

# Africa recasts priorities ahead of G-8

Biotech to fight drought; connectivity to spur innovation; higher education to acquire skills

## CLAUDIA TEN HAVE

The Fourth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD IV) could not have been timelier for next month's Group of Eight summit in Toyako, Hokkaido. This Japan-Africa summit, which is held every four years and for the first time in Yokohama, is a major meeting to strategize African development priorities.

Past TICADs have often been more talk shops and less action, but this time the Japanese government has already announced plans for \$4 billion in soft loans for Africa. The loans are just one indication of the new found confidence that the world is expressing for Africa and a badge of pride that African nations wore at the conference.

With debts burdens down, foreign direct investment up and Africa boasting economic growth rates pushing 6% the African diplomatic corps were out in full force in the Minato Mirai area. But the diplomatic chatter was not about the "dark continent," conflict, poverty and despair, it was about high-tech development, science and innovation.

At a TICAD event that was held by the United Nations University Institute of Advanced Studies it was clear that African diplomats were

carrying a new message from their capitals. They want biotechnology to deal with drought and increasing impacts of climate change. They want connectivity to spur innovation and creativity and they want higher education to acquire the skills and know-how needed to compete in the global marketplace.

The African continent is already dealing with drought and the latest report from a newly released International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development says that climate change is only going to make this situation

worse. Drought is a key factor for the declining productivity of Africa and there is a correlation between rainfall and gross domestic product, meaning that rainfall determines the economic performance of many African countries.

Biotechnology is one obvious solution. With careful use, it can provide crops that give higher yields in dry and barren lands and be a major contributor to food security. Although there are growing examples of biotech crops in Africa, compared to Latin America and Asia the use of biotechnology is extremely low and South Africa is the only country in Africa to commercialize biotech crops so far.

As Africa becomes an emerging player on the global



Participants at the TICAD IV conference in Yokohama hear about Africa's new priorities for strategic help.

market with a population of more than 900 million, natural resources and growing political stability, it wants the rest of the world to take it seriously, but that does not mean that the business model of China, India or Japan necessarily is a one-size-fits-all for Africa. Africa wants new partnerships, but with those that are willing to understand its own innovation systems and give it access to technology so it can adapt for its own local knowledge, values and visions.

The mobile phone is a good example of how Africa can adapt technologies to its own needs. In 2001, only 3% of Africans had mobile phones, but now mobile phone users are increasing at an annual

rate of 65%, more than twice the global average. The phones have empowered entrepreneurs, giving them access to new markets, investment and connecting them to outside suppliers. Africa needs access to more of these connecting technologies.

Higher education is another key area that Africa wants more focus. For years the world has talked about primary education for Africa, but Africans are telling a different story. Frankly, they have the capability to provide primary education — it is the higher education and skills that they require to compete on international markets.

Instead of Japan investing to build 1,000 schools, it should

invest in children's laptops that can hold 1,000 books each and connect universities with higher-band, low-cost Internet access so that new intellectual leadership can grow for Africa and its burgeoning academia can share in the information economy and keep up-to-date on advanced knowledge.

The timing of the G-8 and the TICAD is a strategic coincidence that the Japanese government has planned well, the key now is for the Japanese hosts to transmit a clear message of how to strategically help Africa.

*Claudia ten Have is a South African researcher with the United Nations University Institute of Advanced Studies in Yokohama.*



Claudia ten Have