

April 23, 2026

Japan's Development Cooperation in an Age of Population Decline: From Overseas Aid to Foreign Labor Incorporation

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1. The Blind Spot Revealed by JICA's Transformation: The Human Mobility Perspective

This report re-examines Japan's development cooperation policy from a demographic perspective and analyzes the country's history of receiving foreign human resources. Of particular interest in understanding the recent policy changes are the modifications in the role of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). Until now, JICA had been responsible for foreign international cooperation centered on Official Development Assistance (ODA). Recently, it also started supporting domestic initiatives related to receiving foreign personnel and promoting multicultural coexistence. This indicates that development cooperation is not merely a matter of foreign policy but is intimately linked to the demographic structure and labor supply problems of Japan.

Traditionally, development cooperation in Japan has been explained mainly in terms of economy, diplomacy, and security. Economically, it has been linked to the promotion of domestic industries, such as securing raw materials and expanding exports. Diplomatically, it has been positioned as a means of reinvesting trade surpluses internationally and fulfilling Japan's responsibilities as an economic power. In terms of security, it has been understood as a policy pertaining to the stabilization of the international order through non-military means such as conflict prevention and reconstruction support. However, these explanations do not sufficiently consider the "demographics" and "human mobility" perspectives. Viewed over the long term, Japanese society has undergone three successive transitions: from the problem of surplus population, through a period in which demographic concerns receded into the background, to the current stage of population deficit. The shifts in Japan's development cooperation policy are intimately bound up with these structural demographic transformations.

2. The Period of Imperial Adjustment (1920s–60s): Development Cooperation as an Emigration Apparatus

From this perspective, this report examines Japan's development cooperation as a technique of population governance, dividing it into three historical periods. The first is the "Imperial Adjustment Period" (1920s–1960s), when the nationalist idea that population growth supports national development was connected with the Malthusian concern that a growing population cannot be sustained in a limited territory. Thus, overseas emigration and colonization were positioned as a technique of population governance, and population movement "outside the archipelago" was promoted. These policies were justified under the rhetoric of pioneering, civilization, and even overseas economic cooperation—in reality, they were underpinned by an imperial logic of colonial domination, forced migration, and resource extraction.

3. The Period of Amnesiac Stabilization (1970s–90s): Redrawing Boundaries and the Moralization of ODA

The second period was the “Forgotten Stable Period” (1970s–1990s) when the population issue of Japan gradually receded into the background, and overseas emigration policies shifted toward international cooperation policies. While domestic population-related issues, such as depopulation and overpopulation, are treated as regional issues, Japan’s role as a “pacifist nation” has been emphasized in the international community, and ODA has come to be regarded as a symbol of international contribution. In this process, the perceptions of Japanese society were organized along the lines of “inside = self” and “outside = other,” and development cooperation came to be discussed as a moral policy toward other countries. However, at the same time, this framework also has aspects that have obscured the historical continuity with the imperial period and the existence of overseas Japanese people. In a certain sense, ODA functioned as an apparatus that concealed the memory of Japanese imperialism.

4. The Period of Reversal and Restructuring (2000s onward): Transformation into an Immigration Apparatus

The third period is the “Reversed Reorganization Period” (2000s onward). As the population of Japan continued to decrease, labor shortages became increasingly severe, and the acceptance of foreign workers emerged as a policy issue. Through policies targeting international students, Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs), and the Technical Intern Training Program, the acceptance of foreign nationals under various residency statuses expanded. Concepts such as human resource development, international contribution, coexistence, and exchange were promoted. In fact, issues such as ensuring labor supply, labor exploitation, and the settlement of foreign nationals became apparent. Against this backdrop, JICA strengthened its domestic work and began to participate in improving the environment to receive foreign workers through initiatives such as JP-MIRAI (a JICA-led initiative to improve the working and living conditions of foreign workers in Japan). JICA appears to be assuming a role that complements the previously fragmented foreign policies.

5. Analysis and Outlook: Where are the Issues Shifting?

Looking back from this demographic perspective, it is apparent that Japan’s development cooperation was not always a policy directed “outward.” Rather, it functioned as a governance technique to coordinate demographic pressures and labor issues domestically. While the acceptance of foreign workers has transformed into an issue, the focus is shifting toward how to govern and socially integrate them once they have been accepted. In other words, institutional frameworks such as foreign workers’ rights, working conditions, and social security are now under question.

In terms of future prospects, changes are progressing both in Japan and among the recipients. Fiscal constraints in Japan are becoming more severe, and there exists a shortage of personnel to conduct international cooperation. This has led to a situation wherein regions within Japan are becoming like “developing countries.” Meanwhile, Asian countries are also experiencing declining birthrates and aging, and policy priorities are shifting from growth-

oriented policies to addressing population decline. In this context, Japan's accumulated experience in responding to a declining population may be a new resource for cooperation.

Based on this, the challenge ahead is to re-establish the *raison d'être* for Japan's development cooperation. This is not merely a matter of policy technique but is deeply related to the crisis of Japan's identity as a "developed country." The question now is linking immigration and workforce policies with development cooperation, and how to envision a new form of international cooperation centered on knowledge-sharing. Even if the ODA framework is maintained, its substantive content risks becoming hollow. In this situation, redefining the new philosophy and role of Japan's development cooperation will be a key future issue.

(This is an English translation of an outline of the lecture delivered by Dr. OYAMA Takatoshi, Associate Professor, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Institute of Liberal Arts, Kyushu Institute of Technology, at the 109th Policy Plenary Meeting of CEAC on February 27, 2026.)