferred in today's world, I do not see

any reason why Africa's potential must be limited, as its human talents are obviously very much under-utilized.

For Japan, however, Africa means more than a business opportunity. Both Africa and Japan are partners for development. It is important to remember that both Japan and Africa can offer something the other lacks. Because of a lack of good governance, institutions and infrastructure, talented Africans simply cannot demonstrate their capabilities. Nevertheless, such tough and tragic conditions foster imaginative and spontaneous talent that can operate without depending upon well-functioning institutions. Governance in Japanese society is such that basic services are amply provided, but creative imagination and individual initiative seem to be underdeveloped due to an over-institutionalization of the society. In short, the Japanese of today need to be trained by being exposed to environments in which organizations and operational manuals are unavailable. In addition, young Japanese can be energized by associating with African counterparts who are obliged to be much more serious in order to survive.

This is why the relationship between the two can and should be more than one of helper and helped as the British lady assumed, or one based on mutual material interests. It can be a partnership for human development on both sides. Therefore, I strongly advocate that we send as many highly-qualified young Japanese as possible to Africa to give them a chance to work with local people. Likewise, Japan should institutionalize its immigration system in such a way as to give opportunities to qualified, talented young Africans. More intensive personal contacts between Japanese and local populations will foster durable ties between Japan and Africa. Contacts between peoples from highly dissimilar socio-economic conditions will create unexpected and interesting synergy effects. It was in 1977 that Prime Minister Fukuda promoted the "Fukuda Doctrine" in which he proposed that Japan would develop "heart-to-heart relations" with people in ASEAN countries. This meant that Japan's goal in the region is neither expansion of its strategic influence nor exploitation of economic opportunities but rather cultivation of relations based upon mutual understanding and trust. "Heart-to-heart" relations may sound too nice and flowery to be a

policy goal of an independent country but, given the amicable relations that have developed between Japanese and the people in ASEAN countries since then, we should not be too cynical about the roles played by such political initiatives.

Thus, creating heart-to-heart relations between people in Africa and Japan by working together for shared goals can be more than just pretty rhetoric. For Japan, Africa represents neither an object of pity nor a security threat nor a mere supplier of natural resources nor a giant zoo, but rather a partner with whom Japanese should and would be willing to work together. 

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