

Interview with His Excellency Daba Debele Hunde, Ambassador of Ethiopia to Japan

Ethiopia & Japan: Strengthening Bilateral Ties Through Geopolitics, Agriculture & Technology

By Japan SPOTLIGHT with Prof. Mukesh Williams

Japan SPOTLIGHT visited the Embassy of Ethiopia in Tokyo and met with Ambassador Daba Debele Hunde. He discussed various issues ranging from geopolitics and economy to agriculture and technology, affirming his country's commitment to further strengthen the existing partnership with Japan. He thanked the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) for aiding economic development in Ethiopia through funding and investment, promoting healthcare, developing agriculture, expanding crop insurance, and instituting environmental protection. He also emphasized the Japan-Ethiopia partnership in expanding women's empowerment, educational exchanges, startups, and food and nutrition processing. He highlighted Ethiopia's participation in the Ninth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD 9) in 2025 in Yokohama, and how this forum has helped to improve human dignity and security. The ambassador concluded by thanking Japan and exhorting the Japanese government to further expand the programs that have already been initiated.

(Interviewed on Sept. 19, 2024)

Overview of Bilateral Relations Between Ethiopia & Japan

JS: Amid heightened geopolitical risks, Japan is strengthening ties with the Global South, with India playing a key role. Ethiopia is one of a key representative of Global South. According to Prof. Keiichi Shirakawa at Ritsumeikan University, an African expert, Africa's growing population makes it an important partner for Japan. How can Japan foster a closer relationship with Ethiopia based on this understanding?

Ambassador: Regarding enhanced global geopolitical risks, Japan shall establishing a closer link with the Global South. Japan and Ethiopia have a long-standing relationship and strong diplomatic ties based on mutual understanding and mutual benefits. Ethiopia also has strong economic cooperation with JICA and directly with the Japanese Embassy in Ethiopia. Ethiopia is a beneficiary of aid from the United States and UN agencies, and Japan is one of the big stakeholders in UN contributions; we also benefit from UN educational activities and health initiatives.

So, Japan is contributing a lot to our development; and now we are currently working to advance and strengthen relations between



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the two nations. This year we held the Ethiopia-Japan political consultation with the aim of consolidating the bilateral relationship. In my opinion, in the Indo Pacific alliance, Japan has really been trying to foster regional stability and prosperity by improving connectivity between nations. Therefore, Ethiopia is one of the most important country in Africa, especially in terms of the geopolitics of East Africa. The African Union headquarters is based in Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. It is a big economy now and a rapidly developing country which is the first in East Africa, the third in Sub-Saharan Africa, and an important country for Japan to work together with on mutual issues.

Ethiopian Airlines is connecting inter-African regions, Asia, Europe, and America.

Ethiopia is a hub for different regions in Africa. Japan is also a very important country in Asia in terms of the volume of trade, technology, economy, and its importance in the Indo-Pacific region, its contribution to the United Nations and the Security Council, and its economic and social impact. Japan is economically and technologically advanced. So Ethiopia expects a lot from Japan. Our bilateral relations through our governments and embassies are growing at the highest level to create mutual benefits.

JICA's Contribution to Enhanced Bilateral Relations

JS: What do you think about Japanese agricultural aid to Ethiopia? How do you assess JICA's contribution to promoting school education and agriculture in Ethiopia?

Ambassador: Agriculture is the economic base of our country. We have developed a homegrown economic model, which consists of five pillars. The first pillar is agriculture. The second is industrial development. The third is developing mining sector. The fourth is tourism. And the fifth is the ICT. Amongst these five pillars, agriculture is vital in contributing to our GDP. Ethiopia is now shifting from traditional agricultural methods to advanced farming methods using different kinds of technologies, like fertilizers and agriculture machinery. Japan, through JICA, has contributed and continues to contribute towards developing Ethiopian agriculture and streamlining agricultural planning.

In agriculture, Japan is involved in two projects. The first one is the Crop Insurance Project, which started as a pilot project with JICA in the Oromia region and is now expanding to other regions. Crop insurance is one of the important things for Ethiopian farmers, as scarcity of rain, droughts, or other factors can affect agricultural yield negatively. In such adverse climatic conditions, the farmers do not have techniques for risk advertisement management and risk control. Crop insurance gives them security. The second one is increasing rice production in the Amhara region, which also started as a pilot project and is now expanding to other regions. JICA is participating in capacity building and the transfer of technology. Ethiopia has a big land area, and it can produce not only for itself but export to other countries as well. We appreciate JICA's many initiatives and want it to involve itself in other initiatives such as the coffee initiative, the environmental protection initiative, crop and development initiatives, and research initiatives. I would like to extend my appreciation to JICA for its support and solicit it to add new initiatives for future cooperation.

Other Promising Areas for Cooperation

JS: Do you think that in the field of agriculture, especially the food processing industry, some Japanese SMEs may contribute to the prosperity of Ethiopia?

Ambassador: Yes, we are producing many agricultural goods. Previously, our productivity was quite low, but now we are using new technological ideas and fertilizers, and our volume of production is increasing. So in this regard, the involvement of new technologies,

small-scale businesses, and business enterprises can be helpful for Ethiopia.

JS: During the pandemic, healthcare became very important in Ethiopia, Japan, and other countries. At present or in the future, what kind of healthcare cooperation do you expect between Japan and Ethiopia?

Ambassador: For any kind of development, good healthcare is very important, as the health of the human being is the key to development. However, cooperation is rather minimal. Japan has participated in UN healthcare and is a major contributor to global healthcare activities. We are using healthcare contributions from Japan indirectly, but we need to use contributions to healthcare directly by establishing a strong relationship with them in that sector.

JS: Which area would you like Japan to contribute to in Ethiopian healthcare? Which area is good, in your opinion?

Ambassador: In this regard, our policy is divided into two: curation and prevention. The curation policy has to do with training of doctors, medication, and delivery of medicines. The prevention policy involves the building of hospitals and clinics, health advocacies and awareness creation for the citizens. We need to expand the health sector, especially by building more small clinics, which will directly impact the rural areas and help the farmers. Also, developing an awareness of hygiene can help to prevent the spread of infectious diseases. Therefore, in the field of capacity building, training and advanced health technology, we need assistance from Japan, as Japan is well-advanced in this regard.

Expectations of TICAD 9 in 2025

JS: Some of the issues you mentioned are important parts of the TICAD 9 agenda. The preparatory meeting of TICAD 9 has just concluded, and we are preparing for TICAD 9 in 2025 in Yokohama. What are your expectations of it?

Ambassador: We have participated in TICAD for the past 30 years and discussed issues with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. The TICAD 9 summit in Yokohama in August 2025 will focus on three thematic areas: first, realizing a sustainable future; second, investing in human dignity and human security; and third, promoting trade and business. In the first area, that is realizing a sustainable future, how to collaborate between Ethiopia and Japan is important. This involves developing innovative solutions to address new



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challenges and priorities, such as safety, development activities, climate change, education, agricultural processes, nutrition, and energy.

In the second area of ensuring human dignity and human security, both countries need to focus on strengthen thier cooperation on good governance, peace and security, increase women and youth's participation in leadership roles and decision-making. The third area is promoting trade and investment. This needs reliable and resilient startups, a good ecosystem, and promotion of Japanese companies to invest in Africa. The economic relationship between Japan and Africa will shift from aid to investment, and this will increase the participation of women, governance, peace and security, and economic decision-making. There is greater expectations of TICAD to encourage women and young people to play leadership roles. Ethiopia will be among the major countries to work with Japan through the TICAD platform, and JICA will play a major role in strengthening the relationship between Ethiopia and Japan. Ethiopia has great geopolitical importance and have a big population. We have vast resources and need advanced cooperation with Japan. We want to take this cooperation to the highest level and make our participation the best when compared with the past years.

JS: What do you think of the initiative that late Prime Minister Shinzo Abe took to improve educational exchange programs between African and Japanese youth?

Ambassador: These initiatives have greatly benefited students from Ethiopia by fostering connections with various universities in Japan. The Japanese government is actively involved, and university-to-university relationships have grown over time. The number of Ethiopian students coming to Japan for education and short-term

training has steadily increased, especially for advanced degrees. These initiatives are also contributing to start-up programs, which I believe are highly beneficial. In my opinion, it would be wise to further strengthen these efforts in the coming decade.

Potential of Trade & Investment

JS: You mentioned that trade and industry are very important and that Japanese companies should invest in Ethiopia. In your opinion, which areas are most promising for Japanese investment in trade and industry?

Ambassador: Trade and investment are crucial for the development of any country. While we need foreign investment in many areas, we must prioritize. As I mentioned earlier, we focus on five key sectors, with agriculture being the top priority. Agriculture contributes more than 35% to our GDP, and over 80% of our population is involved in it. Japanese companies could invest in agriculture by acquiring land and producing raw materials, or by providing raw products for processing and export. This includes crops like coffee and other food products. Additionally, investment in agro-processing is vital. After production, the processing, packaging, and export of these goods add significant value. We need Japanese expertise and machinery to improve efficiency in this sector. Beyond agriculture, we have untapped potential in mining, with resources such as gold, platinum, and iron ore. Japanese companies could invest in extraction for both local use and export. Tourism is another key area, given Ethiopia's rich historical heritage. Investments in hotels, tourism infrastructure, and attractions would be highly beneficial. Lastly, as Japan is a leader in technology, we see great potential for collaboration in technology transfer, particularly in ICT. Technology is essential for progress, and we need strong cooperation with Japan in this field as well.

Implications of Indo-Pacific Initiatives for Ethiopia

JS: Do you think Indo-Pacific initiatives are important for your country's security or economic prosperity?

Ambassador: Yes, in my understanding the Asia-Pacific economic and security cooperation, launched by the US in May 2024, includes member countries from Asia, the Pacific, and the UN. This group represents 40% of global GDP and 28% of global goods and services trade. It focuses on four pillars: trade, supply chains, clean energy and decarbonization, and anti-corruption measures. These pillars are highly relevant for our country. Trade is essential for exporting our coffee, industrial products, and other goods. A strong supply chain is

critical for facilitating that trade. In terms of clean energy and decarbonization, we are already implementing the National Green Development Initiative, launched by our prime minister, which is progressing well in Africa. We are eager to build mutually beneficial relationships with any country, whether Japan or others, that can support our trade, based on the principles and practices of our foreign policy. This cooperation would benefit both nations and strengthen multilateral collaboration.

Ambassador's Experience in Japan & Ambitions

JS: What has been your most memorable experience in Japan, and how has it shaped your diplomatic efforts? Additionally, what are your priorities for improving Japan-Ethiopia relations during your time here?

Ambassador: I've had the privilege of serving as an ambassador in other country, but my experience in Japan stands out. Here, I've found that diplomats enjoy great freedom and peace. You can move around the country freely, meet with anyone, and work toward mutual understanding and benefit without restriction. This level of openness is rare and makes Japan one of the best places for diplomatic work. The people are also very friendly and welcoming. Another unique aspect of Japan is the thoroughness of their process. While it may take time for decisions to be made, nothing is forgotten, and the results are well thought out and executed with precision.

As for my priorities, Ethiopia and Japan have a long-standing relationship, nearly 100 years old. In fact, Ethiopia was one of the first African countries to establish diplomatic ties with Japan. A key focus of mine will be to advance our political and diplomatic relations, but I'll place particular emphasis on strengthening economic ties. Japan is a global economic powerhouse with advanced technology, and I would like to encourage more top Japanese companies to invest in Ethiopia. Several companies are already involved, such as Sumitomo in telecommunications, Japan Tobacco, Toppan in security printing, and Itochu in trading. There are also numerous small and medium-sized enterprises operating successfully in Ethiopia. I see great potential for further collaboration and aim to invite more Japanese companies to explore these opportunities.

JS: Overall, can you highlight key sectors of cooperation between Ethiopia and Japan? What further support is needed from Japan to advance in these sectors?

Ambassador: Many things are in progress, but I'd like to highlight

two. The first is education. Japan has been involved in Ethiopia's education sector for over a decade. I participated in the JICA program and had the opportunity to visit, learn, and receive training at Naruto University in Japan. This was a valuable experience, especially in understanding how Japan approaches education and what we can implement here. In particular, we've been focusing on science and mathematics education, which is vital for a developing country like Ethiopia. With over 35 million students, we have one of the largest student populations in Africa. Japan's support through JICA is important to improve the quality of education, particularly in science and mathematics, by training teachers, supporting printing books, and developing new teaching methods. While much has been done, we still need more support from JICA in this area. The second area is agriculture, which is equally important. I was the head of the agriculture bureau in the Oromia Region when JICA introduced crop insurance. I helped guide them in developing this initiative, which has since expanded. Crop insurance and rice cultivation programs are now quite valuable, but they started small. We have many ongoing initiatives in agriculture with promising and tremendous changes doing the past five years. But there are still significant gaps. We need additional participation and resources from JICA to further expand these programs as Ethiopia has a huge potential to produce agricultural products.

JS: In many countries, including India, Japanese universities have established institutes of technology. Do you think Ethiopia should have one supported by Japan, and how would it work?

Ambassador: Thank you for the question and suggestion. I hadn't directly mentioned it, but I've been discussing the role of technology in agriculture. Technology is one of the five key pillars of our homegrown economy plan, as it supports agriculture, industry, mining, tourism, and more. Without technology, progress in these sectors is impossible. I believe an institute of technology supported by Japan would be highly valuable for Ethiopia. Technology is essential not only for economic activities but also for education, knowledge transfer, and implementation. It should be a priority in any development plan, including TICAD initiatives. Technology is critical, and we must emphasize it moving forward.

JS: Thank you for your time.

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Written with the cooperation of Prof. Mukesh Williams, who is a professor of Soka University and former Faculty member of Keio University. He has conducted seminars on global cultures and counselled Japanese universities on academic exchange and PR strategies.