

Achievements of the ABE Initiative & the Voices of Africans



Author Yukifumi Takeuchi

By Yukifumi Takeuchi

Preface

The ABE Initiative – the “African Business Education Initiative for Youth” – under the Japanese government’s program for human resources development started in the autumn of 2014 with the arrival of the first batch of 156 participants from eight African countries, making the scale of this development program for Africa unprecedented in the history of Japan’s international cooperation. The welcome reception held on Sept. 19, 2014, at the International Conference Hall in the Japan International Cooperation Agency’s (JICA) Ichigaya Building in Tokyo saw many young African people dressed in colorful ethnic costumes and brand new suits.

The initiative was advocated by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at the Fifth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD V) in June 2013. The TICAD is the main framework of Japanese economic assistance for African countries, which started in 1993. The ABE Initiative program aims at inviting a total of 1,000 young African people to Japan over five years, giving all the participants the opportunity of a professional education at graduate schools throughout Japan so that they can help form the backbone of Africa in the future. At the same time, the program offers the participants the opportunity to receive internship training at Japanese companies in order to learn not only state-of-the-art technologies and advanced skills but also the corporate culture and work ethic of Japan.

At TICAD VI held in 2016, it was also announced that the program would be expanded further. The total number of ABE Initiative participants so far is 1,219 from 54 countries, including 119 fifth-batch participants from 47 countries who arrived in Japan in the autumn of 2018.

Taking the opportunity of TICAD VII held in Yokohama at the end



Leading members of Kakehashi Africa

of August 2019, the achievements of the ABE Initiative were focused on. In particular, the participants voluntarily established a networking channel named “Kakehashi Africa” (Bridge of Africa) to maintain communication among not only African members but also Japanese supporters and companies that are interested in African business. Considering the future of relations between Japan and Africa, this network will be the key channel of information exchange and business development and cooperation in the African market (Table).

Sense of African Solidarity

Through interviews with many participants of the ABE Initiative since it started in 2014, it becomes clear that one of the biggest achievements is that this program creates opportunities for African participants to meet each other in Japan and make them aware of their African neighbors as well. The land mass of the African continent is more than 30 million square kilometers and is approximately 80 times bigger than Japan with a population of more than 1.2 billion. Although they have the African Union and several regional common markets within the continent, they don’t have many chances to meet each other when they stay in their African mother countries.

Through such meetings with other African people, many participants feel a sense of solidarity or unity. A Madagascar female participant said to me, “When I saw various African sisters and

TABLE

Number of ABE Initiative participants

	Year of arrival in Japan	Number of young Africans	Number of countries
1st batch	2014	156	8
2nd batch	2015	317	33
3rd batch	2016	348	46
4th batch	2017	279	46
5th batch	2018	119	47
Total		1,219	54

Source: Compiled by the author



Photo: Author

Young Africans gather for an exchange meeting with Japanese companies.

brothers in the same reception space, I felt very excited. The ABE Initiative made me rediscover my identity as an islander of the Indian Ocean near the African continent.” Another male participant from Cameroon said, “It was the most ideal opportunity to gain further understanding about various African cultures.”

Such a common perception among participants was probably the main motivation to establish the Kakehashi Africa network. According to Kozue Tanaka, a coordinator of the Japan International Cooperation Center (JICE) in charge of the ABE Initiative, some of the second batch of ABE Initiative participants raised the idea of creating a platform using English as a common language, not just for alumni but as a useful business network for Japanese companies taking part in the African market. They established the organization in 2016 by themselves and created its own logo to print on T-shirts and stationery.

Kakehashi Africa is now registered as an international NGO located in Kenya with five regional branches – East, West, South, North and Central Africa – and approximately 450 members. The current CEO is Nico de Wet from South Africa who currently works for a major Japanese telecommunications company in Tokyo having finished the ABE Initiative program. He pointed out that Kakehashi Africa will be very useful for maintaining the momentum of the ABE Initiative and exchanging views on various topics and business information with Japanese companies. Kakehashi Africa’s core members took part in a side-event at TICAD VII to promote this voluntary organization.

Environment: the Most Popular Technology

According to JICA, the major subjects studied by participants in the ABE Initiative so far are:

- Engineering: 360
- Economics & business management : 321
- Agriculture: 142
- ICT: 111
- Politics & public policies: 77
- Science: 48
- Medical health : 21
- Others: 139

On the other hand, the number of companies registered to accept internship programs for the ABE Initiative was 217 in 2015 and increased to 584 in 2019. The business categories by industry are:

- Manufacturing: 29%
- Service: 18%
- Sales: 14%
- ICT: 10%
- Academism & research: 9%
- Construction: 6%
- Logistics: 3%
- Agriculture & forestation: 3%
- Others: 10%

Visiting some of their universities and internship companies reveals that one of the most popular areas of research is the environment and its infrastructure development. In particular, waste treatment and management is a very important technology to implement in most African countries.

Mutembei Kariuki from Kenya came to Japan for the ABE Initiative in 2014. He studied the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in Kobe and now works for the Eco-center of the Shirai Group. He is involved in preparing construction of a treatment facility in Nairobi. Following economic development, the population of Nairobi is expected to double from three million in 2009 to six million in 2030. The volume of discharged waste in the Nairobi region has increased to 1 million tons a year, of which the volume of hazardous waste has sharply increased to 30,000 tons. However, Nairobi has only one disposal site for general waste and half of such waste generated is said to be illegally dumped.

Kariuki acknowledges that “while the legal system is firmly in place in Kenya, the enforcement of policies and regulations requires improvement. One reason is that there is no business operator capable of replacing the existing operators. Japan’s excellent environmental technologies can nurture such business operators.”

Water Treatment Technology Based on Bitter History of Pollution

Among various environmental fields, water treatment is another popular technology for Africa. Hinode Sangyo Co. Ltd., an enterprise which specializes in the treatment of effluent in Yokohama, started accepting ABE Initiative internships from 2016 and has become the most popular company among Africans wanting to learn about Japanese water treatment technology.

According to George Obina Anioke, who is an industrial inspector at the Ministry of Industry, Trade and Investment of Nigeria and studies at Nagasaki University, the population of Nigeria of more than 180 million is the largest in Africa. But its economy has slowed down due to sluggish natural resources prices. He lamented that “neither fiscal growth nor infrastructure development have been able to catch up with the population growth and rapid urbanization. The resulting strain has led to a water problem of 80% of waste water being discharged untreated nationwide.” Many infants die due to such diseases as cholera associated with unhygienic water.

Nigeria also experiences problems which are typical for an oil producing country. One is the discharge of contaminated water from illegal exploration as well as from crude oil. The official regulatory regime which is in place is said to be seldom complied with properly. Anioke expressed his concern about a possible escalation of polluted water, as with Minamata Disease in Japan, in Africa.

Xolani Nkosikhona Mhlango, currently studying at Kagawa University, is a university lecturer in South Africa and an expert in food processing. He pointed out the environmental pollution is

caused in his country by mineral poisons from copper mines. Meanwhile, Cecilia Mwango Ratemo, who is a researcher in eco-tourism from Kenya and studies at Sophia University in Tokyo, talked about her visit to a museum and an eco-park in Minamata city in Kumamoto Prefecture. She said, “Japan’s painful past experience has made Japan now emphasize environmental conservation policies. I hope that Japan will teach Africa not only technologies but also incontrovertible knowledge based on its past experience.”

Africa’s needs in regard to water are not confined to improvement of the water supply through proper effluent treatment and the reduction of pollution, etc. but are diverse, including the efficient and sustainable use of water, water resources management and conservation of the eco-system surrounding water.

Bigger Need for Public Health

Another company located in Yokohama, Hoken Kagaku, Inc. (Health Sciences Research Institute) is very active in accepting ABE interns specializing in public health. It is the top enterprise in Japan in the field of clinical examinations. Hend Saad Elsayed Elsayed, who is a pharmacist working for the Ministry of Health and Population in Egypt, came to Japan in the autumn of 2016 and is studying at the Graduate School of Tropical Medicine and Global Health of Nagasaki University. She took an internship at this company and expressed her concerns regarding the spread of geriatric diseases as well as lifestyle diseases. She said, “40% of the population suffer from high blood pressure but many people are unaware of their own state of health. An improved diet has led to an excessive intake of high



Photo: Author

Young Africans conducting a water treatment experiment at Hinode Sangyo Co., Ltd. water recycling company



Photo: Author

Young Africans receiving internship training at Hoken Kagaku, Inc. in Yokohama

calorie foods, increasing obesity. The number of people suffering from heart disease is also increasing because of high salt intake.”

She then expressed her view that “Accurate diagnosis requires accurate medical health data. I hope to facilitate exchanges between the Japanese and Egyptian health sectors with a view to using Japan’s health system and medical equipment to improve health in Egypt.”

Another ABE Initiative participant who received training at this company is Lindo Celestino Gavicho, a doctor working for the Ministry of Health of Mozambique. He also studies at the same graduate school of Nagasaki University and conducts research on the detection of the DNA of schistosomes. He said, “I would like to play a bridging role for Japanese enterprises planning to invest in Mozambique to improve the situation of the shortage of medical equipment in Mozambique.”

People with various health and medical backgrounds come to Japan under the ABE Initiative program and are conducting various studies and research work.

Tracey Elizabeth Jones, a pharmacist working for the Ministry of Health in Sierra Leone, came to Japan in 2016 and studies infectious disease control at the graduate school of Tohoku University. From mid-2014 to 2016, she was in the frontline of the battle against Ebola haemorrhagic fever which was rampant in West Africa. Her thesis “Lessons from a pandemic in Sierra Leone”, published in the academic journal of Tohoku University, emphasized the importance of educating nurses and other health workers, greatly stimulating Japanese researchers.

In Sierra Leone, 8,704 people were infected with Ebola in a one and a half year period from its original outbreak and 3,589 of them died. In the frontline of the battle, hospital-acquired infection affected 12 doctors of whom only one survived. The number of victims among health workers was much higher, with 31 out of 74 workers infected in the initial period of four months from the outbreak eventually having died.

Infection by the Ebola virus was initially confirmed in 1976 in Sudan and Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo) and the name originated from the Ebola River in northern Zaire. As it had not occurred in West Africa before, the manner of its spread through the blood, body fluids and excrement of patients was not properly understood locally.

At the end of 2014, the government of Sierra Leone established the National Ebola Training Academy in Freetown with the assistance of the International Organization for Migration, World Health Organization, and the United Kingdom’s Department of International Development. Using this facility as a base, some 6,000 health

workers received professional training and education. The Ebola epidemic was quelled after a year or so.

“Intensive and effective education can prevent hospital-acquired infection, protecting the lives of health workers. In turn, this creates a strong defense mechanism to protect people from infectious diseases,” said Jones. She added, “Education is also important for young children. Education on sanitation and environmental cleaning-up must be thoroughly implemented at schools throughout Africa.”

South Sudanese Praying for Restoration of Peace

Among the third batch of ABE Initiative arriving in September 2016, 11 members of the Republic of South Sudan took part for the first time. A tall lady made a speech at the welcome reception. She was Awar Arop Deng Kuol from Juba, the capital of South Sudan.

Kuol is an architect who graduated from the University of Juba. She used to be a draughtsperson at an architect’s office. It was surprising to find that she speaks almost perfect British English. When asked about it, she explained that she grew up in Oman in the Middle East where her father was an English teacher.

In 1983 before she was born, the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) based in southern Sudan revolted against the government of Sudan which was controlled by the majority Arab Muslims. This marked the start of the second Sudanese civil war. The SPLA was led by the Dinka, the largest ethnic group in the south, gaining the support of the southern Sudanese people, many of whom were Christians. Kuol’s father was a Dinka born in southern Sudan. For the

Photo: Author



Young Africans from the Republic of South Sudan

sake of his children's education, he opted to live in the Gulf region of the Middle East which was not affected by the civil war.

It took until 2005 for faint signs of a forthcoming peace to emerge in Sudan, which had suffered from a long-running civil war. In January 2015, a peace agreement was signed which ended the civil war and granted the south the right to self-governance. It was then decided to hold a referendum in the south to determine whether South Sudan should declare independence from Sudan or not.

In January 2011, the people of the south overwhelmingly voted for independence in the referendum, paving the way for the separation and independence of the south. As soon as the south became an independent country in July 2011, Kuol returned to South Sudan, the home of her father, and enrolled at the main campus of the University of Juba where she majored in architecture. Kuol explained her motivation to study architecture: "Since childhood, I have always loved drawing pictures. I also wanted to respond to the deep desire of South Sudanese people to live peacefully in their own homes."

Kuol studies architecture at the Graduate School of Shibaura Institute of Technology in Toyosu, Tokyo. According to Kuol, traditional houses in South Sudan are mostly made of mud walls and bamboo. However, recent years have seen the construction of 10-story office buildings in Juba and the demand for modern architecture is growing. "Even though the climate is quite different between wet Japan and dry South Sudan, I would like to explore the possibility of applying the traditional wooden architecture in Japan to houses in South Sudan. I would also like to study Japan's eco-houses equipped with photovoltaic power generation systems."

The Graduate School of Shibaura Institute of Technology has another ABE Initiative participant. Lazarus Lemi Chacha Costa studies construction materials. His English is exceptionally good. When South Sudan was governed by the north, the official language was Arabic and English was not taught in ordinary schools. However, Costa attended a missionary school as a Christian where he learned English even though he was born and grew up in Juba. After independence, English became the official language of South Sudan. "As I can speak both English and Arabic, I can live in Africa or the Middle East," said Costa. He works for the Ministry of Infrastructure of the provincial government and has been supervising public works. His research theme in Japan is construction materials, such as cement.

Costa lamented that, "Even though South Sudan has limestone resources, there is not a single cement factory. Water and gravel are locally available but 90% of the materials, including cement and admixture, to make concrete must be imported from a neighboring country." He dreams of establishing "a concrete laboratory" in Juba to develop construction materials which are suitable for the climate

and the available natural resources of South Sudan to overcome the current problems.

The solidifying speed and strength of the concrete used for construction work greatly vary depending on the quality of the cement as well as the water and ambient temperature. Recycled materials from industrial waste are sometimes used as concrete materials. It is hoped that repeated tests at the university jointly conducted with Japanese students will produce positive results that can be applied.

Professor Takeshi Iyoda of the Shibaura Institute of Technology who is Costa's supervisor applauds Costa's positive attitude: "Japanese cement has achieved the highest quality in the world and there is much to learn from Japanese technologies in terms of construction materials. I hope that Costa fully analyses these materials and technologies and takes back positive results to his own country."

Epilogue

In the *International Development Journal*, a magazine specializing in international cooperation, I began publishing a series of articles called "The ABE Initiative – Pilots of African Business" in November 2014, for the purpose of recording this large-scale attempt at human resources development.

As Africa evokes a sense of distance both physically and psychologically for Japan, the series aims at not only conveying the honest opinions of the participants but also at diminishing the sense of distance on the Japanese side through the input of information on a wide variety of African countries. The series also introduces the Japanese universities assisting the education and research work of the African participants and explains the relationships between the participants and the Japanese enterprises providing training opportunities by means of internships.

Many of the participants who have completed the ABE Initiative program have since returned to their own countries and are now acting as bridges between their countries and Japan while making the best use of their newly-acquired knowledge from Japan at their places of work.

It is my sincere hope that, taking the opportunity of TICAD VII, the ABE Initiative and its participants will continue their own success stories.

JS

Yukifumi Takeuchi worked for the *Asahi Shimbun* for 31 years, including as a correspondent in Bangkok and New Delhi. He has continued to work for the monthly *International Development Journal* since 2014.