

## Innovations Driven by Overseas Experts with Close Ties to Japan

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Japanese international cooperation faces enormous challenges, as the COVID-19 pandemic limits human contact and pushes people to work remotely using digital technologies. As one of the possible breakthroughs, Izumi Ohno, an editorialist for this journal, proposes enhanced networking of overseas experts familiar with Japanese values and skills, cultivated through longstanding partnerships with Japan. She discusses the future of Japanese international cooperation building on notable achievements made by the Technology Promotion Association (Thailand-Japan) (TPA).

### *Creating a Virtuous Learning Cycle*

Japan takes pride in its field-oriented and hands-on approach to development cooperation. Many Japanese experts have endeavored to give concrete advice to partner countries through joint work with local counterparts, mindful of country-specific circumstances. Such an approach can be commonly observed in the Japanese business sector. Dr. Hiroyuki Itami, the President of the International University of Japan and a specialist of Japanese corporate management, emphasizes the Japanese-style "Human-Capitalism," which is built on human networks and co-creation on space, in contrast with Western-style capitalism.

The recent COVID-19 pandemic has urged us to try new ways of doing things, such as online training and remote teaching. In practice, everyone seems to be experimenting how to effectively use "explicit" knowledge that can be easily shared in a standardized way and "tacit" knowledge that can be passed only through hands-on guidance in the field. And each one of us is trying to find out the process of co-creating knowledge with counterparts. Japan should absolutely take this opportunity to accelerate digitization. Still, face-to-face dialogues are essential to co-create new knowledge through exchanges of ideas, stimulus and inspiration. We must carefully examine the content and method for knowledge sharing in order to produce a virtuous cycle of learning, by properly combining implicit and explicit knowledge. At the same time, it is important to convert the COVID-19 pandemic into an opportunity to innovate international cooperation. Based on my research on the network of Asian industrial human resources familiar with Japan, I have been proposing "network-based development cooperation" as a way forward, working with those people and organizations that share common values and know-how cultivated through longstanding partnerships with Japan. Their experience is valuable, particularly with respect to how they acquired knowledge and technologies through joint projects with Japan, internalized and adapted them suitable to country-specific context, and promoted domestically. (Professor Keiji Maegawa of University of Tsukuba calls such process "translative adaptation.")

The ongoing pandemic has made us keenly aware that the models of developed countries are not necessarily superior, and that we must go beyond the conventional notion of development assistance, which the wealthier North provides to the developing South. In my view, people and organizations that have experience absorbing and adapting Japanese values and methods through translative adaptation could create a virtuous learning cycle by combining implicit and explicit knowledge through the content and methods suitable for local realities, as mentioned above.

### ***Associated Benefits to Japanese Companies and Local Communities***

Let us take Thailand for example, with which Japan has a long history of economic cooperation and official development assistance (ODA), as well as business partnership. Thanks to such accumulated assets, in Thailand there are a wealth of industrial human resources familiar with Japanese value and skills. Among others, the Technology Promotion Association (Thailand-Japan) (TPA)—a non-profit organization (NPO) that supports the development of industrial human resources—stands out for its expertise in promoting *monozukuri* or Japanese-style manufacturing. TPA was established in 1973 with the objective of promoting industrial development in Thailand, at an initiative of Thai students who graduated from Japanese universities and ex-trainees of the Association for Overseas Technical Cooperation and Sustainable Partnerships (AOTS).

TPA has developed in four stages: (1) “technology transfer” by learning from Japanese experts; (2) “technology promotion” by nurturing Thai experts while reducing dependence on Japanese experts; (3) “technology diffusion” by building capacity of local companies through training and consulting activities; and (4) “technology education” through the establishment of Thai-Nichi Institute of Technology (TNI) as a university specialized in Japanese-style manufacturing by the Thai people for the Thai people.

Throughout these stages, TPA has secured their own revenue sources through business activities, such as calibration of industrial instruments, Japanese language training, publication of technical documents and drawings, and training of small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) management consultants. These independent revenue sources have made it possible to establish a private university (TNI) in 2007—a long-standing dream of TPA.

Currently, nearly 4,000 students study at TNI. Many graduates are employed at Japanese companies and their local suppliers. TNI has also signed partnership agreements with over 50 universities in Japan, and various exchange programs are being implemented. For instance, Osaka Prefecture University, the City of Sakai, and the Sakai Chamber of Commerce and Industry jointly host senior students from TNI under an internship program that offers both classroom lectures and practical training at local companies. Some Thai interns have come back to work at host companies in Sakai after they graduated from TNI. In this manner, the internship program has benefited local SMEs willing to expand their business overseas, as well as local communities. Furthermore, since August 2018, TNI has offered an international educational program for youths of neighboring ASEAN countries to teach Japanese-style manufacturing.

Notably, TPA has served as a social enterprise, in which Thai graduates from Japanese universities and ex-AOTS trainees launch new initiatives under the clear vision to promote Thailand’s industrial development by using their close ties with Japan. While Japan has supported TPA activities for many years through public-private partnership including ODA, it is the Thai counterparts who set goals and vision with strong ownership. This is the reason why trust has been fostered between both Thai and Japanese sides based on shared values.

### ***Japan Should Serve as a Facilitator***

There are three key factors behind the success of TPA and TNI. First, there exists a core group of Thai experts who strongly committed to building and expanding their networks with Japan.

These experts studied at Japanese engineering universities during the 1960s and 70s. They were convinced of the importance of adopting and diffusing the latest technologies and knowledge from Japan in Thailand. After returning home, they engaged in TPA activities, while

playing important roles in Thai industry, government and academia. Secondly, Mr. Goichi Hozumi served as an unparalleled Japanese mentor. The socially-minded educator dedicated his life to the progress of developing countries by receiving foreign students and trainees to Japan. He established the Asian Students Cultural Association (ABA) and the AOTS, and served as the first chairperson of Japan-Thailand Economic Cooperation Society (JTECS). Many Thai alumni were inspired by Mr. Hozumi and committed to uphold and further his vision. Eventually, they became the core founders of the TPA. Lastly, the public and private sectors of Japan have also supported the social enterprise activities conducted by TPA and TNI. It should be remembered that JTECS as a Japanese NPO facilitated the mobilization of public and private resources while respecting the needs of Thai counterparts.

In recent years, the government of Japan and the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) have been expanding the programs for inviting international students to Japan. The move is extremely important for expanding the pool of overseas experts with close ties to Japan. Instead of simply increasing their number, it is important to identify and foster motivated experts who would play core roles based on shared values. Japan should bolster its own capacity to support these experts and related organizations so that they can drive the development of respective countries, and eventually play active roles in Japan and the rest of the world. Various financial resources and methods can be mobilized. For TPA and TNI, JTECS has played a facilitator's role by mobilizing Japanese ODA (in particular, technical cooperation) and private-sector cooperation. There are many more possible ways, such as financial cooperation with the private sector including social investment, as well as collaboration with local governments. In Vietnam, Mr. Le Long Son, who studied at a graduate school of engineering in Japan, has set up ESUHAI Co., Ltd., a private training institute. ESUHAI offers training for the Vietnamese youth before their coming to Japan as technical intern trainees and helps with the job search after their return to Vietnam. JICA has assisted its facility improvement through the overseas investment and loan program.

TPA and TNI are a leading example of future-oriented international cooperation for several reasons. They have successfully forged an extensive network of Thai experts with close ties to Japan based on the longstanding partnership between two countries. They have also played essential roles as social enterprises. We would like to turn the COVID-19 crisis into an opportunity to innovate international cooperation driven by overseas experts and organizations who are familiar with Japanese value and skills. The fundamental premise, however, is that Japan must remain an attractive country for overseas partners and refrain from unilaterally imposing its own agenda on partner countries.



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