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Nadine Burgschweiger

'Towards a Vibrant Africa': The beginning of a new era of Japanese-African partnership?

With shrinking debts burdens, increasing numbers of foreign direct investments and expanding economies, Africa is becoming an emerging player on the global stage. Consequently, investor's perceptions are also improving, and as global competition for natural resources is stepping up, more and more international actors are making inroads into the continent and intensifying their diplomatic efforts to ensure access to resource-rich countries and growing consumer markets.¹ Japan, however, has long been uninvolved in this development and can be considered as a late-comer on the continent.

Historically, Japan's relationship with Africa has been largely based on economic interests and has not been as deep as with other parts of the world. However, this situation seems to have changed over recent years. Tokyo has three essential motives for enhancing its role in Africa. First, since Japan relies heavily on imports of natural resources, it needs to secure reliable external supply of raw materials like crude oil and rare metals, of which the continent is a major provider. Second, the market potential of the continent's fast-growing economies is catching the attention of Japanese multinational companies. Another motive behind Japan's growing efforts is its desire to seek support for its bid to become a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, as African nations account for one-quarter of the U.N. membership (The Nikkei Weekly 2008a; Nihon Keizai Shinbun 2008a).

Particularly in the wake of this year's various initiatives concerning African development, including the Fourth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD IV) in May and the G8 summit in July, many scholars claimed that there has been a shift in Japanese policy towards Africa. By shedding some light on recent developments in the fields of diplomacy as well as economic relations between Japan and African countries, this article aims to analyze if this has been actually the case. Special emphasis will be put on the geopolitical rivalry which is increasingly evident on the continent, and how Japan can respond to it.

¹ This shift is also visible in terms of gross bilateral Official Development Assistance (ODA) provided by the OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries to sub-Saharan Africa, which doubled from 2004 to 2006 in comparison to the level of 1992-1994 (OECD 2008: 222).

Diplomacy

Compared with those of Europe, the U.S., China and India, Japan's political ties to the continent had been rather limited.² With primarily economic relations dating back to the end of the 19th century, Japan has been perceived as relatively neutral, mainly because of its non-involvement in African colonial history, thus giving it a diplomatic edge over other industrialized countries. However, due to this fact, it lacks the experience European actors have with regard to the continent. As a consequence, Africa has long been a rather unknown region for Japan (Takahashi 2008; Pohl 1998: 240-242).

However, diplomatic and political relations have gradually gained importance, since Japan has intensified efforts after the end of the Cold War to push its image as a development advisor and a supporter of a broader involvement of African leaders in international politics. The Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) has become the main institution channeling those objections and Japan's diplomatic ties with the continent (Donnelly 2008: 3). After the outcome of TICAD IV and the G8 Toyako summit in 2008 are examined, the current situation of Japan's Development Assistance to Africa will be discussed within this section.

Spurring African development: Japan as TICAD IV and G8 host in 2008

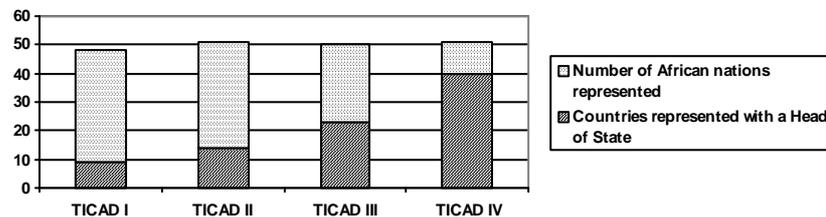
Since the first TICAD was initiated in cooperation with the United Nations and the World Bank in 1993 – at a time when global interest in Africa touched bottom – the summit has grown into one of the world's major institutions for the promotion of African development. Taking place every five years, the conference, with its core principles being South-South cooperation and African ownership, is designed to draw inspiration from East Asia's development experience as well as to reflect African leaders' own priorities for development. With these goals in mind, the TICAD has been able to establish unique development strategies, and the number of participants has grown steadily, as shown in *figure 1* (*The Japan Times* 2008a; Donnelly 2008: 3-4).

Judging by the number of participants alone, TICAD IV, which was held from 28 to 30 May 2008, was a success: 51 of the 53 African countries were represented in Yokohama, 40 of them by their head of state. Representatives of 34 partner countries as well as 75 international and regional organizations were also among the nearly 3,000 people attending the conference (MOFA 2008c). But TICAD IV was not only the TICAD summit which

2 This also holds true for security issues, though the Japanese government decided in September 2008 to dispatch two Ground Self-Defense Force officers to Sudan by October 2008 in order to support UN peacekeeping operations by assisting in road construction and mine-removing (NNI 2008b).

has attracted the most international attention, it was also the one with the most substantial concessions the Japanese government has ever made towards African countries. Given its own tight fiscal leverage at present, Japan's offers seem to be even more generous, underlining the government's firm commitment to intensifying its efforts to promote African development (NNI 2008a).

Figure 1: Participation of African nations at TICAD I-IV



Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Tokyo)

The outcome of TICAD IV was summarized in the 'Yokohama Declaration', subtitled 'Towards a Vibrant Africa'. The Declaration confirms that many African countries have undergone considerable improvement, as many of them have achieved increased political stability as well as impressive economic growth rates and amounts of foreign direct investment. Nevertheless, the document also acknowledges that there are still serious challenges left to take up, among them; the most urgent poor infrastructure, continuing poverty and infectious diseases. Moreover, the document pointed out the plan to promote technology transfer, particularly through closer Public-Private Partnerships. In order to ensure regular monitoring of the implementation process, a threefold follow-up mechanism was established at the conference, which includes annual progress reports of the participating countries (MOFA 2008a; *Kyodo* 2008).

Along with the declaration, a separate 'Yokohama Action Plan' was drafted, serving as a 'road map' for the implementation of the suggested measures and goals. First of all, the Action Plan confirms the government's announcement both that it will double its Official Development Assistance and its commitment to double private direct investment by 2012. Recognizing agriculture as a 'major driving force for economic growth', it also schedules measures to increase food production. To strengthen their own efforts to improve framework conditions, African governments themselves committed to allocate at least 10 per cent of their national budgetary resources to agriculture and rural development over the next five years. Within the same period, Japan will support African nations in expanding their irrigated cultivation area (MOFA 2008b). Moreover, in his address at the opening session of TICAD IV prime minister

Yasuo Fukuda pledged to respond to a sharp rise in global food prices by providing Africa with a significant portion of the government's announced emergency food assistance package to developing countries worth 100 million US dollars. He also expressed the aim to double the continent's current rice production to 28 million tons by 2018 (MOFA 2008d).³ To support African nations in achieving their U.N. Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) adopted in the year 2000, several other projects are being promoted, with special emphasis put on community development. The Japanese government pledged to build 1,000 elementary and secondary schools and also plans to provide assistance to teacher training. Moreover, 100,000 health and medical workers are to be trained as well (MOFA 2008b; Kamiya/Hongo 2008: 2). The Yokohama Action Plan also addresses environmental issues like production and utilization of clean energy as well as careful and effective management of water resources (MOFA 2008b).

As pledged at the end of the Yokohama Declaration, Prime Minister Fukuda reflected the outcomes of the TICAD IV at the G8 summit hosted in Toyako (Hokkaido) from 7 to 9 July 2008 and sought active support for African development. Additionally, an Outreach Working Lunch and a Working Session with leaders from Africa was organized. Recognizing that the majority of African countries are having difficulty achieving their MDGs, the G8 leaders stated the need to further increase assistance to Africa as well as to fulfill their commitment of providing 60 billion US dollars for health over five years made at the Heiligendamm Summit 2007, and to provide 100 million mosquito nets to prevent the spread of malaria. Addressing the current food crisis, they proclaimed their intention to set up a G8 Experts Group. Finally, a new follow-up mechanism was established to observe the implementation of past commitments (MOFA 2008g).

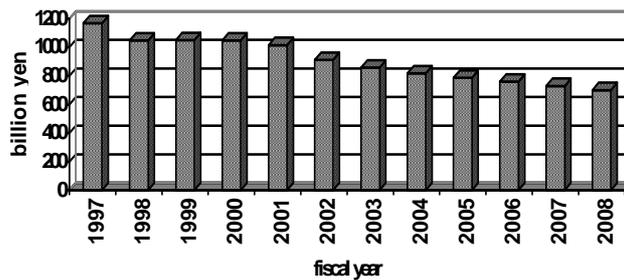
Development assistance

Since the End of World War II, Official Development Assistance has become the Japanese government's principal instrument to join the efforts of the international community and to pursue its diplomatic interests. Japan's ODA budget, on the other hand, was tightened cumulatively by 37.6 per cent within the decade from 1997 to 2007, as shown in figure 2 (GRIPS Development Forum 2008: 19). Under the current 2009 government draft proposal, how-

3 To achieve that target, a special high-yielding rice breed called 'NERICA (New Rice for Africa)' has been introduced successfully, being thought of as contributing significantly to food security in sub-Saharan Africa. Nevertheless, it has to be taken into account that the majority (around 70 per cent) of the region's population is living on maize, not on rice. Moreover, a crop that is as water-consuming as rice is surely only the second-best option for most parts of the continent suffering from recurring drought periods. That is why critics call it a 'misdirected way of aid' (Iriyama 2008).

ever, 771.9 billion Yen (7.88 billion US dollars) are being considered as ODA budget, which would mark a 10 per cent increase from 2008 and the first expansion since 1999 (MOFA 2008 f.).

Figure 2: Japan's ODA General Account Budget



Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Tokyo) 2008

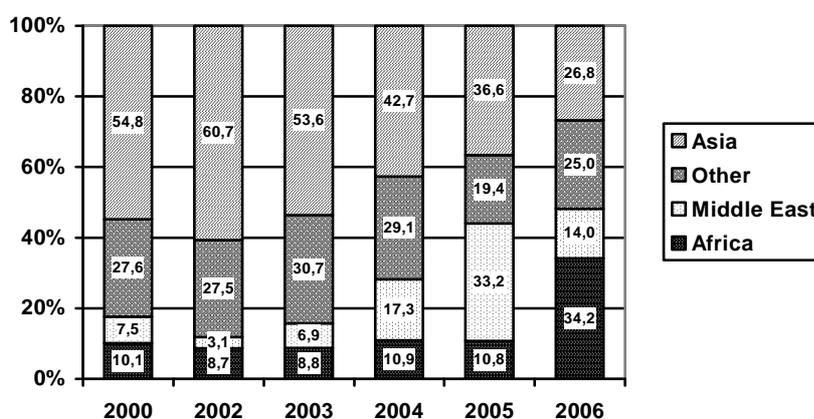
Japan, which was the world's largest donor state in terms of volume from 1993 until 2000, has been replaced as leading donor by the U.S. and the United Kingdom. According to preliminary figures of the OECD, Japan's ODA net disbursements ranked fifth behind Germany and France in 2007. If measured as a share of national income, Japan's commitment to development assistance seems to be even less ambitious. In 2006, it amounted to 0.25 per cent, which ranked 19th among OECD countries and is projected to further decline in 2007, even behind Portugal and Italy (OECD/DAC 2008).

Nevertheless, Japan remains one of the largest aid donors within the global community. From 2003 to 2007, it provided an annual average of about 900 million US dollars to Africa, and furthermore pledged at TICAD IV to double this figure to 1.8 billion US dollars by 2012 (*The Nikkei Weekly* 2008a; MOFA 2008b). While the fragmented decision-making process with regard to ODA met much criticism in the past, the consolidation of Japan's aid system completed in October 2008 is expected to break ground for a more fluent, cost-saving and efficient allocation of disbursements, even though these are declining (Watanabe 2008:14; *Nihon Keizai Shinbun* 2008b).

In fiscal 2006, a total sum of 2.6 billion US dollars of development assistance was directed to Africa, which represented 34.2 per cent of Japan's whole aid disbursements to the world (see *figure 3*). It was the first time that the bulk of the amount flowed to another continent than Asia, which had been traditionally the largest recipient of Japanese ODA before. Compared to its 2000 level, Africa's share of Japan's assistance increased substantially, by about 2.5 times until 2006, whereas Asia's share decreased by 51.1 per cent

over the same period. However, it has to be taken into consideration that the figures of 2006 included debt relief amounting to around 2 billion US dollars. If seen from this perspective – excluding debt relief – Japan’s share of overall bilateral ODA going to Africa stood at a mere 11.6 per cent, whereas Asia still held the larger portion of 44.2 per cent (MOFA 2007).

Figure 3: Share of Japanese ODA for selected regions



Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Tokyo) 2007

Economic relations

Although Japan’s ties with the African continent have traditionally been focused on economic interests, private investment activities in particular have not kept pace with the level of bilateral assistance. This is mainly attributed to local problems like political instability, poor infrastructure and difficulties in the field of human resources. Moreover, economic exchange has been confined to a few certain countries on the continent, such as South Africa. It has, however, been transformed into a more balanced relationship over the past few years.

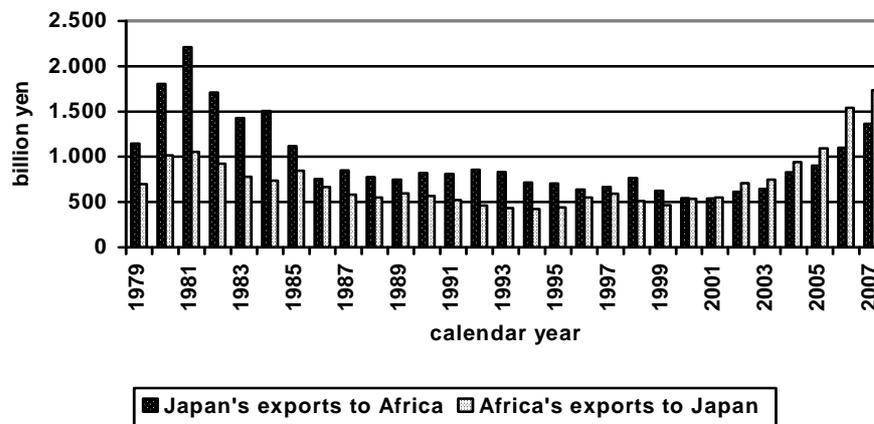
Within this section how these shifts have actually taken place in the field of trade and investment will be examined.

Trade

After declining gradually for many years, trade between Japan and Africa has continued to rise since its low point in 2001, although it has still not reached its highest level of 1981 (see *figure 4*). In 2007, trade volume increased by 16.3 per cent from the previous year. Japanese exports to Africa doubled within the four years from 2003 to 2007 up to 11.6 billion US dollars, while imports from the continent reached a record high for the third con-

secutive year, amounting to 14.8 billion US dollars. With the prices for imports of raw materials from Africa rising gradually, Japan's traditional trade surplus has been converted into a deficit since 2001. In 2007, it totaled nearly 3.2 billion US dollars (JETRO 2008a).

Figure 4: Trade between Japan and Africa 1979-2007

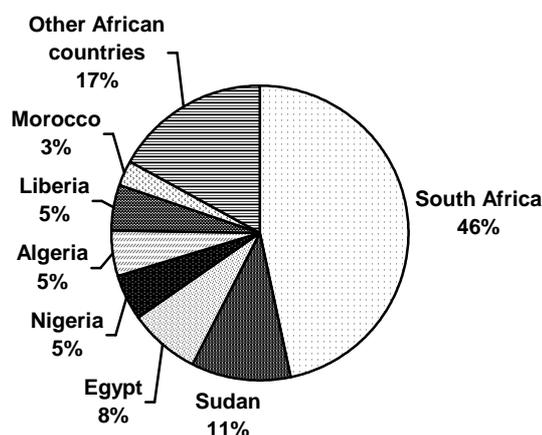


Source: Ministry of Finance (Tokyo) 2008

In fact, natural resources make up a large proportion of Japan's imports from Africa. In 2006, crude oil and platinum were the principal import items, accounting for 21 per cent and 8 per cent respectively of the 13.26 billion US dollars worth of commodities shipped from the continent. The bulk of the imported crude oil is exported from Sudan, Angola, and Nigeria, whereas rare metals like platinum, palladium or cobalt primarily needed in the automobile and high-tech industries come from South Africa, Uganda, and Zambia. South Africa alone accounts for nearly one half of Japan's trade with Africa, followed by Sudan (11%), Egypt (8%), and Nigeria (5%) (MOF 2008; see also figure 5).

Although raw materials play a dominant role in Japan's trade portfolio with African nations, other primary products are important as well. For example, 70 per cent of Japan's octopus imports come from Morocco, and 60 per cent of cocoa beans bound for the Japanese market are shipped from Ghana. Meanwhile, Japan exports mainly manufactured products to African markets. In 2006, automobiles were the principal export commodity, accounting for 24 per cent of the total, followed by other vessels (6%) and engines (4%) (*The Japan Times* 2008b).

Figure 5: Japan's trade with Africa by major trading partners 2007



Source: Ministry of Finance (Tokyo) 2008

Overall, Africa still accounts for merely two per cent of Japan's global trade. In theory, the fundamental differences in factor endowments of developing Africa and Japan as a matured economy may contribute to complementary trade relations that are likely to be sustainable in the near future. In reality, however, a balanced access to each other's markets has still not been achieved. An urgent challenge for Japan would be, for example, to open up its market to a broad range of agricultural products from African countries. The Japanese government's Development Initiative for Trade, which should provide free market access for goods from Least Developed Countries (LDCs),⁴ could be one crucial step in this direction (NNI 2008a; MOFA 2006).

Foreign direct investment

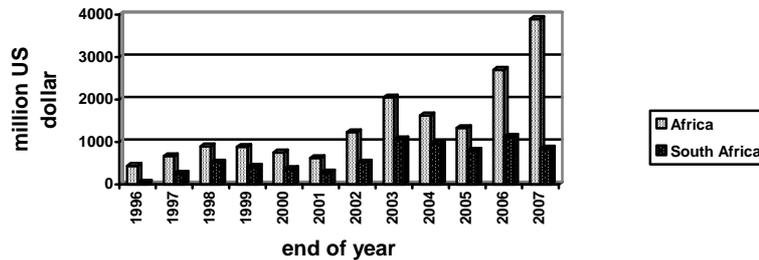
Foreign direct investment (FDI) from Japan to Africa still remains at a comparatively low level, but it has been expanding dynamically within the last two years. But although Japanese companies invested an all-time record sum

4 The Development Initiative for Trade was first presented by Prime Minister Jun'ichirō Koizumi at the Hong Kong Ministerial Conference of the WTO in December 2005 and is aimed at providing LDCs' comprehensive assistance to facilitate trade beyond mere liberalization. Important measures within the Initiative are the promotion of no tariffs and no quotas for goods originating from LDCs as well as the One Village One Product Campaign, which intends to promote local economies (MOFA 2006).

of 1.1 billion US dollars on the continent in 2007, up from 899 million US dollars in 2006 and 25 million in 2005, this still accounted for a mere 1.5 per cent of the total Japanese investments made worldwide that year. In sum, Japan's FDI stock in Africa reached 3.9 billion US dollars at the end of 2007 (JETRO 2008a). Compared with the overall stock of foreign direct investment on the continent, which totaled around 547 billion US dollars at the end of the same year, this figure is still extremely low (UNCTAD 2008).

Until 2005, most of Japanese FDI went to South Africa, which has also been traditionally the leading trading partner for Japan on the continent⁵. A large proportion of Japanese investments are still made in that country, especially within the automobile market, which is already as large as Thailand's at around 700,000 cars sold per year (*The Nikkei Weekly* 2008b). However, the state of disproportionate investment activities in South Africa is changing gradually, as the country's share of Japanese FDI in Africa has decreased over the last two years (JETRO 2008a, see figure 6), indicating investment projects' destinations are much more diversified now.⁶

Figure 6: Japan's foreign direct investment to Africa and South Africa in particular (stock)



Source: Japan External Trade Organization (Tokyo) 2008

In general, Japanese business activities in Africa are mainly led by the mining and automobile industries. But, whereas European as well as US American firms have already established solid business networks within the African continent, only few Japanese companies enjoy sustainable profits there (*ibid.*).

5 This close relationship grew particularly during the time of Apartheid, when other major developed countries strictly held to their embargo policies towards South Africa. Although this impartial situation has been altered due to pressure exerted by U.N. in the 1980s, it can be observed even today, meeting with much criticism (Pohl 1998: 241; Ampiah 2005: 100).

6 Indeed, Japanese business activities, currently expanding to various parts of the continent, substantiate that theory (for various examples, see Terada 2008).

Risk factors like infectious diseases, social instability and poor infrastructure make Africa a difficult place for business. A lot of difficulties for foreign and African enterprises arise from numerous different regional trade agreements, which are like a 'spaghetti bowl' with overlapping regulations regarding customs administration and processing, and are thus an impediment to trade and investment. With eight customs unions, eight other regional initiatives, and each African nation being a member of at least four of the above mentioned treaties, cross-border transaction costs on the continent are comparatively high (Broadman 2008: 103). Another serious obstacle for business in Africa is posed by product piracy. Among others, Japanese companies often complain about sales-distorting counterfeit products, in particular manufactured goods from China (*The Nikkei Weekly* 2008b).

From June to September 2007, the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO) carried out a survey among 112 Japan-based firms concerning their experiences on African markets. Asked about the main problems of doing business on the continent, the firms named the maintenance and implementation of rules and law top of their lists, regardless of which part of Africa they operated in. In second place they ranked human resources and employment issues, followed by political instability. Despite those difficulties, however, recent business results of Japanese companies in Africa generally show an upward trend. According to the survey, more than 60 per cent of them enjoyed an improvement during the five years from 2002 to 2007, mainly due to an increase in domestic and overseas sales. As a key to success on African markets, they most often mentioned price competitiveness and investments in goods suitable to the respective market's needs (JETRO 2008b).

To support this positive development, Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda at the opening ceremony of TICAD IV pledged that Japan would dispatch Joint Missions to Africa, to promote trade and investment as well as Japanese resource diplomacy (MOFA 2008d). From the end of August to late September 2008, three of those missions had been carried out⁷, each made up of 60 to 70 leaders from economic and political circles, ministries and government-related organizations. The Joint Missions were the first that Japan has sent to Africa involving both public and private sector leaders (MOFA 2008e).

Heading for a new Japanese-African partnership?

Although a considerable number of nations on the continent have improved their economic performance over recent years, many people in Africa are still

⁷ The South Mission visited Botswana, Mozambique, Madagascar and South Africa, while the East Mission was directed to Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia and Tanzania. The third mission to Central and Western Africa went to Nigeria, Ghana and Senegal (MOFA 2008e).

suffering from poverty. Thus, African nations continue to be reliant upon foreign assistance for furthering their development (Have 2008). To a great extent thanks to its TICAD series, Japan has grown into one of the most active advocates for Africa in the world community. Nevertheless, developed countries' conferences on African development have generally had the widespread reputation for being merely 'talk shops' instead of formulating concrete policies – and TICAD was no exemption in this regard (Ampiah 2005:110). So what has changed with Japan's hosting of TICAD IV in May and the G8 Toyako Summit in July 2008?

First, the coincidence of various conferences related to African development organized or attended by the Japanese government⁸ in 2008 certainly increased the international public's awareness of the continent's relevancy within the global context as well as of its urgent problems, be they climate change, rising food prices or human security. Second, after years of talking, this year's achievements are much more focused on action. The orientation of Japan's assistance has also changed, as more emphasis is now put on trade, investment and infrastructure by means of an extended contribution of the private sector (Watanabe 2008: 11).

The findings of this article support the proposition that Japan's relations to African countries have undergone significant changes over recent years, especially in the field of diplomatic exchange as well as in trade and investment relations. This year's conferences and initiatives accelerated this development. The substantial commitments and financial support pledged by the Japanese government towards African leaders at TICAD IV reflect the ongoing increase of international competition on the continent. Japan is now forced to act if it does not want to be left behind other nations in ensuring access to African resources and markets.

But as Africa's bargaining power is rising due to its economic success and its appeal for various international actors, it will not be easy for Japan to take the leader in supporting African development. Moreover, with its Official Development Assistance shrinking, Japan can hardly outpace countries like China with respect to financial aid on the continent. Nevertheless, a qualitative improvement of ODA planning and allocation is expected to be obtained with the completed redeployment of the Japanese foreign aid system, making it more efficient even though the overall quantity continues to decline.

Notwithstanding their need for continued foreign development assistance, the majority of African nations want new partnerships that take into account their own innovation systems and provide access to technology as

8 Besides TICAD IV and G8 Toyako Summit, Japan also hosted the G8 Development Minister's Meeting in April 2008 in Tokyo and participated in the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the U.N.) conference on World Food Security in Rome in June 2008.

well as higher education (Have 2008). This is a chance that Japan should seize as a major industrialized country, being itself increasingly reliant on external resources and markets due to its declining population and a highly advanced standard of living. Though playing a rather tangential international role in determining aid policy in history, the less assertive stance Japan has taken in relation to African countries contributed to gradually strengthen mutual trust, further deepened during the TICAD process (GRIPS Development Forum 2008: 22). What Japan particularly can do for Africa is to bring in its experience as the first non-western economy that managed to become a leading industrial country, and to offer its know-how instead of trying to compete with other donors on the continent. Being both a major global player in international organizations and less burdened with historical baggage, Japan is probably the only country capable of successfully arbitrating between Africa and the other advanced economies, and of obtaining better international cooperation on African development (Takahashi 2008; Donnelly 2008: 2).

For African governments, on the other hand, improving their own wealth distribution systems, regulating domestic competition and intellectual property rights as well as simultaneously spurring their respective infant industries will be major tasks over the years to come.

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