



A·P·O *news*

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Productivity will always matter

An interview with the APO Secretary-General

In mid-September this year, Mr. Takashi Tajima will complete his second and final term as the APO Secretary-General. Throughout his six-year tenure, he has been actively involved in the work and development of the APO. In an interview with the APO News, he spoke about what he was able to achieve as Secretary-General (SG), future challenges to the organization as well as those of the NPOs in member countries, and the productivity movement in the region. Excerpts:

■ What do you regard as the major achievements of the APO during your term as SG?

In my annual report to the recent Governing Body Meeting in Yogyakarta, I mentioned some of the reforms and changes that I had initiated during my tenure as SG. As the July 2004 issue of the *APO News* carried a good summary of them, I will not repeat them. There are, however, a few other initiatives that I would like to highlight here. One was the relentless public relations efforts undertaken to make the APO better known in the region, particularly in Japan, and around the world, for example, the introduction of the Japanese edition of the *APO News* and the many news features about the APO in journals and newspapers. Our international profile was enhanced when we celebrated the 40th anniversary in 2001 with an International Productivity Conference in Singapore and when we participated in the UN World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg, South Africa, 2002. I believe that as the APO becomes better known and its mission more widely appreciated, it will help in propagating the productivity movement in the region as well as in generating support for NPOs in member countries as they drive their national productivity movements. The formation of the Green Productivity Advisory Committee, which involves Japanese private-sector corporations in the APO Environment Program, especially in greening supply chains in the region, is another example of APO activities which I believe will be an invaluable asset to the APO.



Mr. Takashi Tajima

■ What has given you the greatest personal satisfaction during that time?

At the top of the list must be the support and cooperation that member countries and Secretariat staff members have accorded me so generously, which enabled me to carry out those changes and reforms in the APO I thought necessary. The admission of Cambodia and Laos as new APO members was another high point in my tenure as it signifies the expansion of the productivity movement in Asia and the Pacific. For the region as a whole to be truly developed, all countries in it have to move together on the path to growth and prosperity.

■ Has your perception of the APO's mission and role changed since becoming SG?

The role of the APO is even more important today than when I first came onboard. It has expanded in scope and reach, as reflected in the three-pillared vision of strengthening of competitiveness, harmonization of productivity increases

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"It is always easier to talk about change than to make it. It is easier to consult than to manage."

Alvin Toffler

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with environmental protection, and maintenance of social fairness. The thrust areas were expanded and updated during my tenure to respond better to the changing needs of member countries. We have become a global player, although on a very modest scale, having participated in and actively supported the follow-up activities of, for example, the WSSD and World Water Forum, among others.

■ **What was the biggest difficulty faced by the organization during your tenure?**

The combined impact of a series of events over the past few years has shrunk the national economies of some of our member countries. Others were affected more indirectly. I am referring to the persistent Japanese economic recession, Asian financial crisis of 1997, the outbreak of SARS in 2002, and the recent avian flu epidemic, which seems to be making a comeback. All this has undermined member countries' contributions to the APO, especially in the hosting of APO projects, as funds become scarcer. With productivity enhancement as a major strategy in resolving the above-mentioned crises, it was difficult to know the amount of work that needed to be done while not having enough resources to do it all. Happily, the countries worst affected have recovered and are well on the growth path again. It is my hope that before long member countries will be able to do more for the APO for the greater benefit of everyone.

■ **Do you think that the APO should reinvent itself to stay viable and useful to member countries?**

One consequence of globalization and liberalization is a widening of disparity in development between countries and between economic sectors in the same country. To help the affected countries deal with the situation, more country-wise strategies will have to be established. The publication *APO Asia-Pacific Productivity Data and Analysis* should be used more extensively for this purpose.

■ **Do you think that the APO should expand its role to include helping nurture productivity movements in other regions?**

The work of the APO has become known outside



Mr. Tajima with APO participants on a field visit in Japan

the Asia-Pacific region, like Africa and Latin America. We have received many requests for information and assistance from countries in these regions. As far as we can, we should share our experience and know-how with them. Having said this, within the Asia-Pacific region itself, there are still many countries that we should bring into the APO family so that we can support their developmental efforts. Myanmar, Brunei, and Central Asian countries are some examples.

■ **You have always had a special concern for the NPOs of member countries. What is your perception of them now?**

The NPOs in general have become stronger since my first acquaintance with them six years ago. Despite this, however, some will still require substantial support, particularly from their governments, to strengthen further their capabilities and capacities. We must understand that the productivity movement of a country will only be as strong as its NPO. During my visits to member countries, I always tried my best to solicit the support of senior governmental leaders for the NPOs. We have seen some very encouraging results. In the Secretariat, we have also increased the number of projects under the Development of NPOs Program, including helping member countries facilitate national roundtable conferences (RTCs) to generate support for the productivity movement in general and the NPO in particular from government agencies, employer organizations, trade unions, and academia. To mention only recent cases,

both Indonesia and Laos have held very successful RTCs.

■ **What do you envision will be the major socioeconomic and productivity issues facing APO member countries in the near future?**

Productivity will always form the basis for socioeconomic development. As an economy grows and develops, there will be new problems, issues, and challenges to deal with. The important thing is to grasp what they are quickly so that appropriate and timely responses can be made. Environmental issues will continue to need attention. IT should be further harnessed to improve work operations and productivity. There is an absolute need to increase the productivity of the agriculture and public sectors, as the focus in the past and even the present has largely been on the manufacturing sector. Free trade agreements and economic partnership agreements are current trends at the macroeconomic level in this region. The micro-level activities of the APO should also reflect this situation to remain relevant and useful.

■ **What are your plans after leaving the APO?**

My service in the APO has greatly increased my understanding and knowledge of countries in the Asia-Pacific region. I want to continue to build on this valuable insight. I hope to be able to do more to promote and sustain international cooperation and friendship—politically, economically, and culturally.