
Of Leading with Precision, Discipline, and Intent: The Tale of My Incredible Journey in Japan

...by Isaiah Chikurunhe

My stay and training in Hokkaido, Japan was incredible, bringing together 12 participants from Azerbaijan, Egypt, Ghana, Kenya, Morocco, Mozambique, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zimbabwe. We participated in the Knowledge Co-Creation Program course, 'Maintenance, Operation and Management of Irrigation Facilities (A)' from June 16 to July 26, 2024.



Before embarking on this journey, I used to plan my day in advance and I was excited, but in Japan we had our whole 40-day journey carefully planned out with immense precision, for instance, the time to start or finish, the time for transport and the mode was well spelt out. It was incredible to have full control of one's time, with punctuality and discipline at the forefront.

For 40 days we endeavoured to understand agriculture in Hokkaido, that enjoys a calorie-based food self-sufficiency ratio above 200% annually. To experience first-hand how the rural development drive can be initiated, we travelled as a group back in time to 1909 when the Irrigation Association law allowed for the formation of Water Users Associations, appreciated formulation of Land improvement Act of 1949, and developed agricultural business leaders, with a solid foundation in enhanced production.

Fast forward to 2024, we were fascinated by the wisdom and progress of the Small Holder Empowerment and Promotion (SHEP) approach developed in Kenya through JICA's technical cooperation. Stock management, which emphasises extending functional life of our irrigation facilities for sustainable management, was also another key takeaway from the training.



I would like to appreciate the courage of the Japanese Experts and expats who went to the extent of revealing even the environmental implications of the existing models that have been proposed over time. Naturally when a host receives guests in their home, they would exercise caution and be conservative regarding their past mistakes and current challenges for fear of being condemned, but for a close friend/ family one would willingly confide and share all the intricate detail. Japan was that friend to us as their counterpart, showing the paradox of how the modified habitat for indigenous crayfish has for the mean time been uninhabited by this species in a particular model.



On the other hand, the success story of how the Japanese have constructed an eco-friendly bridge in protection of the habitat of Siberian flying squirrel called Momonga was enlightening. It awakened us to the major role we play as development agents, not to sacrifice our natural ecosystems in the name of a successful project. It left us determined to exercise due care and guidance going forward, and to endeavour to promote eco-friendly, prosperous agricultural operations and lifestyles in our respective countries.



It was quite heartwarming to experience the hospitality of the team in Japan throughout our stay. They were very intentional about giving us a holistic experience of Japanese culture, cuisine, tradition, and hospitality second to none, right from the airport. I am grateful for the special tea ceremony that was done at the beginning of our training, it made us feel very welcome. Another good hospitality takeaway was the bathroom experience, where the light would turn on when one opens the door, when one goes past the seat, it would open automatically, flashes and pre-warms, and a waving gesture would be sensed when exiting. The cherry on top was that we enjoyed space in the prime-time news of Hokkaido National TV. It was encouraging to know that the people's contribution to this collaboration is well received and channelled to good use.



I extend my sincere gratitude to our governments, companies, employers who facilitated our presence in Japan, and to the families of the participants who endured long calls in the weird hours, due to the difference in time zones. Their sacrifice was to a worthy cause, to see wealth transfer in the form of knowledge and to experience friendship from the heart of the Japanese people to that of our own. My sincere gratitude also goes to the dedicated team, our course leader, interpreter, facilitator and the entire JICA team for the impeccable transfer of knowledge, and their hard work, support, and guidance that led to our collective success. A problem that is well articulated is half solved, we transcended this moment and came up with solutions for issues faced. We completed our training equipped with an armour of fully developed action plans to implement in our respective countries, and hopeful that our environments will never be the same again. At the end of my stay, I had a huge smile on my face, and all I thought of was, **'Nihon e kite yokatta desu' (I am glad I came to Japan).**