

How we saw Japan! (ABE プログラム留学生が見た日本の発展とは?)

As a student of African Business Education (ABE) Initiative for Youth

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I. Introduction

The Meiji era (1868-1912) opened up Japan to foreign countries and during the same period foreign students started to come for studies. In 2008, Japan established the International Students Plan, targeting 300,000 by 2020 up from about 115,000. This was based on a shared understanding between the Japanese business sector and the government that Japan needed to recruit talented students to succeed in international competition. In line with this policy, ABE Initiative was launched in 2013 at TICAD VI in Yokohama.

Until JFY2019, more than 1,300 participants from the 54 African countries had joined ABE Initiative program, and over 900 participants have completed the program with most of them going back to their respective countries. A few of them were employed by Japanese companies while others joined PhD programs. JICA maintains a database with contacts of all the participants/graduates and they carry out regular networking programs at the country level. Initially, the program was meant to run for five years with a total of 1,000 participants. However, it was later extended by over 2 years. During TICAD VII in 2019, ABE initiative 2.0 was launched by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. The new program targets to train 3,000 African youth in the coming six years.

This article shares how we saw Japan during ABE Initiative program. In particular, I share the motivation for choosing Japan and the program, life outside school experiences, and post-ABE initiative activities.

II. Why Japan and Why ABE-Initiative Program

Growing up in the rural areas of Kenya, my first experience/contact with Japan came through Japanese electronics like radio, TVs and the cars especially Toyota. This created

a sense of believe that Japan could do what many other countries couldn't do. Since then I developed interest to study engineering. At that time, it was a dream of anyone who wanted to pursue engineering to go to Japan. Later after my undergraduate studies I got interested on renewable energy technologies and environment.

My preliminary research showed that according to the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), Japan held 55% of the world's renewable energy patent applications followed by the U.S. with 22% and then the EU with 7%. Japan's research and development in the renewable energy field is very advanced both in academic and public research institutes and private sector. Japan is leading the world in the field of solar photovoltaic and wind power, and geothermal generation technologies have maintained equivalent position to the US and EU countries. This attracted me a lot as my country was focusing on increasing power generation from renewables. I wanted to



Attending conference

obtain knowledge and skills and be part of the network of human resource that could contribute to Kenya's industrialization. Furthermore, Japan is a unique development partner for Africa as it has focused mainly on human resource development which has greater and long-lasting impacts.

ABE Initiative scholarship program was unique from inception with its idea of creating a network of skilled human resource that could connect Japanese industries with African industries. This had an advantage of contributing directly to industrial development in Africa.

The opportunity to join summer and/or after graduation internship was another attraction as it provided a chance for us to hone the knowledge and gain great industrial experience. Additionally, the scholarship was open to applicants from both public and private sectors. They also provided financial support for carrying out overseas research together with attending local and international conferences (see the attached photo). Apart from gaining useful networks, conferences

also allowed us to publish our research findings. Although in the first batch we were drawn from eight African countries, the number increased to cover all the 54 countries from the second batch. This accorded us an opportunity to create some kind of ‘super network’ across the continent. We also participated in joint programs and also formed Facebook platform for communication and enhanced networking. This has deepened the networks we created and fostered the achievement of the overall objective (connecting Japanese with African industries) with ease.

III. Internship Experiences at Japanese Companies

ABE Initiative provided summer vacation and after graduation internship opportunities. In summer, I went for internship at Panasonic Corporation, Osaka and



Internship at Mayekawa Mfg.

Mayekawa Mfg. Co., Ltd (see attached photo). After graduation, I joined OPC Corporation, Tokyo a consultancy firm. For the entire period of 2015/16 academic year we were also involved with Sanden Environment Project. Through these internship experiences we gained a lot of useful technical and business skills and culture. The Japanese companies also got useful information and ideas that will aid in the design of products more suitable for the African market.

I believe this will be useful in promoting Japanese companies/products in Africa.

I also got to learn some surprising things at these workplaces. These include: drinking party considered as work (nomikai), open office layout, long working hours, morning exercises and recitals, adherence to kaizen principles. In one of the companies we used to recite the 5S principles every morning despite the same being found at every corner of the factory. I found 5S and kaizen principles as the backbone of Japanese innovation and technological advancement. The open office layout looked more like a school classroom than a workplace. I was also surprised to find some workers who have been working on the same thing for over 20 years. Although they looked excited and showed

full commitment, I found it monotonous. The very long working hours seem to have a negative work-life balance.

IV. Life Outside School

The program gave us an opportunity to deeply experience the Japanese culture from food to religion. It is important to recognize the efforts that the Japanese have put to maintain their culture despite being very advanced technologically. This has been a challenge for many developing countries.



Mochi pounding at New Year party

We participated in several Japanese festivals like mochi making (see the photo below), machinaka and Yagibushi dance. The visit to shrines and temples was also common where we experienced the Shinto and Buddhist religions respectively. In one occasion, we did the Hokekyō (Namu Myōhō Renge Kyō) Buddhist prayer. Although there were some similarities with Christianity, interestingly, we got the feeling that it influenced the Japanese people's way of thinking and behavior much more

than the way Christianity influences ours back home.

Homestay programs and parties were a great way for us to deepen our understanding of Japanese culture and family lifestyle. We managed to learn how to make Japanese foods, try Japanese calligraphy (shuuji) and play games.

Japan has some of the most beautiful sightseeing spots I have ever seen. I managed to visit some of them in Fukushima, Hiroshima, Kyoto, Miyazaki, Niigata, Osaka, Tochigi, Matsuyama city, and Minamata city. Apart from



Trying Japanese calligraphy

enjoying the beautiful sceneries in these places, I also witnessed serious environmental

problems caused by human activities. During my visit to Hiroshima Atomic Bomb Museum and Minamata Disease Municipal Museum, I saw the devastating destructions from the two disasters. Unfortunately, these are examples of man-made disasters that could have been avoided. For the case of Minamata disease, this is a disaster that I think could provide valuable lessons for the developing economies as most of them tend to sacrifice the environment in pursuit of economic development. The monetary cost of ecosystem rehabilitation and the time it takes should serve as a warning on the vulnerability of our planet and the dangers of events like climate change. Although the ecosystem and the people's livelihoods may not be fully restored, the steps taken by the Japanese government and the society in this respect are commendable.

V. Post- ABE-Initiative Program Activities

The completion of ABE program meant the beginning of efforts to actualize the program's main objective of connecting Japanese and African industries. The efforts varied but not limited to registering companies/ organizations, working for Japanese companies in Japan or Africa and project collaborations. The internship experience at the different Japanese companies created in us an impression of inadequate information and lack of a clear framework for Japanese



With Hinode Sangyo Co. Ltd Director, Fujita Kaori san when we visited her company in Yokohama

companies to venture into the Africa market. As a result, we teamed up with two other ABE graduates and one other Kenyan with experience of working with Japanese company in Africa. Together we formed Higashi Africa Investment Company Limited, HAIC, (www.higashiafrica.com) a consulting and advisory firm. Through HAIC, we aim to contribute to industrial development by providing a reliable platform and support for Japanese companies who want to invest in Africa. HAIC's head office is in Nairobi, Kenya with a branch office in Tanzania, and a country representative in Uganda.

So far, HAIC has been made contacts and worked with several Japanese companies who are planning or doing business/projects in Africa. In particular, we have worked with three Japanese companies in Kenya and Tanzania. The projects include those in the areas of manufacturing, Technical and Vocational training (TVET), energy, health and agriculture.

We are also keeping very close contact with JICA/JICE (see attached photo) and we participate in some of their activities (<https://www.jice.org/en/news/2018/10/jice-17.html>). In addition, we have visited Japanese companies like Hinode Sangyo (see attached photo), Tochigi Leather Factory and Nakamura Co. Ltd plant for networking. HAIC's main technical expertise and experience of both Japanese business culture and the local African companies is our main competitive edge.



With JICE Coordinator, Mr. Someya at the 2019 ABE Networking Fair

As a result of our impressive efforts, we were selected by JICA to present at TICAD VII, Yokohama in 2019. The objective was to share success cases of ABE Initiative and discuss how both Japanese companies and ABE Initiative participants can further collaborate and expand the human resource network.

VI. Conclusion

In conclusion, the intervention to raise the number of Japanese companies investing in Africa through ABE initiative is a very timely one. We think that probably it must be one of the most significant resolutions of TICAD process. The experience throughout the program period was very positive to many of the participants and a good return on their own investment. I can say that we met the right choice in joining the program. The internship and life outside school experiences have given us an excellent understanding of Japanese society and systems of Japanese enterprise. This is key in contributing to Africa's development in collaboration with Japanese private sector. However, ABE

initiative program involved building of relationships and as such, its impact may not be instantaneous. For that matter, to fully realize the benefits, it is important for JICA to put more efforts in building a platform that Japanese companies and ABE Initiative graduates can interact and exchange ideas with ease. This will allow the buildup of relationships from just acquaintance to serious business collaborations and partnership.