

POINT OF VIEW / Masaru Todoroki and Djibril Diallo

Asia-Africa youth ties could spike up benefits

Presidents and prime ministers from several Asian and African countries recently took the world stage by addressing the United Nations General Assembly in New York.

But the next generation of leaders from these two continents also had their say, during the Pan-Asian Youth Leadership Summit held Sept. 19-21 in Hiroshima.

There, they crafted a game plan to help cut poverty, promote business development, encourage the empowerment of women, counter environmental degradation, reduce HIV-infection rates and prevent the spread of the disease in their regions.

Young leaders from 35 countries gathered for the summit to map out strategies to help their regions achieve the eight Millennium Development Goals agreed to by world leaders in 2000. The goals call for a set of time-bound and measurable goals to combat poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy, environmental degradation and discrimination against women.

The Hiroshima summit culminated in the adoption of a declaration in which the delegates called on the leaders of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, Pacific Island Forum States and South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation to receive and act on their recommendations.

They committed themselves to doing everything they can to help achieve the goals in Asia and the Pacific and to establishing coalitions with youth in other regions.

They have already started building bridges with young Africans, whose Pan-African Youth Leadership Summit triggered a series of regional youth conferences organized by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Millennium Campaign and the Global Peace Initiative of Women in June in Dakar, Senegal.

Young delegates came to Dakar

from virtually every country in Africa and were joined by an international delegation of young people from Europe, North America and Asia.

The deepest and most lasting connections were made between the Asian and African delegates.

For example, a friendship forged between Fred Phiri, a Zambian delegate to the Dakar Summit, and Kwan Chinachote, a participant from Thailand, led to the creation of a new Web site to appear in November. The site will be a news source for development challenges and solutions, a forum for young people to air their views and an impetus to encourage youth to participate in development and policy decision-making.

Ten young Africans also traveled to Hiroshima to participate in the gathering of Asian youth.

The Hiroshima summit kicked off Asia-Pacific 2015, a campaign to bolster efforts to achieve the goals in the region. A Pan-American Youth Leadership Summit is planned for Brazil in early 2005.

Common cultural values

The new connections among Asian and African youth are extremely timely. More than ever before, Asia is cultivating stronger ties with African nations. This makes good sense for both regions.

Although rich in natural resources, Africa continues to grapple with the devastating consequences of HIV/AIDS, poverty and armed conflict and remains largely unable to take advantage of the benefits of globalization. African countries, therefore, need the expertise and increased investment that Asia can offer. For their part, Asian countries, with 60 percent of the world's population and some of the best performing developing economies in the last 40 years, often lack the minerals and other natural resources that are so abundant in Africa.

Another factor is that the two

continents may have more common cultural values than either shares with Western nations.

China, India and Japan have initiated significant economic projects in Africa, leading the way to what could emerge as a major strategic alliance as Africa seeks to develop its industrial, transportation, telecommunications and high-tech sectors.

UNDP has advocated this partnership, organizing Asia-Africa business summits to generate trade and economic investment. Ensuring that a new generation of entrepreneurs—whose vision goes beyond historical relationships—is poised to take the mantle is key.

The next generation, which, thanks to communications technologies, is equipped with a much broader global perspective than previous generations, is readying itself to accept the challenge. This message came through loud and clear during the Pan-Asian Youth Leadership Summit.

Among the participants in Hiroshima were Pham Thi Thanh Nhung, who raises awareness about environmental issues in Vietnam by organizing student clean-up campaigns, training courses, painting competitions and community forums.

Also there was Phonsalin Cheutching Thao, a staff member of Health Unlimited RHIYA (Reproductive Health Initiative for Youth in Asia) in Laos. Thao is getting young people in her country to talk about reproductive health.

Also on hand were Sachin Pilot, India's youngest member of Parliament, and Nandita Das, a movie star from India who uses her acting talent to dramatize the plight of women and children.

As the young people who came together in Hiroshima seek to enhance their connections, there is much their governments can do to support them. Partnerships among these young people are key to achiev-

ing development goals.

To this end, we propose the establishment of an Asia-Africa Youth Fund centered on programs to bring young Africans to Asia for training and to send young Asian professionals to Africa for field work. The fund will also create a mechanism through which young people in Asia and Africa can assess how their communities are doing and set up specific partnership projects between African and Asian youth. Also in the works are exchanges between African and Asian artists and sports figures who are mobilizing their communities.

The governments of Senegal and Thailand were the first to support this effort to bring young people to the forefront in the Millennium Development Goals campaign.

Linking youth of 2 continents

Thailand's prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, sent a letter of support to the African delegates gathered in Dakar. After hosting the Pan-African Youth Leadership Summit, President Abdoulaye Wade dispatched his minister of youth, Aliou Sow, a young person himself, to the Hiroshima summit. The governments of Equatorial Guinea and Morocco have also come forward to pledge their support.

We call upon the governments of Asia and Pacific countries to urgently engage young people in this worldwide campaign, and to strengthen the burgeoning partnership with Africa by finding new and creative ways to link together the youth of two continents. It is critical to all our futures.

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