

# The Arrival of a New Era for the Japan-Africa Relations?

By MUTSUJI Shoji

The fifth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD V) was held in Yokohama on June 1. TICAD, which started in 1993 and is held every five years, is among the largest international conferences that the Japanese government hosts periodically to invite heads of state from more than 50 African countries, Western countries, international organizations and NGOs. I remember being surprised at how little the Japanese press covered TICAD (for example, small space of newspaper articles) in 1993, when I was a university student who just started to study Africa. It symbolized how poor Japanese interest in Africa was at that time. The end of the Cold War in 1989 triggered Japan and Africa approaching each other. Before that, communist and capitalist states had "aid races" in Africa to secure as many allies as possible. However, the end of the Cold War caused strategic aid for Africa to become less important. In addition, former communist countries introduced democratization and free market economy and could not afford to support Africa. Former capitalist countries, "the victor of the Cold War," started to reduce aid for Africa due to "aid fatigue" caused by financial burden. At that time, in contrast, Japan was in the prime of bubble economy. Japan had no need to eliminate aid for Africa and as a result, the presence of Japan in Africa became relatively large. This caused African countries to approach Japan.

Meanwhile, Africa was basically a distant area to Japan not only geographically but also economically and politically. The reason why Japan started to approach Africa in that situation was that our country had expectations for Africa. Japan thought of not only securing resources but also of securing African support for becoming a permanent member on the United Nations Security Council. These benefits for Japan triggered TICAD being held for the first time in 1993. However, Japan's approach to Africa via TICAD was basically modest for good or bad. That is, on the whole, the focus of TICAD was how to realize African development and peace rather than Japan's benefits. This was because the Japanese government, especially the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, avoided prioritizing Japan's economic benefits in its approach to Africa.

Until the late 1980s, Japan had the policy of “separating politics from economy” and hardly intervened with the domestic affairs of foreign countries. As a result, our country continued trades with South Africa, which underwent economic sanctions by the United Nations because of its apartheid. However, African countries condemned Japan for its policy at the United Nations General Assembly in 1988, which triggered Japan changing its policy and joining economic sanctions. This caused the Japanese government to shift its approach to Africa from a focus on national interests to cooperation for Africa. That is, the Japanese government began to think of altruistic approach in an effort to remove its bad impressions because of highlighting national interests. What is discussed at TICAD is in line with the Millennium Development Goals, which was adopted by the United Nations in 2000, and is intended to promote international cooperation for reducing poverty in Africa and promoting peace. The recent increase in resource prices triggered growing interest in Africa as “the last frontier” and in this situation, emerging economies as well as Western countries are actively expanding into the African market. China, India and Brazil hold conferences similar to TICAD. Those conferences are attended by business persons, as well as governments, international organizations and NGOs, and are a kind of major business meetings. Amidst an unprecedented African boom, both Western countries and emerging economies aim to secure economic benefits in Africa. In comparison with it, TICAD’s approach is, on the whole, modest.

This is related to Japanese companies’ poor interest in Africa. Many people of Japanese embassies in Africa lament that even if they encourage Japanese companies to expand into the African market, many companies hesitate to because they are afraid of country risks, such as poverty, political corruption, poor infrastructure and low standard of public safety. As the terrorism in Algeria this January shows, terrorism is remarkably spreading in the African continent as well and this is one of the factors that discourage Japan from investing in Africa. Anyway, through TICAD, Japan has succeeded in promoting a gentlemanly image in Africa instead of an image of a country that greedily pursues its own national interests. However, in the current situation in which Japan can no longer lavishly provide abundant aid, it is necessary to reconsider investments that can lead to local economic growth and increase in income as part of international cooperation.

**(This is the English translation of an article written by MUTSUJI Shoji, Lecturer, Yokohama City University, which originally appeared on the e-Forum "Giron - Hyakushutsu" of GFJ on June 4, 2013.)**