

Remarks by His Excellency Paul KAGAME, President of the Republic of Rwanda, at the Science and Technology in Society Forum on “Collaboration Between Developed and Developing Countries”, 29 May 2008, Yokohama, Japan

- 🇷🇼 Honourable Koji Omi, Chairman and Founder of Science and Technology in Society Forum;
- 🇷🇼 Excellencies;
- 🇷🇼 Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen;

I am delighted to participate in this STS Forum on “Science and Technology Collaboration between Developed and Developing Countries”.

I am pleased to be among leaders in government, industry, academia and development institutions from Japan, Africa and beyond to reflect on this critical subject matter – especially on the occasion of the fourth Tokyo International Conference on African Development.

Discussion on African development would be incomplete without reflection on how Africans and our partners can jointly boost and enable science and technology to accelerate transformation, create prosperity and improve lives.

It is not news that Africa lags behind in science and technology.

You may be familiar with the fact that education generally suffered as a result of instability, conflict and socioeconomic decline or even collapse in much of Africa from the 1970s up to the 1990s.

Curricula became outdated – losing focus in strengthening science and mathematics, omitting problem-solving outlook, and overlooking the need to align training with job market demands.

Development assistance also contributed to imbalances in Africa’s education sector – higher education was categorised as a luxury Africa could not afford.

The combination of these factors severely affected all sectors but hit tertiary education particularly hard, compelling the best and brightest African professionals to seek opportunities outside the continent.

However, it is no longer gloom and doom on our continent; in what amounts to a quiet revolution – because it is not beamed on international TV screens as regularly as images of conflict and disaster, Africa has turned around.

Increased stability and greatly improved economic performance on the continent are leading to institutional re-generation including education reform – which enables the positioning of science and technology back on the national agenda.

Civil society, domestic business communities, expanding foreign investment, as well as public sectors are provoking demand for more skill and talent.

The extraordinary impact of information and community technology has also changed Africa, although this potential is not yet fully realised due to digital isolation caused by connectivity and broadband challenges.

The increasing economic relationships between Asia and Africa are also bringing about new partnerships and the sharing of new experiences.

Further, Africa's development partners now understand the critical importance of supporting tertiary education, especially science and technology.

These new factors present us with an opportune moment for strengthening existing networks and building new ones that can make a big difference in fostering a vibrant science and technology in Africa.

Let me emphasize that collaboration is a vital and a well-established practice historically – almost all countries have at one time or another benefitted from those that are more scientifically and technologically advanced.

The initial phase of collaboration between developed and developing countries would necessarily involve catching up by tackling the essentials, such as strengthening existing education institutions; building basic infrastructure such as laboratories and libraries in universities and other knowledge centres; revamping curricula to give science and technology higher priority; and contributing to creation of a critical mass of strategic knowledge, especially PhDs in sciences, engineers and researchers.

However this journey need not be a one-way street.

There are numerous hidden opportunities in Africa for scientists and innovators from the developed world like Japan.

These include the continent's unique and mostly unexplored biodiversity that can not only engage scientific curiosity, but also generate wealth for investors, local communities, and national economies.

Permit me to share the story of coffee in Rwanda, and how a network of individuals in our country and abroad quite literally revolutionised the sector benefitting whole communities in a short period.

This case fits very well with the objectives of STS that revolve around creation of human networks and "removal of barriers to using science and technology to solve problems facing human kind".

Coffee used to be a low performing sector in which raw beans were exported to mass markets unprocessed, with little benefits accruing to farmers.

Several actors came together – a local university, an American university, a poor farming community, a government ministry, and a development agency that supported this joint effort.

Collaborative research established the fact that Rwandan coffee could fetch much higher returns if exported into a more sophisticated speciality niche.

This led to adoption of better production methods including value-addition by processing more parts of coffee value chain locally, resulting in drastically increased incomes and savings for the farmers, as well as changed mindsets towards hard work and pride in their occupation.

When this product reached the market in the United States, it was found to be the best in the world, leading to the entry of Starbucks as well as other trading chains into the Rwandan coffee industry.

The latest in this success story is that Starbucks is setting up in Rwanda a regional training centre for coffee farmers from Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Burundi, and of course Rwanda, motivated by the increasing conducive business environment in our country.

The lesson of this story is in keeping with STS advocates, namely that science and technology have the powers to solve problems facing human kind, and no part of our world should be left behind.

There are similar scenarios along these lines waiting to happen in Africa and in Rwanda in areas including, but not limited to, renewable energy, tropical diseases, biotechnology, agro-processing, water conservation and rain water harvesting.

I end by once again thanking and congratulating STS for organising this special forum on North-South collaboration in science and technology. Africa and Rwanda look forward to partnering with the Japanese scientific community, government and businesses to enable science and technology to play its rightful role of improving lives.

I THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION