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Editorial

Reimagining Africa–Japan Partnership: Toward Mutual Learning and Youth-Centered Transformation

June 2025
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Abstract
This editorial proposes a new Africa–Japan partnership built on mutual learning and recognition of Africa's informal economy as a driver of youth-led innovation and community resilience. Drawing on Senegalese examples, it argues that development support is most effective when reinforcing—rather than replacing—existing systems. Highlighting Japan's strengths in vocational training, incremental innovation, and trust-based cooperation, the essay suggests culturally grounded, low-intrusion approaches that enhance informality without erasing it. It outlines practical tools such as ROSCAs, mobile learning, and Tankyu Practice to empower informal actors. Ultimately, it calls for co-designed, youth-centered strategies that value endogenous knowledge and reposition Africa not as a recipient, but as a co-author of global development.

要約
本論説は、アフリカのインフォーマル経済を若者主導のイノベーションと地域のレジリエンスの源泉として捉え、相互学習に基づく新たなアフリカ-日本パートナーシップを提案している。セネガルの事例を通じて、支援は既存の仕組みを置き換えるのではなく、それを強化することでより効果を発揮することを示した。日本の職業訓練、漸進的で小規模なイノベーション、信頼に基づく協力といった強みに着目し、本稿は、インフォーマル性を損なうことなく高める、文化的背景に根ざした干渉を抑えたアプローチを提案する。ROSCAs（頼母子講）、モバイル学習、Tankyu（探究実践）などの具体策も紹介し、知識を共有しながら、アフリカを受益者ではなく共創者として位置づける未来を呼びかけている。

1 Introduction: A New Paradigm of Partnership

As the contours of global development shift, the traditional donor-recipient framework that has long shaped Africa's engagement with the world is increasingly

misaligned with the ambitions of the present. What is now required is a model grounded not in hierarchy, but in reciprocity—an equal-footing partnership that draws on the distinct yet complementary strengths of African nations and Japan.

Africa and Japan could not appear more different on paper—one young and bustling, the other aging and ordered. Yet it is precisely in their difference that a transformative opportunity arises: to move beyond outdated binaries and build a new form of cooperation rooted in mutual learning, human-centered strategies, and co-designed innovation. This partnership must recognize that sustainable progress will come not from replicating external models, but from investing in systems already thriving within African contexts.

This essay contributes to that vision by exploring one often-overlooked pillar of African dynamism: the informal economy. It argues that transcending conventional aid requires looking inward—toward local knowledge, youth entrepreneurship, and community-based systems—as foundations for a more equitable and forward-looking partnership.

2 Beyond Aid: Why Conventional Models Fall Short

For decades, Africa–Japan relations have largely followed conventional aid-based pathways. These include bilateral development assistance via JICA, technical support programs, infrastructure loans, and capacity-building initiatives. While many of these efforts have provided tangible benefits—from road networks to vocational training—they have often failed to engage with the lived realities of African societies. Instead of strengthening endogenous systems, aid has frequently operated through top-down mechanisms, imposing frameworks designed for industrialized economies.

This approach tends to treat development as a matter of replication: formal institutions, employment structures, and regulatory frameworks from Japan or other donor countries are transposed onto African settings with little adaptation. But when solutions are imagined rather than co-created—when they seek to reshape rather than reinforce existing community structures—they often miss the mark.

Consider the historical record. Between 1960 and 1998, Africa received an estimated US $2.6 trillion in aid. Yet during that same period, poverty rates climbed from 11% to 66%. Econometric reviews by Boone (1996), Rajan & Subramanian (2005), and Burnside & Dollar (1997, 2000) consistently show weak or conditional links between aid and growth, especially where governance and institutional alignment are lacking.

Senegal provides a more recent and localized illustration. From 2020 to 2023, USAID invested over US $155 million into sectors like agriculture and youth development. Yet its Human Development Index ranking remained stagnant at 169th. The 2021 IFAD-backed PADAER (Agricultural Development and Rural Entrepreneurship Support Program) in Senegal offered insurance and irrigation, but failed to address systemic barriers like limited market access, inadequate financial tools, and the exclusion of women.

Ghana's "Operation Feed Yourself" (1972–78) suffered a similar fate decades earlier. Despite generous funding and self-sufficiency ambitions, the program collapsed under the weight of poor infrastructure, misallocated subsidies, and bureaucratic favoritism. In Ethiopia, pilot fertilizer programs showed early promise, but could not scale due to cultural misalignment and a lack of logistical planning.

These examples reveal a broader pattern: when aid bypasses community knowledge, ignores informal systems, or seeks to overwrite existing practices, it fails to deliver sustained outcomes. The underlying assumption that African models must be reengineered often results in programs that are irrelevant, unsustainable, or actively disruptive.

Today, both Africa and Japan face profound internal transitions—Africa with its demographic boom and Japan with its demographic decline. Africa's greatest asset is not merely its natural resources, but its people—especially its youth. Japan, in contrast, brings institutional stability, advanced technology, and a culture of precision. The development cooperation model must evolve to reflect these contemporary realities. It must be driven by co-creation, symmetry, and mutual respect—not by legacies of paternalism or the inertia of outdated frameworks.

The opportunity lies not in discarding Africa's informal or indigenous systems, but in learning how to support and elevate them. A new era of Africa–Japan collaboration would benefit in being built on this foundation.

3 Africa's Informal Sector: A Source of Resilience and Innovation

Too often, the informal sector in Africa is framed as a challenge to be solved or formalized away. But in practice, it is a vibrant cornerstone of economic life. In countries like Senegal, approximately 96% of the active labor force works in informal employment, and nearly 97% of businesses are unregistered (ILO, 2022). Far from being a space of disorder, informality represents a system of resilience—where communities create employment, services, and social safety nets in the absence of formal structures.

In Dakar's open-air markets, roadside food stalls, artisanal workshops, and mobile money kiosks, one finds an intricate web of activity powered by youth initiative, collective labor, and grassroots ingenuity. Informal economies thrive not just out of necessity, but out of cultural logic and practical wisdom. They respond to real needs with real-time solutions—blending economic participation with community care.

A striking example of this capacity is the rapid uptake of mobile money platforms across West Africa. Services like Wave have empowered millions of informal workers and vendors to manage transactions, save earnings, and access financial services—all without conventional banking infrastructure. This kind of digital inclusion offers a roadmap for how informality can intersect with innovation to drive economic autonomy.

Initiatives like the ILO-supported SNIFEI (Integrated National Strategy for the Formalization of the Informal Economy) and PAOTSI (Operational Action Plan for the Transformation of the Informal Sector) program in Senegal demonstrate that government and international actors are beginning to recognize informality's value. Yet such recognition often coexists with contradictory measures, such as the 2024 evictions in Colobane, where vendors were forcibly removed under the guise of urban order.

Rather than seeing the informal sector as a prelude to formality, it should be understood on its own terms. It is a domain where Africa's youngest generation expresses entrepreneurial energy—often self-financing their ventures, navigating market volatility, and relying on family or cooperative support networks. Organizations like UNACOIS (National Union of Traders and Industrialists of Senegal) exemplify how informal actors are organizing collectively to influence policy, negotiate licensing, and adopt digital tools like customer relationship management systems.

The informal economy also provides space for experimentation, allowing micro-enterprises to pivot quickly, learn through trial and error, and adopt innovations without heavy bureaucratic constraints. It fosters fluid money flows—especially through cash-based transactions and mobile banking platforms—and serves as the primary job generator for large segments of the population.

That said, one of the core challenges facing the sector is that its contributions are difficult to measure. Without formal oversight or standard reporting mechanisms, the full economic value of the informal sector often goes unrecognized in national statistics. This lack of visibility can limit its policy relevance and hinder the kinds of support mechanisms that would enhance its productivity and stability.

This brings us to a broader proposition: perhaps it is not only Africa that can benefit from formalization, but also countries like Japan that can learn from the adaptive logic of informality.

4 Learning from the Margins: What Japan Can Gain from Africa's Informal Sector

Across much of Africa, the informal sector is not simply a safety net—it is a space of innovation, self-organization, and economic inclusion. In contrast, many developed economies, including Japan, are grappling with aging populations, rigid labor markets, and declining social cohesion. There is growing value in looking outward—not just for technology exports or market expansion, but for inspiration.

What lessons can Japan draw from Africa's informal dynamism? First, flexibility. In contrast to heavily structured employment systems, informal economies thrive on adaptability. Second, mutual aid. In tightly knit communities, informal actors rely on one another through rotating savings clubs, shared infrastructure, and kinship-based safety nets. Third, entrepreneurial resilience. Whether it's a young woman selling cosmetics via WhatsApp or a mechanic building tools from scrap, informal workers exhibit a resourcefulness that defies standard models.

Moreover, there are rich cultural motives embedded in the informal sector—from collective responsibility to informal apprenticeship systems—that foster trust, belonging, and intergenerational continuity. These practices offer important insights for Japan's search for greater community cohesion in the face of growing social isolation.

For Japan, which seeks to foster local innovation, reinvigorate civic life, and support small-scale entrepreneurship, the informal sector provides a living example of how communities can generate value without central coordination. By observing how African societies integrate work, family, and social purpose within informal systems, Japan might uncover new strategies for designing more humane, adaptable, and inclusive economies.

Crucially, this calls for deeper research into the internal logic of informal systems. Academic and policy collaborations can map the organizational structures, financing models, and market networks that sustain informality. Such knowledge is essential not only to understand what works, but also to identify where and how these systems can be enhanced—without disrupting the cultural and economic ecosystems that underpin them.

Researching Informality from Within: While much academic attention focuses on

large firms or digital startups, there is limited understanding of informal-sector systems: how group finance pools operate, apprenticeship chains function, local pricing negotiations happen.

Japan's universities and research institutes have strong ethnographic and systems-analysis traditions that could map and model informality. For example, documenting how savings groups emerge organically, or how vendor associations self-regulate market access. With this knowledge, informal sector support could be targeted, non-damaging, and genuinely collaborative.

5 Learning Across Borders: What Africa Can Gain from Japan

Deep Cultural Cohesion via Shared Language and Identity: Japan's success lies partly in its linguistic unity. Japanese is universally taught—from remote islands to megacities—allowing national standards in education, TVET (technical and vocational education), safety protocols, and micro-entrepreneur training to be uniformly understood and implemented. In contrast, African settings often feature dozens of local languages. This linguistic fragmentation makes standardized learning tools difficult to deliver.

Lesson for Africa: exploring national or regional lingua francas—like enhanced use of French, English, or Hausa in formalizing training—could empower informal workers everywhere, even in rural areas. Reinforcing a shared language ecosystem supports sovereignty and educational inclusion across the informal workforce.

Kaizen in Micro-Scaling, Not Mass Scaling: Western donors (the USA, Europe) often push large-scale programs like multi-million-dollar manufacturing hubs, requiring rigid contracts and centralized oversight. China and India have extended infrastructure or agro-tech, typically through mega-projects tied to corporate interests.

Japan, however, excels in *incremental improvement*. Its ethos—Kaizen—emphasizes small, locally driven upgrades: a more durable vendor stall, improved hygiene practice, or a community savings group. These bite-size upgrades build resilience among micro-entrepreneurs without pushing them out of their own practices.

Quiet, Trust-Based Diplomacy Over Extractive Deals: Chinese and Indian investments often come with strings attached—loans tied to resource concessions, or infrastructure projects overseen by foreign firms. Western agencies tend toward short timelines or high expectations for scalability.

Japan's model tends toward long-term, low-profile trust-building: multi-year JICA engagements or municipality-level partnerships where local stakeholders remain central. This approach reduces dependency and enhances local ownership—yielding more sustainable outcomes.

TVET Access Across the Urban–Rural Divide: In sub-Saharan Africa, 95% of workers with no schooling—and 90% with only primary education—are in the informal sector. Many rural informal workers lack access to formal schooling or language instruction. The IMF Global Informal Workplace discusses the issue thoroughly[1].

Japan's national approach to TVET—combined with language-standard curricula—helps quality vocational training reach even remote areas. Africa could draw upon this by producing multilingual, context-sensitive TVET materials for informal entrepreneurs, all delivered locally (e.g., via mobile learning kiosks or community centers).

6. Contextualized Development Support for Informal Systems

Informal economies are often approached as transitional stages toward formality. Yet, as shown in the preceding chapters, they are full-fledged systems of resilience, innovation, and community organization. Development cooperation would benefit from investing in understanding and reinforcing these systems on their own terms. This section outlines a non-exhaustive set of practical, adaptable support models that can be co-designed and explored within Africa–Japan partnerships to strengthen informal systems without displacing their internal logic. These interventions are organized by theme to reflect a holistic, multi-sectoral approach.

6.1 Financial Tools Rooted in Trust and Equity

Effective financial inclusion cannot rely solely on conventional banking mechanisms. Instead, support models should build upon systems that informal actors already use—and trust.

- **ROSCAs (Rotating Savings and Credit Associations)**: Widespread across African communities, these informal group savings mechanisms operate on trust, where each member contributes regularly and takes turns receiving a lump sum. ROSCAs already serve as a financial backbone in informal ecosystems and can be enhanced through mobile payments, digital recordkeeping, or links to matched-savings or insurance products.

[1] https://www.elibrary.imf.org/display/book/9781513575919/ch008.xml#:~:text=Introduction,the%20share%20is%2072%20percent.

- **Community-Based Health Insurance (CBHI)** [2]: Pooling small contributions at the community level enables informal workers to access essential healthcare. According to the ILO's policy framework on supporting informal workers, CBHI schemes are a proven model of grassroots protection, particularly effective in reaching low-income, informally employed populations where public or private insurance is inaccessible. Their participatory design reinforces social cohesion and can be scaled or adapted through local partnerships and capacity support.
- **Grameen Microfinance Model**: Pioneered in Bangladesh, this model provides collateral-free loans to groups—often women—for small-scale income-generating activities. Its peer accountability and repayment structure align well with informal networks. Adapted versions could be explored to support youth and women-led ventures within Africa's informal economy.
- **Islamic Finance Principles** [3]: Islamic finance provides an alternative to conventional banking by emphasizing risk-sharing, real-asset investment, and ethical lending. According to UNDP, it can expand financial inclusion for MSMEs and informal enterprises by focusing on the strength of business ideas and entrepreneurial capacity rather than collateral or personal credit. Instruments such as asset-backed securities and shared-investment partnerships can help mobilize resources and fund informal sector innovation. While rooted in Muslim-majority contexts, the underlying principles—such as fairness, risk-sharing, and social responsibility—offer relevant insights for designing inclusive financing models in diverse cultural settings.

6.2 Capacity Building and Innovation Spaces

- **Tankyu Practice**: Tankyu (探究) cultivates discovery-based problem solving and solution design rooted in context. Training young people—especially in informal ecosystems—to develop Tankyu mindsets could help shape adaptive, socially grounded micro-enterprises. While ideal for early education, Tankyu can also be applied in technical training, incubation hubs, and even adult learning programs.
- **Mobile-Based Microlearning**: Informal workers, many of whom have limited access to formal schooling, benefit from learning systems that use SMS or USSD codes to deliver training in local languages—ranging from hygiene and customer care to pricing strategies and digital literacy.
- **PPP Incubation Hubs**: Local governments, informal entrepreneurs, and tech partners can co-design simple tools for informal sectors: e.g., portable fridges for

[2] International Labor Organization, "Supporting Workers in the Informal Economy - A Policy Note" February, 2002

[3] United Nations Development Program, "Mapping Successful Financing Strategies and Models for MSMEs and Informal Sector Enterprises" December 2021

fish vendors, digital payment systems, or traceability apps for waste collectors.

- **Micro-Kaizen Upgrades**: Drawing from Japan's tradition of continuous small improvements, small, community-driven improvements—such as water stations, shared sanitation, solar lighting, or better vendor stalls—can significantly improve health, dignity, and productivity in informal markets, without disrupting autonomy.

6.3 Collaborative Research and Cultural Valorization

- **Ethnographic Research Labs**: Joint Africa–Japan research centers can study the internal logic of informal systems—apprenticeship chains, self-regulation, local market norms—and produce frameworks for respectful engagement and policy design.
- **Preservation & Enhancement of Local Savoir-Faire**: Traditional craft, healing, or agricultural knowledge often thrives within informal systems. Japan has a rich history of valuing and institutionalizing such know-how—from *monozukuri* to cultural preservation efforts. Similarly, mapping, archiving, and even exhibiting African know-how can boost local pride and cultural capital. It can enhance its value locally and globally, supporting both identity and innovation, while informing supply chain upgrades and curriculum development. Outcomes may include digital archives, local exhibitions, or even museum-style documentation.

6.4 Institutional and Policy Innovation

- **Joint Informal Economy Policy Labs**: Local governments and academic partners can pilot new forms of collaboration with informal actors, generating data, policy feedback loops, and adaptive governance strategies.
- **Technology Transfer with Local Adaptation**: Japan's high-quality tools can be introduced with adaptation mechanisms—ensuring affordability, repairability, and local control rather than one-size-fits-all deployment.

7. Conclusion: A Call for Mutual Imagination

Africa–Japan relations stand at a generational crossroads. The question is not what one can do for the other, but what both can create together. Africa brings youth, improvisation, and untapped potential. Japan offers process, foresight, and trusted engagement.

Let us then imagine a different future—one not bound by precedent but propelled by mutual respect and shared curiosity. A future where cooperation is not charity, but co-authorship. Where youth are not a problem to be solved, but the writers of the next chapter.