NEPAD adopts Japanese productivity improvement concept

Africa is traditionally seen as a continent beset with strife, turmoil and economic hardships that are largely but not solely borne out of challenges brought about by decades of colonialism.

The colonialism of Africa follows the so called “Scramble for Africa which saw the occupation, division, and colonisation of African territory by European powers during the period of the New Imperialism, between 1881 and 1914”.

A host of African countries started to gain independence from their former colonial rulers in the 1960s. The transition into independence by and large saw a tumultuous period which was often characterised by a continent at war.

By the 1990s through efforts from organisations amongst others such as the The New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD), an economic development program of the African Union (AU), enabled the continent to move away from being a war torn continent towards one that focuses on the economic growth and industrialisation of Africa.

One of the international bodies that is working closely with NEPAD in the new millennia towards this objective is the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). JICA is a Japanese governmental agency that coordinates official development assistance for the government of Japan. JICA is tasked by the Japanese government with assisting economic and social growth in developing countries, and the promotion of international cooperation.

JICA has introduced and promoted Kaizen in nine countries on the African continent as a tool of quality and productivity improvement. According to JICA’s Deputy Director, Private Sector Development Group Industrial Development and Public Policy Development, Ms Suzuki Momoko, “Kaizen is a Japanese management philosophy which can improve quality and productivity, reduce time and cost, and increase productivity within companies”.

“Kaizen is primarily implemented within the manufacturing sector however it is adaptable to various sectors including the services sector and personal lives. The concept is about inculcating a sense of value and measurement in all tasks. Kaizen is not limited to simple management techniques, but it is essentially the process where everyone in an organization maintains an attitude to consistently pursue advanced levels of quality and productivity (Improvement of job quality)”
Speaking at the 3rd Africa Kaizen Annual Conference, held in Durban, South Africa in 2018, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of NEPAD, Dr Ibrahim Assane Mayaki said at the time "one of the themes at the sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD VI) held in Kenya was “the potential contribution of Kaizen in Africa’s development”.

The theme which had earlier been endorsed at the 35th NEPAD HSGOC in Kigali, Rwanda in July 2016, has been acknowledged by the African Union member states as an important approach in advancing enhanced performance in the development efforts.

In line with these political commitments, NEPAD Agency and JICA have collaborated in establishing the “Africa Kaizen Initiative”. The initiative aims to contribute to the realization of Agenda 2063, striving for transformed, inclusive and sustainable economies. NEPAD and JICA aim to promote the application of Kaizen in African countries through a mutual learning process of theory and practice of current Kaizen activities and to encourage a dialogue on the impact of Kaizen practices in Africa.

The key public relations objectives also include reaching people who may potentially benefit from Kaizen; and to have Kaizen practices implemented in not only in manufacturing, but also business management and individuals’ homes and lives.

The initiative draws upon four key strategies;

(i) advocacy at policy levels,
(ii) standardizing Kaizen in Africa,
(iii) identifying and strengthening the functions of centers of excellence, and
(iv) promoting the Kaizen approach in Africa.
Networking with Kaizen promoting institutions in Africa and around the world.

To date JICA has implemented JICA’s Kaizen projects in nine African countries including Cameroon, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania, Tunisia and Zambia. The implementation of Kaizen in some of the African countries follows a model that sees the formation of a Kaizen Institute in the country.

Key sectors that have seen the implementation of Kaizen Institute in the nine countries include the marketing and services sector. Basically Kaizen implementation sees the Kaizen Institute approach companies operating with the key focus sector and offer to implement the Kaizen concept at a government subsided cost within the company. The primary aim of the implementation of the Kaizen concept within a selected company is to enable the company to implement methodologies that will improve the company’s productivity.

A team of Kaizen experts and consultant will conduct an assessment of the company thereby identifying key areas that may hamper the productivity of the company. In order to identify and tackle bottlenecks that affects the efficiencies within the company, the Kaizen team at inception will apply basic Kaizen Concepts such as 5S and for Productivity Improvement.

The fundamental aim for the Application of Japanese 5s and Kaizen Concepts for Productivity Improvement is to ensure improved the competitiveness of model companies. On the micro level the uptake of the Kaizen concept by the companies sees improvement in efficiencies of the company thereby enabling growth of the bottom line within the companies and general success of the companies.

On the macro level and when applied to a host of companies within a sector in a particular country, the growth and prosperity of those companies ultimately contribute to the growth of that sector and enhancing economic growth within the country.

To ensure the success of the “Africa Kaizen Initiative” NEPAD has setup a secretariat (Kaizen-Unit) at its headquarters in South Africa devoted to Kaizen. JICA has commissioned a study on “Standardizing Kaizen Approach in Africa” as initial process to implement the initiative.

During the sixth Tokyo International Conference of African Development (TICAD VI) in 2016, Kaizen was highlighted as a promising method in raising productivity, improving standard and ensuring total quality management in production.

Directory of the Kaizen team at NEPAD, Dr Diran Makinde says “Although the implementation of Kaizen concepts is relatively in its infancy in some African countries, countries that have adopted Kaizen has responded and improvement in productivity”. Dr Makinde NEPAD expects to see more countries involved in the Kaizen project.”