



Civil Society Monitor

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Can Japan Welcome Immigrants? A Shrinking Population Spurs a Growing Debate

TOSHIHIRO MENJU

Managing Director and Chief Program Officer, JCIE/Japan

As Japan's population contracts and grays, the country's policymakers have been compelled to look to foreign workers to help sustain the country's economy and care for its seniors. For more than a decade, JCIE's Toshihiro Menju has been examining the interplay between national immigration policy, local government policy, local communities, civil society organizations, and the foreign residents who are living, studying, and working in Japan. In this issue of *Civil Society Monitor*, he explores the shifts occurring in the national discourse and points to the role of civil society, which has been on the front lines of Japan's immigration issues and which will need to provide critical social infrastructure should Japan decide to welcome more immigrants.

JAPAN'S AGING POPULATION and declining birthrate pose an acute dilemma for the nation. The working-age population (15–64 years old) has been falling since its peak of 87.3 million in 1995 and currently stands at fewer than 80 million people. Japan's overall population has also been in decline since 2008. The current population is 128 million, but that is forecast to plummet to 100 million by 2048 and then continue to fall to under 87 million by 2060. While the overall population is shrinking, the number of elderly is increasing. Seniors (over 65 years old) are projected to rise from 24 percent of the population in 2012 to more than 33 percent by 2035. On the other hand, the number



In Hamamatsu, Nikkei Brazilian children and Japanese children study together.

of young people in Japan has been rapidly decreasing, resulting in the closing of more than 500 public schools every year.

Amid increased concern about the sustainability of Japanese society, a report published in May 2014 by the Japan Policy Council, a private policy research institute, presented a shocking vision of the country's future. It forecast that out of 1,718 municipalities that are in existence today, more than half—or 896—may vanish by 2040 due to the ongoing population decline and outflow of young women moving to large cities.

As the Japanese economy picked up in 2014 under the influence of the government's "Abenomics" policies, the upturn exacerbated the labor shortage, which gave further impetus to a growing debate within the country on the population problem and immigration. But the direct trigger of the current rise of the immigration debate in Japan was a report prepared by the Cabinet Office in February 2014 for a meeting of a Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy committee that was set up to assess the impact of the shrinking population and to discuss the restructuring of Japanese society with a view to the next 50 years. The report estimated that Japan's population could be sustained at the 100 million level, but only if there were an increase in the birth rate and an increase in immigrants. This was widely reported in the media as a sign that the Japanese government had begun to seriously consider relaxing immigration policies to encourage a greater inflow of foreigners. That idea was reinforced when Prime Minister Shinzo Abe responded to a direct question from an opposition party Diet member that same month by saying that opening Japan up to more immigrants "is an issue relevant to the future of our country and the overall life of the people. I understand that [the government] should study it from various angles after undergoing national-level discussions" (*Japan Times*, May 18, 2014).

The Immigration Taboo

Still, while Japan's population continues to shrink, the Japanese government has for the most part been

very cautious about discussing immigration. In fact, not only the government but also the media has long avoided the topic of immigration. One of the reasons for such reticence is that the country still considers itself a homogeneous society, and it is not accustomed to having many foreigners. The 2 million foreign residents in Japan today account for only 1.6 percent of the population (see table 1)—a ratio that ranks 151st in the world. While Japanese people have become quite comfortable with travelling overseas, there are still very limited opportunities for the average Japanese person to interact with foreigners in their daily lives, and many still feel uneasy with the idea of a large number of immigrants entering the country. Many fear that such an influx would lead to an increase in crime and a deterioration of public safety. Some people also think that immigrants will take away jobs from Japanese nationals and keep wages low. In addition, many believe that immigration will bring social disorder and even riots, a perception often based on Japanese media reports that portray European countries as having failed with immigration.

Number of foreign residents in select advanced countries (2011)

Country	Foreign residents	% of population
Switzerland	1,772,300	22.4
Germany	6,930,900	8.5
USA	21,057,000	6.8
Korea	982,500	2.0
Japan	2,078,500	1.6

Source: OECD, www.oecd.org/els/mig/keystat.htm.

Recent tensions in Japan's relations with China and Korea and a rise in nationalism also cast shadows over the immigration debate in Japan. Some politicians and experts worry that easing immigration restrictions may result in an overwhelming inflow of Chinese and Korean nationals, who would then create a migrant community in a certain locality and take over the local government. In 2008, when the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) proposed a bill to grant voting rights

in local elections to permanent foreign residents, it met with fierce opposition from the right wing; amid rising nationalism, the bill was defeated. This experience led many politicians to believe that immigration is still a taboo topic in Japanese politics.

As preparations get underway for the 2020 Olympic Games in Tokyo, Japan's labor shortage, especially in industries such as construction, is expected to worsen. To address this, Prime Minister Abe is promoting a Technical Intern Training Program (TITP), which has been expanded to allow foreign trainees in the construction industry to stay in Japan for five years, up from the previous limit of three years. A number of occupations, such as health aides for seniors, were also added to the program as Japan expects a labor shortage in these fields as the population ages. However, the use of a trainee program that was supposedly created to transfer technical skills and knowledge to developing countries as a way to counter the country's cyclical labor shortage is a controversial move. In fact, there have been many reports of misuse of the system where foreign trainees were exploited as cheap labor. For example, there have been cases of trainees being forced to work without pay or days off, and some trainees have reported that their passports were confiscated by their employers. In 2012, it was reported that 79 percent of companies that participated in the program were in violation of the program regulations. The US government also criticized the program in its annual *Trafficking in Persons Report*, pointing out that the system puts foreign trainees in a vulnerable position, promoting forced labor-like conditions. The Japanese government has responded to such criticism by saying that it intends to strengthen its oversight, but many believe that it will be difficult to drastically change the current situation.

Meanwhile, the Japanese government has largely continued to avoid the immigration debate. When it proposed the expansion of the TITP, the administration stressed that it was not an immigration policy and that the program was designed to bring in only foreign trainees who would stay in Japan temporarily.

Yuriko Koike, chair of the Liberal Democratic Party's caucus on international human resources, said during a magazine interview, "I don't call myself an 'immigration advocate' ... That's because as soon as we use the word 'immigration,' opponents immediately label us, and we won't be able to discuss what we really need to discuss. I am worried that immigration tends to be a yes-or-no, black-or-white question in Japan and our mind freezes there" (*AERA*, July 14, 2014).

Even in the DPJ, which is considered more progressive, very few are willing to discuss immigration. Masaharu Nakagawa, former education minister, is the only prominent DPJ member who publicly speaks about the need to ease the restraints on immigration. When the DPJ's working group on birth rate and population issues published a report in June 2014, it pointed to the declining population as a serious problem, but it only discussed the possibility of accepting highly skilled foreign workers and never mentioned the word "immigration."

One other exception to this rule is Shintaro Ishihara, the high-profile, right-wing politician and former governor of Tokyo. While he is known for his animosity toward China and has advocated keeping a strong guard up against the inflow of Chinese immigrants, he has also spoken about increased immigration as an inevitable option for Japan if it is going to counter the challenges associated with its shrinking population.

The Future of the Immigration Debate in Japan

While politicians continue to be cautious, the media seems to be gradually opening up. In fact, NHK (Japan's national broadcast network) has been the most proactive in taking up the issue of foreign workers and immigration, and it has aired various programs on this topic on TV and radio each week since the beginning of 2014. As a result, the tendency to see the immigration issue as taboo has been declining since the beginning of the year, and the media is now beginning to discuss immigration more openly, although the terminology is still

a sticking point. When the author of this article was invited to appear in June 2014 as a commentator for a TV program on NHK, there was still a heated discussion among the members of the production team as to whether they should use the word “immigration” during the program. The decision was to use the expression the “so-called immigration issue” instead. Similarly, while the majority of major newspapers still avoid using the term “immigration,” it has become acceptable to argue for the need for a serious discussion about the issue.

Sooner or later, Japan will have to accept immigrants if it wants to sustain the population, and the debate will shift to the question of whether to grant permanent residency to foreign TITP trainees in the future. South Korea, a country similar to Japan in its relative homogeneity, also faces the issue of an aging population and declining birth rate. Recently, the discussion of immigration has been gaining momentum in South Korea, and if the Korean government decides to grant permanent residency to temporary foreign workers, it might affect the thinking in Japan as well.

In fact, immigration may be the final trump card left for Japan to play. It has the potential not only to resolve the labor shortage but also to shift the Japanese mindset off its current trajectory, which seems to be heading toward greater introversion and a lack of confidence in the future of the country. Immigration may change the course of Japan and make it a country that is open to the world and full of new energy. Easing immigration policies could also have a very positive impact on Japan’s diplomatic relations with countries such as the ASEAN members, which are predicted to become major source countries of immigrants to Japan.

Does Japanese Society Have the Necessary Infrastructure to Accept Immigrants?

Japanese civil society has been involved in activities to promote international exchange at the grassroots level for more than half a century. Also, many groups have

Japanese Civil Society Organizations that Support Immigrants

Numerous Japanese groups are engaged in important and often innovative activities to help foreign residents in their community. Here are some examples:

SEELS (Social Enterprise English Language School)—SEELS provides training for immigrants from the Philippines to become English teachers and assists them in opening community-based English language schools.

Tabunka Machizukuri Kobo (Studio to Create a Multicultural Neighborhood)—This NPO at the Icho Danchi public housing complex in Kanagawa Prefecture has formed a community disaster prevention team in which young foreign residents, instead of aging Japanese residents, participate and get training to become first responders.

Global Jinzai (human resources) Support Hamamatsu—This group has been supporting Brazilian immigrants who lost their jobs after the 2008 financial crisis by preparing them to become health aides and by providing assistance in finding jobs in their field.

Tabunka Kyosei Center Tokyo (Multicultural Center Tokyo)—The center runs Japanese language classes and high school entrance exam preparatory classes for immigrant children to help them stay in school and pursue their education.



SEELS provides vocational training for migrant Filipinas to become English teachers.

been engaged in programs to assist foreign residents and promote multiculturalism in their communities for the past two decades. Today, there are numerous nonprofit organizations (NPOs) in the field, and many Japanese language classes are run by volunteers across Japan. For example, in Yamagata Prefecture (in northern Japan), which has approximately 7,000 foreign residents, there are 29 Japanese language classes in operation, mainly supported by volunteers. Thus, while the government may lack a comprehensive immigration policy, Japanese civil society has an established track record of supporting foreign residents and has built a certain level of infrastructure to accept immigrants into Japanese society.

Where is Japan's immigration debate heading? A sense of urgency about the population issue, swings in public opinion, reactions from businesses to the labor shortage, debates among opinion leaders about Japan's future—all of these can affect the course of the immigration debate in Japan. Given how quickly the debate grew in 2014, immigration may gain even greater attention in the next few years (or at the latest, in the lead up to the 2020 Tokyo Olympic

Games) as a viable option to deal with various challenges that Japan faces today. What we need now is to present a vision for society in which Japanese and foreign residents can build win-win relationships. And in order to do that, we need to understand the true urgency of the population issue, stop treating immigration as taboo, and engage ourselves in a national debate about immigration that is objective and forward-looking.



A sign reflects the diversity of the Icho Danchi public housing complex in Kanagawa Prefecture.

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Editor: Atsuko Geiger Layout: Patrick Ishiyama

Japan Center for International Exchange (JCIE/Japan)
9-17 Minami Azabu 4-chome
Minato-ku, Tokyo 106-0047 Japan
E-mail: admin@jcie.or.jp URL: www.jcie.or.jp

Japan Center for International Exchange, Inc. (JCIE/USA)
135 West 29th Street, Suite 303
New York, NY 10001 USA
E-mail: admin@jcie.org URL: www.jcie.org

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