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sustainable japan

Peo Ekberg's fair trade company pioneers solutions from the inside

From banana stems, One Planet Cafe grows change

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For sustainability producer Peo Ekberg, the smallest change can be an exciting chance to make a difference in the world, and his enthusiasm inspires and motivates those around him.

Originally from Sweden, Ekberg has been working in Japan's sustainability sector for more than 20 years. Together with his wife, Satoko, he runs one of Japan's first fair trade-verified companies, One Planet Cafe, training companies in sustainability basics, SDGs and strategy, while producing a fair trade-labeled paper made from banana waste.

"There are two major ways to approach sustainability. One way is from the outside, protesting or talking about greenwashing. This is how I started my career," he said with candor. "The other way is working from



Products made out of banana tree stems

HIROMICHI MATONO

inside with companies and the government. After all, executives and officials are people and they have children, too." Ekberg is now taking the latter approach, emphasizing positive solutions rather than problems.

Small steps, big differences

One Planet Cafe's Japan office is based in the World Gate building in Tokyo's Toranomon Hills district, utilizing WeWork Japan's coworking space there. Efforts from Ekberg have been the catalyst for two sustainability initiatives in the office environment.

As vegetarians, Ekberg and his wife were keen to see some nonmeat options on the menu at WeWork's cafe in the building.

After speaking with the cafe operators and pointing out how meatless meals can contribute to sustainability, they were invited to contribute their ideas. They developed a vegan taco rice together, now the best-selling item on the entire menu.

Moreover, when Ekberg learned that WeWork was going through 2.6 million sheets of copy paper annually, he started a conversation with the admin team about sourcing a more eco-friendly option. Their collective efforts led to a switch to FSC-certified paper. (The FSC, or Forest Stewardship Council, is a multi-stakeholder organization that promotes responsible management of the world's forests.) WeWork's management liked the initiative so much that they eventually rolled it out at all their co-working spaces across Japan.

Environmental stewardship is now Ekberg's main mission in life, but growing up in Sweden he had another passion: soccer. In fact, he set three world records for soccer juggling (freestyle) while still a teenager.

These included heading and double juggling, whereby two people trade off times juggling the ball with only their feet and head. While Ekberg's soccer days are behind him, he is very much on the ball when it comes to finding opportunities to connect with people.

Talk, show, do

One Planet Cafe is celebrating a decade in business. Asked about the inspiration behind the name, Ekberg laughed and admitted that some people mistakenly assume he is running some kind of restaurant. "The first part of our name — One Planet — means to connect globally. Local connections are also very important, but we can't forget about the rest of the world," he explained. "And Cafe, is a place where people can come together and talk about solutions."

With bases in Zambia, Sweden and Japan, One Planet Cafe's activities on sustainability can be broadly divided into what Ekberg refers to as the "three main pillars": talk (lectures and training) show (study tours); do (SDG tools and banana paper). The first two involve working with individuals and companies to discuss and implement environmentally friendly solutions, including leading study tours to Sweden and Zambia to allow people to experience things firsthand. One Planet has worked with some of Japan's leading companies, including Fujitsu, Kao, Lush and Seven & I Holdings.

The third pillar, producing banana paper, is the heart and soul of Ekberg's efforts to show how sustainable practices can help an entire community. The business was born from a visit to South Luangwa National Park in Zambia with his wife to see the wild ani-



HIROMICHI MATONO

mals there. The people in the area were living in extreme poverty, some cutting trees for fuel to cook with and even hunting some wildlife, including endangered species like elephants and lions. The Ekbergs searched for a way to provide the people with a decent living while also protecting the natural environment.

"We found the answer in the banana farms there, and we collaborate with the farmers. The trees grow 3 to 5 meters, but after harvesting one bunch of bananas, they need to cut it back to allow a new banana tree to grow, and they throw the stems away. So we buy the stems from the farmers," he explained.

It takes a village

One Planet Cafe subsequently established a "green factory" near South Luangwa, employing 25 local people to extract the fibers from the banana stems. These fibers are then used to make handmade paper and cards in Zambia, and high quality machine-made fair trade paper in Japan and the United Kingdom. The paper is one of the first climate-positive papers, and is used in a wide variety of products, including notebooks, packaging, certificates and coat hangers.

The local workers in Zambia come from areas of extreme poverty and now receive a fair living wage and multiple benefits

Japan lists OPC as best practice

Peo Ekberg was born in Malmö, Sweden. After a theoretical-practical education in journalism in Sweden, he began a career as a journalist. He came to Japan during a round-the-world trip and decided to stay. After obtaining a journalist visa, he began working for the media and as a consultant on sustainable practices. During more than 20 years in the field in Japan, Ekberg has worked with universities, companies and municipalities, leading workshops and study tours and introducing best practices from Sweden, Zambia and Japan. He has also served as a navigator for Japanese radio and television shows about the environment. Ekberg and his wife established their company One Planet Cafe in 2012 with a mission statement to reduce poverty and environmental problems through positive business solutions. In 2020 it was recognized by the economy ministry as one of Japan's 15 top examples of best practices for small and medium-size companies working toward the United Nations' 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs).

such as insurance, bonuses, paid education, micro-credit loans and paid days off, which are far from standard for most employees in the area. Ekberg points out that there has been a ripple effect, with the banana paper project now benefiting over 1,000 people in the area. Four children of team members have been able to enter university — a rare thing. With an eye to the future, Ekberg is pleased that Japan's young people are concerned about making a difference in their world. In a recent survey among Gen Z about work preferences at ethical companies, One Planet Cafe was recognized as one of the most desirable firms for new job seekers, ranking alongside famous names such as The Body Shop, Patagonia and Lush. "For me, it felt like a dream come true, as companies like these have been my inspiration," Ekberg said with palpable pride.

Eisai is resolved to treat, end neglected tropical diseases

Mission: Sustainability

OSAMU INOUE
RENEWS

On June 23, a battle against what are known as neglected tropical diseases (NTDs) got underway in Kigali, the capital of Rwanda in East Africa. One of the targets under the United Nations' sustainable development goals is: "By 2030, end the epidemics of AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria and neglected tropical diseases and combat hepatitis, water-borne diseases and other communicable diseases."

In June, a summit was held in Kigali on eradicating NTDs and malaria, attended by heads of state including the presidents of Rwanda and Botswana and the prime minister of Jamaica, as well as the United Kingdom's Prince Charles and Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation co-Chair Melinda French Gates. Governments, international organizations, private-sector support organizations and businesses signed the Kigali Declaration, which calls for spending over \$4 billion on controlling the diseases.

The declaration calls for multiple global pharmaceutical companies to donate large amounts of preventive and treatment drugs. Participating from Japan in this endeavor was Eisai Co.

Top sustainable companies

Eisai's consolidated net sales totaled ¥756.2 billion (\$5.7 billion) for the fiscal year that ended in March 2022. The figure places the company sixth among Japan's pharmaceutical companies, yet Eisai has a strong presence in the global arena. That is because it is well known in the areas of ESG and sustainability.

Every year, a Canadian investment research company selects the world's 100 most sustainable corporations whose sales total at least \$1 billion. In the 2022 ranking, Eisai was selected for the sixth time and was the only Japanese pharmaceutical company on the list. Moreover, Eisai's efforts in developing and emerging countries are recognized in the Access to Medicine Index published by the Netherlands' Access to Medicine Foundation. Eisai remained in the global top 20 of the index for 2021, placing 11th, the second-highest ranking among Japanese companies.

The company has also put efforts into indirect initiatives to contribute to sustainability. Still, its most significant contribution is its



Eisai's treatment and preventive drug for lymphatic filariasis is being mass-administered.

endeavors to help achieve the sustainable development goal of "Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages."

Lymphatic filariasis

One of the NTDs, lymphatic filariasis, is a disease in which parasitic filarial worms are transmitted by mosquitoes to humans. If not treated early, it can cause severe difficulties in living. Over 800 million people are estimated to be at risk of contracting the disease, mainly in emerging and developing countries, but preventive and treatment drugs have been in short supply globally.

What formed a significant obstacle to controlling the disease was one of the three types of drugs for its prevention and treatment, diethylcarbamazine citrate (DEC). DEC needs to be administered together with two other types of tablets annually for at least five years. The WHO recently said that, in a country where DEC tablets can be administered, the disease can be contained if all three types are administered together two times.

However, treatment drugs for NTDs are old medicines in advanced nations and thus not profitable. Eisai Chief Executive Officer Haruo Naito was serving as president of the International Federation of Pharmaceutical Manufacturers & Associations, headquartered in Geneva. While repeatedly communicating with the director-general of the WHO, Naito learned that the WHO wanted to control lymphatic filariasis, but there was an obstacle.

"At the time, Eisai had never manufactured DEC tablets," said Sayoko Sasaki, Eisai's vice president in charge of ESG-related operations. "And then Naito said, 'Donation is something that can be done by charitable organizations. What [Eisai] can do best as an R&D company is to stably supply high-quality drugs.' So we decided to develop and manufacture the drug at a new plant in India, which we were preparing to launch, and provide it for free around the world."

Long-term investment

When the London Declaration on Neglected Tropical Diseases — one of the largest public-private partnership initiatives in history — to control, eliminate or eradicate 10 NTDs was announced in 2012, Eisai, the only Japanese company to participate, pledged to supply 2.2 billion DEC tablets for free by 2020.

DEC tablets began shipping from the

Indian plant in October 2013. So far, the company has supplied a total of 2.05 billion tablets (equivalent of dosage for about 820 million people), contributing greatly to efforts to control lymphatic filariasis infections in Egypt, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Kiribati. Additionally, it provided on-site support for mass administration, installed sanitary water tanks and engaged in educational activities. "On our part, we are doing this, calling it a 'price zero' business, because we regard it as a long-term investment to contribute to correcting health disparities, eradicate diseases to help improve labor productivity and support growth of the medium-income bracket," said Sasaki.

By contributing to efforts to eliminate diseases, Eisai can boost local people's trust and its local presence. Eventually, as the economies of the target countries grow, Eisai presumes its business will grow there. There is no guarantee Eisai's efforts can bear such fruits in the future but Eisai's determination does not waver.

Eisai advances forward with the belief that what it is doing will not doubt lead to improving its corporate value in the future. What makes it do so is its corporate philosophy, which it has developed over the past three decades and is symbolized by the catchphrase "human health care." Eisai aims to work with the WHO. It may take a decade or two, but if neglected tropical diseases are eradicated from the planet, Eisai's fame will spread.

Scan the QR code to read the full article about Eisai's commitments to treat and end neglected tropical diseases.



Japan's startup landscape grows as it reaches abroad

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Japanese investors are opening up to and actively seeking investment opportunities from all around the world, and they are turning to new platforms for access to domestic and overseas startups. Together, these startups enjoy accelerated growth while partnered Japanese investors see strong returns in new industries or from companies leveraging new sustainable technologies applied to traditional industries.

Not only financial firms, but also government agencies and accelerators are increasing interest in foreign startups. Even Japanese universities are growing internal entities that focus on startups and innovation. Top institutions such as Tokyo University, Kyoto University and financial powerhouses like SMBC and MUFG are names recognized in this growing community. Naturally, many overseas startup representatives are visiting Tokyo to present ideas and search for funding opportunities.

Startups, together with an astute and savvy Japan investor base, are cultivating deeper ties and nurturing innovation in medical and financial technology, IoT and much more, fostering growth in these numerous areas and inspiring much-needed innovation in the Japanese economy.

With this growing interest in startups, events that lead to new connections and relationships are important. On March 17 of this year, a group of Israeli VCs presented their best selection of startups to interested Japanese and international thought leaders in Japan. Organized by Daniel Kolbar, Minister of Economic Affairs from the Embassy of Israel, and Joseph Bodenheimer, founder of Venture Invess, this event kicked off a series of meetings and exchanges.

"While the number of Israeli-based startups has increased dramatically, Japanese investors have eagerly embraced the corresponding opportunities. Note that 2021 saw a record of nearly 3 billion USD investment from Japan in Israeli high tech, representing nearly 16% of total foreign investment. The recent event provided a platform for startups and investors that accelerates the investment process and builds relationships. It was a pleasure co-hosting the event with Joseph Bodenheimer, and we look forward to continue working together," — Daniel Kolbar, Minister of Economic Affairs, Embassy of Israel.

"For any venture capitalists, including MPower Partners, Israel is a fascinating country to watch for its robust startup ecosystem. The event was immensely useful and informative, especially at a time when traveling was virtually impossible. We made many useful contacts and already look forward to future events," — Yumiko Murakami, general partner, MPower.

Friendly, culturally acceptable
Reading a pitch deck online has limited utility. Ultimately, meeting founders face-to-face to hear their story and feel their passion is incredibly important when investing in early-stage companies that are pre-revenue and still developing a minimum viable product.

For over 30 years, Japanese companies have been enamored with technology companies in Israel. Fostering a highly diplomatic relationship, Japan has interacted with Israel in a way that benefits both countries in the near and long terms. While there remain challenges to curating and tailoring endless waves of information on startups, a growing number of investor groups are eager to build relationships with actionable startup ideas directly or via venture capital groups.

Japan as a country is known for studying and deep-dive learning, which makes the vetting process a long one. However, once strong relationships and trust are established, opportunities and the subsequent actions come to fruition.

Makio Inui, a venture financier, added, "To those who have the toolkit to remove the veil of cultural eccentricity and communi-



Makio Inui, venture financier (left), and Joseph Bodenheimer JOSEPH BODENHEIMER

cation challenge posed by what is largely a monolingual society, the appeal of the Japanese startup asset class is irresistible. Smart money knows Japanese venture."

One noticeable change since Japan started opening up to business travel is the number of operators on the ground to facilitate and properly platform eager startup teams in their quest to reach out to local institutions. While this approach is effective, there are corresponding challenges as well. David Case, a venture capital attorney based in Silicon Valley, shared that "given the high rate of failure of startup companies, Japanese investors need to take additional steps to educate themselves about new technologies, early-stage companies and their founders, the competitive landscape and the company's growth prospects. Investors need quality information to make investment decisions."

It is becoming clear that a key component of making decisions from quality information is building a startup culture, one that encourages organizing meets, presentations, events and even user-friendly websites to enhance a deeper understanding of startups across the board.

While Japan has become a popular destination for global startups who seek to build mutually beneficial investor relationships, language barriers and cultural differences may still be a challenge. Startups that are patient, especially those committed to building strong interpersonal relationships, find success. We achieved our goal by building an investor ecosystem that is eager to engage and learn more about startups and their technologies. "Building a powerful ecosystem of thought leaders and investor relationships takes years but is well worth the effort, as Japanese engage and open up to those who embrace sustainability and long-term investments," said Bodenheimer.