

Africa Day Symposium 2012

A crowded hall welcomed participants in this year's Africa Day Symposium. The annual event, jointly organized by the African Diplomatic Corps in Tokyo and the United Nations University, was held at UNU Headquarters on Friday, 25 May. The day was kindly sponsored by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan and attended by a wealth of participants, including academics, ambassadors, and ministerial and development experts.

The Africa Day symposium series began in 2000 as a celebration of the founding of the Organization of African Unity; seeking to explore many critical issues of African development and inform both the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) and Group of Eight (G8) processes. Since its inception, it has provided a vital forum for the discussion of both the problems and vast potential of the continent, focusing on pressing issues like trade and investment, infrastructure development and the digital divide.

UNU Rector Osterwalder opened this year's event by emphasizing the continued relevance of Africa Day. He commented that with each passing year, the symposium becomes "ever more vibrant, and ever more vital", acting as a platform for dialogue and the promotion of innovative thinking on African issues.

The theme of the event was "Hard Infrastructure Development in Africa: The Role of Japan". The topic's importance was underlined by Dr. Ibrahim Mayaki, Chief Executive Officer of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) Planning and Coordinating Agency, who was quick to highlight the continent's remarkable achievements over recent years. Noting that governance within Africa is continuing to "improve tremendously", he also reminded the audience that according to the International Monetary Fund, African public finances are now better managed than in Europe.

Remarking that it was for these reasons that 11 of the world's fastest growing economies are now in Africa, Dr. Mayaki went on to warn that these achievements bring with them a new political challenge in ensuring that the benefits of success are felt equally. Highlighting this risk, he emphasized the "need to maintain growth but make sure that this growth is inclusive".

One of the major constraints to equality and development is poor infrastructure; it is estimated this alone hinders African economic growth by around 2% every year. Currently, only 30% of the African population has access to electricity; the telecommunications penetration rate is just 6%; railway coverage is sparse; African ports are often uncompetitive; and inland waterways are hardly utilized for trade and travel.

With these challenges in mind the African Union Commission, African Development Bank and NEPAD are leading the way in the creation of a fully integrated infrastructure development blueprint for the continent: “The Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa” (PIDA). The PIDA initiative places the utmost priority on vital infrastructure projects supporting regional integration and the physical interconnection between and among African countries. Dr. Mayaki expressed excitement and optimism for the future of PIDA, commenting that although public resources are limited, this opens up opportunities to the private sector, allowing Japan to become a “key partner with a critical role”.

This role was expanded upon by Akio Dobashi, Chairman of the Committee on Sub-Saharan Africa, Keidanren, who believes that Japanese coal technologies have the potential to improve African power production and reduce emissions of greenhouse gases, whilst *shinkansen* (bullet train) technology has the ability to improve African transportation infrastructure and enable interconnections between countries, thereby invigorating economies and improving markets.

Hideichi Okada, Vice Minister for International Affairs, Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry of Japan (METI), remarked that whilst Japan is rich in technology, Africa is rich in resources. If this relationship is managed well, he said, it could create a “win–win situation”. He went on to stress, however, that this is “not only about exporting hard infrastructure, but providing financing and technological input”.

Okada commented that a further advantage of Japanese investment would be the creation of local employment, as Japanese companies in Africa aim to bring one Japanese employee for every 500 African workers, ensuring that the benefits of partnership are felt by both sides. Looking towards TICAD V in 2013, Okada expressed hope that an increasingly strong relationship between Japan and Africa would form the foundation for a bright future.

Following the keynote speeches, Obijiofor Aginam, Senior Academic Programme Officer at UNU-ISP, moderated a lively panel discussion within which a number of pertinent questions were addressed. One listener put to the panel a quote from a recent Ernst and Young attractiveness survey, which indicated that “afro-pessimism continues to be a stumbling block for FDI”, and asking what mechanisms are in place to deal with this problem. Dr. Mayaki responded by asserting that “actions speak louder than words”, stating that rather than becoming preoccupied with image, we should be investing our thought into changing systems, reiterating that this is the only effective and lasting way to change perceptions of the continent.

Another participant, interested in the challenges that face Japanese companies when attempting to begin partnerships in Africa, asked what could be done to improve communications and understanding between the two continents. Adama Deen of the NEPAD Planning and Coordinating Agency responded to this by emphasizing the need to improve streamlining and efficiency, commenting that to start a business in Africa is a

process that can take many, many months. Jean Paul Melaga of the Bank of Tokyo-Mitsubishi UFJ added to this by stating that “information is key”, commenting that another of the major difficulties in setting up businesses in Africa is a lack of web presence, creating difficulties in accessing even simple information.

However, Alex Rugamba of the African Development Bank argued that there is often a misperception about the physical distance of Africa from the rest of world. He stated that Japanese communications companies have a vital role to play in demystifying this gap, providing education in the key aspects of business culture, down to the such fine details as how to exchange business cards.

In his closing remarks, Ambassador Ahmed Arita Ali of Djibouti referred to a saying from his country that teaches “the speaker plants seeds, and listeners harvest the crops”. He commented that Africa Day is an opportunity to plant seeds by contributing to a dialogue that is essential for economic growth. The Ambassador commented that “Africa is a rich continent but its people are poor,” yet through connections and continued discourse between Africa and Japan, advancements can and will continue to be made.