

Japan's Approach to South-South and Triangular Cooperation: A Platform for Co-Creation and Mutual Learning

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Abstract: The paper addresses global development challenges and the significance of South-South and triangular cooperation in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It focuses on Japan's historical and strategic emphasis on triangular cooperation, which integrates knowledge co-creation and mutual learning. Since the 1970s, Japan, primarily through the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), has initiated numerous triangular cooperation endeavours, engaging over 85,000 participants globally via its Knowledge Co-Creation Programme (KCCP). The paper illustrates Japan's dual role as both aid recipient and donor, which influences its philosophy underpinning its development cooperation. JICA's triangular cooperation has evolved over time, supported by international dialogues, partnerships, and policy initiatives, demonstrating its effectiveness in diverse sectors like health crises, post-conflict reconstruction, and agriculture. Today, Japan seeks to leverage these experiences, viewing triangular cooperation as a platform to co-create solutions and forge new partnerships, aiming to enhance its collective action on global issues and contribute to the SDGs.

Keywords: *Triangular cooperation, Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), Knowledge co-creation, Mutual learning, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Development challenges, Global partnerships.*

Introduction

The world is currently facing multiple development challenges, including post-pandemic recovery, climate change, geopolitical conflicts, and food insecurity, pushing millions into extreme poverty. Estimates indicate an annual financing gap of US\$ 3.9 trillion in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (OECD,

2020). With only 17 per cent of SDG targets on track, the achievement of these global goals is at significant risk (UN, 2024). Recognising the urgency of these challenges, the call for global partnership is more important than ever.

Japan has been engaging in and promoting triangular cooperation for over a half century since the 1970s, making it one of the traditional donors with the longest history in this field.

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The Japanese government has placed triangular cooperation at the center of its development cooperation policy (MOFA, 2013). Based on this strategic direction, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA)² has accumulated extensive experience in triangular cooperation with its partner countries around the world. Approximately 85,000 people worldwide have participated in triangular cooperation within its flagship programme, the Knowledge Co-Creation Programme (KCCP). Japan and its partner countries provide training courses for third countries, focusing on specific development challenges and joint solution development (JICA, 2024). As a development agency with a wide range of modalities, from technical cooperation to financial cooperation, JICA tailors in its triangular cooperation approaches based on the needs and conditions of its partner countries to maximise outputs and outcomes.

JICA's triangular cooperation has evolved over time with changes in the international positioning of South-South and triangular cooperation (SSTrC). Throughout its history of triangular cooperation, Japan has emphasised knowledge co-creation and mutual learning, inspired by its own experiences, since the Meiji Restoration in the 19th century, of adapting Western solutions to fit its local context. Since the initiation of SSTrC, Japan has created various momentum to boost this modality and expanded it globally through agreements with partner countries, networking through international dialogues, and integration into regular development

cooperation programmes as knowledge sharing. Today, triangular cooperation is recognised as a complementary modality to South-South Cooperation for contributing to the achievement of SDGs and addressing global issues. In this context, JICA has utilised its triangular cooperation on the ground to tackle global challenges, such as pandemic responses, mine action in conflict-affected areas, and support for small-scale farmers. Now development issues are becoming more complex and multifaceted. In addition, many emerging and developing countries are proceeding with institutionalisation of cooperation agencies, and actively taking leadership roles in sharing experiences and know-how in managing cooperation programmes. Also, issues that were not commonly addressed by South-South cooperation, such as experiences of fragile and conflict-affected countries, are being addressed recently by sharing knowledge among countries with similar experiences. Against this backdrop, Japan has been shifting its strategy to view triangular cooperation as regional and global platforms for co-creating development solutions and strengthening its ties with like-minded partners through mutual learning.

Japan's Journey in South-South and Triangular Cooperation

Japan learned the importance of knowledge co-creation and mutual learning during its modernisation in the 19th century. Japan adopted advanced Western technologies and systems and integrated them with the existing local

norms and values (Kitaoka, 2019), thereby creating solutions tailored to the local context. This approach was further reinforced by its own experience of post-war recovery and subsequent economic advancement. During the reconstruction phase following World War II, Japan received significant aid for infrastructure development, funded by the World Bank and other entities. Simultaneously, Japan became an aid provider by joining the Colombo Plan in 1954 and began to take a leadership role in South-South cooperation (SSC) (JICA, 2005).³

Japan started sharing its development experiences, particularly with Asian countries, emphasising the importance of self-help efforts for aid recipients based on its post-war recovery and economic advancement.

This dual role of being both an aid recipient and donor provided Japan with a unique perspective on the effectiveness of SSC, shaping its development cooperation philosophy. Since then, Japan's philosophy has been that cooperation is not just about bringing finance or ready-made solutions from Japan, but about working together with partner countries to develop solutions that fit each country's context.

Starting in 1994, Japan signed Partnership Programme agreements with 12 countries⁴ that were showing economic growth and gaining potential as new providers of international cooperation. Under these Partnership Programmes, Japan and its partner countries held annual consultation meetings to discuss their joint technical cooperation projects, evaluate the outcomes, and plan for the

following year. While some of these Partnership Programmes are less active today, others continue to thrive.

In 2002, triangular cooperation gained additional momentum through international frameworks for facilitation, such as the JICA-ASEAN Regional Cooperation Meeting (JARCOM), later renamed the Japan-Southeast Asian Meeting for South-South Cooperation (J-SEAM). These frameworks promoted regional knowledge exchange among ASEAN countries (JICA, 2018a). Moreover, Japan supported ASEAN initiatives through the Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund (MOFA, 2022).

Additionally, Japan hosted the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD), with the third conference in 2003 advocating for South-South cooperation through the "Asia-Africa Initiative." This initiative involved Asian countries in supporting African development, with JICA ensuring the participation of these countries from the project formulation stage to foster ownership and match needs and resources (JICA, 2005). This approach fostered ownership among the involved parties and matched needs and resources after identifying the needs of the recipient side. These initiatives promoted an understanding of the significance of triangular cooperation and the voluntary efforts of emerging countries.

With these developments, the Japanese government began emphasising SSTRC as effective method for promoting development cooperation. The 2003 Official Development Assistance (ODA) Charter clearly stated that Japan will

promote this modality in partnership with countries in Asia and other regions.⁵

Furthermore, JICA established guidelines in 2005 to systematise triangular cooperation. These guidelines highlight the values of JICA's trilateral cooperation, describe practice trends in different regions, and set directions to address future challenges (JICA, 2005).

To promote knowledge co-creation and mutual learning, gathering information on local needs and contexts was crucial. In 2003, JICA underwent a major strategic shift, transforming itself into an independent implementing agency apart from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. Under the leadership of Madame Sadako Ogata, who became JICA's president that year, the organisation adopted an on-the-ground approach known as "gemba." This strategy involved assigning more personnel to each country and delegating more authority to its overseas offices, rather than centralising control in its Tokyo headquarters. This shift accelerated the gathering of information on each country's needs and streamlined decision-making in various cooperation efforts, including triangular cooperation (JICA, 2018b).

Today, this approach remains a core aspect of JICA's operational vision. JICA gathers information and assesses needs from 150 developing countries through its 96 overseas offices. In countries such as Malaysia, Thailand, and Egypt, national staff with over 20 years of experience in triangular cooperation share their extensive knowledge with other overseas office staff. Similarly,

Japanese experts are assigned to regions like Central America, specifically the Central American Integration System (SICA), and to Brazil, at the Brazilian Cooperation Agency (ABC), to listen to local needs and facilitate project formulation and implementation with JICA.

South-South and Triangular Cooperation as Effective Modalities for Contributing to SDGs.

Triangular cooperation is increasingly recognised as an effective and complementary modality to SSC for contributing to the achievement of the SDGs and addressing global issues. The Second High-Level United Nations Conference on South-South Cooperation (BAPA+40) in 2019 marked a milestone in promoting this recognition and reaffirming its potential. UN Member States acknowledged that SSTRC could leverage and mobilise additional technical and financial resources, enable stakeholders to share a broader range of experiences, and build partnerships and trust among all participants toward achieving the SDGs (UN, 2019). Japan also made an effort to deepen the discussion on the importance of triangular cooperation for BAPA+40. JICA had long been supported by the UN Office for South-South Cooperation (UNOSSC) to jointly organise the Director Generals Forum for Sustainable Development alongside the United Nations South-South Cooperation EXPO, where delegates from UN

member states shared their respective experiences and learned from each other to further improve the impact of their cooperation. Under its G20 Presidency in 2019, following up the discussion initiated by Argentine Presidency in 2018, Japan enhanced the discussions in the G20 Development Working Group on triangular cooperation by organising a side event in January 2019, focusing on “Effective Triangular Cooperation to Achieve the 2030 Agenda.” The event discussed the role of G20 countries and international organisations in achieving the 2030 Agenda and shared practical examples of triangular cooperation (MOFA, 2019).

In the recent years, Japan has been utilising triangular cooperation by integrating it into its regular development cooperation programmes and projects as integral elements to contribute to the achievement of the SDGs and tackle global challenges with its partner countries, focusing on knowledge co-creation and mutual learning. One example is a countermeasure against a health crisis. In response to the spread of the Ebola virus in West Africa, JICA launched a programme aimed at preparing for pandemics and strengthening the capacity of disease control experts in Africa through research. Using triangular cooperation, JICA was able to scale up the programme’s impact from Egypt, Ghana, and Kenya to almost half of the countries on the African continent. Based on this partnership, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Noguchi Memorial Institute for Medical Research in Ghana, a partner of the programme,

was able to conduct over 370,000 PCR tests between March and mid-July 2020, representing around 80 per cent of the PCR tests in the country. Furthermore, in January and February of the following year, Ghana hosted an online training on countermeasures against infectious diseases, including COVID-19, with the participation of 15 experts from nine countries in West Africa (GPI, 2021).

Similarly, JICA utilises triangular cooperation to support conflict-affected countries. JICA has supported the Cambodia Mine Action Centre (CMAC) for over 20 years, enabling it to develop one of the best operational mine action capacities in the world. JICA then encouraged CMAC to start cooperating with other mine-contaminated countries such as Colombia, Lao PDR, Iraq, and Angola, thereby connecting their technology specific to conflict-affected countries to others facing similar challenges. In 2023, CMAC invited staff from Ukraine’s State Emergency Service (SESU) for training to enhance their mine action capacity (JICA, 2023). Now CMAC has accumulated rich experiences of co-creating mine action equipment and methodologies with various partners trying to introduce and develop new technologies, while JICA facilitates CMAC’s cooperation with new partner countries by deploying these new technologies.

JICA implements triangular cooperation to contribute to SDGs, too. From 2006 to 2009, JICA launched the Smallholder Horticulture Empowerment and Promotion (SHEP) approach in Kenya, which strengthened the

capacity of smallholder farmers and nearly doubled their average income. From 2010 to 2015, the second phase was implemented, establishing a unit dedicated to expanding the SHEP approach within the Kenyan Ministry of Agriculture. Based on this cooperation, Japan and Kenya began providing training courses on this approach starting in 2014, inviting other African countries (JICA, 2015). To date, 57 countries have adopted this approach, expanding to Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America (Interview with a JICA staff). This exemplifies how triangular cooperation can start small in one country and then expand to other countries and regions.

As illustrated by these cases, JICA follows the golden rule of “Start small and then Scale-Up.” This strategy involves beginning with mutual learning and knowledge co-creation with one partner country and then expanding to other countries or regions if successful. During this process, JICA’s triangular cooperation transforms local institutions into pivotal “Centers of Excellence,” strengthening their institutional capacity (Yamashita, 2022). Therefore, it is not merely an extension of bilateral cooperation but a broad application of co-created solutions to address context-specific regional challenges.

With its long-standing experience in triangular cooperation, JICA supports emerging development cooperation agencies in strengthening their capacity, too. In 2008, during the High-Level Forum on SSC, Directors-General level delegates declared the need to reinforce the management practices

of development cooperation agencies responsible for SSTRc to enhance and increase development results. Following the forum, the Brazilian Cooperation Agency (ABC) confirmed its support for this endeavour, particularly to assist least-developed countries. JICA and the UNOSSC joined this commitment. From 2012 to 2022, they provided training programmes, inviting approximately 40 countries. Recently, JICA has provided its partner agencies with lectures on JICA’s operations from project formulation to evaluation, supporting them in improving their management practices (Interview with a JICA staff).

Triangular Cooperation as a Platform for Co-creating Solutions.

The revised Japanese Development Cooperation Charter in 2023 focuses on co-creation and solidarity to tackle complex global issues with diverse stakeholders. By recognising the importance of co-creation with various partners including those in developing countries, it reaffirms Japan’s commitment to enhancing SSC and triangular cooperation, working together with both developed and developing countries.⁶ Moreover, JICA launched its new strategies in 20 thematic areas, known as “JICA Global Agenda,” in 2021, which illustrates JICA’s vision and strategies in each of these 20 sectors and aims to bring together diverse stakeholders and capabilities to tackle these challenges and maximise development impact in partner countries. The JICA Global Agenda and its implementing strategies include

many examples of knowledge sharing with good practices of JICA's partner institutions in developing countries in each sector (e.g. Phnom Penh Water Supply Authority for water supply) and its scale-up to the regional and global levels (JICA, 2022). This demonstrates JICA's unique approach, which includes elements of triangular cooperation in its regular practice and co-creation of ideas as the foundation of Japanese cooperation.

In addition, while JICA has been implementing trilateral cooperation in many projects as an integral part of its regular development cooperation operations, without necessarily calling it triangular cooperation, today's development issues are becoming increasingly complex and multifaceted. Additionally, some of the countries that JICA has supported in strengthening their institutional capacity over the past several decades are now promoting institutionalisation of their SSC and taking on leadership roles as emerging partners. There are more and more cases in which JICA works with these newly emerging cooperation agencies. In light of these changing dynamics in development cooperation, JICA is rethinking how it can leverage its evolving assets and what contributions it can make to the global international cooperation architecture.

One new perspective that JICA foresees for future triangular cooperation is that it becomes evident that the need for regional and global platforms for sharing experiences and knowledge of these emerging cooperation agencies

is increasing. These knowledge-sharing exercises among agencies will enhance their common understanding and coordination among them. To date, JICA has been implementing triangular cooperation by partnering with new countries and scaling up bilateral cooperation to other countries. With the emergence of various development cooperation agencies, JICA aims to strengthen dialogues with these new partners who share common values and can jointly create development solutions.

Furthermore, to improve the efficiency of its conventional triangular cooperation schemes, JICA leverages the assets accumulated over years of triangular cooperation as "public goods" for a region to tackle compounded crises and achieve SDGs. In Latin America, for example, JICA is co-creating a platform with its partner countries and their sector-specific institutions as centers of excellence. This platform identifies capabilities for a wide range of development challenges and catalogues them. Additionally, JICA is exploring ways to organise training courses and send experts to third countries more efficiently and quickly. Through these initiatives, JICA aims to streamline the effective use of triangular partnerships as regional and global public goods, promoting knowledge co-creation and mutual learning even further.

By leveraging resources, knowledge, and capacities in complementary ways, the international community can maximise the potential of triangular cooperation to significantly boost progress toward the SDGs of the 2030 Agenda,

especially during this critical Decade of Action. The success of triangular cooperation depends on collective and coordinated commitment. Notably, the G20 Presidency of Brazil has recently prioritised triangular cooperation at the G20 Working Groups and is leading discussions on catalysing this cooperation to build trust and partnerships (OECD, n.d.). In this context, Japan is committed to working together to create an environment that promotes effective SSTRC, based on mutual trust and solidarity, ensuring that SSTRC brings together diverse actors and broadens knowledge and innovation to contribute to the achievement of the SDGs.

Conclusion

This paper examined how Japan, based on the history of its own development experiences, has emphasised knowledge co-creation and mutual learning, embedding triangular cooperation in all aspects of its development cooperation. Considering the changing dynamics in global development cooperation, Japan is now rethinking triangular cooperation as a platform for co-creating development solutions and expanding partnerships with new collaborators. JICA believes that this will mainstream the effective use of triangular cooperation as regional and global public goods. Triangular cooperation has the potential to bring various actors together through partnership and enhance unity, contributing to a fair and equitable international order and the achievement of SDGs. As the challenges, facing the international community, become more complex and multifaceted, it is

becoming more important to share the experiences and knowledge of the countries of the South and promote common understanding and mutual learning in order to make triangular cooperation an even more effective approach.

Endnotes

- ¹ In this paper, “JICA” refers specifically to the Japan International Cooperation Agency, which executes programmes assigned by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA). Meanwhile, “Japan” typically denotes the collective actions of both MOFA and JICA unless stated otherwise.
- ² South-South Cooperation (SSC) refers to “the exchange of resources, technology, and knowledge between developing countries” (UNFPA, 2016). Japan in the past perceived it as a member of the developing countries until it became a member of Development Assistance Committee of OECD in 1964 (OECD, n.d.).
- ³ These countries include Singapore (1994), Thailand (1994), Egypt (1998), Chile (1999), Tunisia (1999), Brazil (2000), Argentina (2001), the Philippines (2002), Indonesia (2003), Mexico (2003), Morocco (2003), and Jordan (2004) (Yamashita, 2022).
- ⁴ “Japan will actively promote South-South cooperation in partnership with more advanced developing countries in Asia and other regions. Japan will also strengthen collaboration with regional cooperation frameworks and will support region-wide cooperation that encompasses several countries” (MOFA, 2003).
- ⁵ “Japan will strengthen the sharing of knowledge and resources as well as collaboration with other donors, both developed and developing countries that share the common objectives and principles of development cooperation... By promoting multilayered multilateral cooperation, including South-South and triangular cooperation initiatives, Japan will provide developing countries with a variety of options” (MOFA, 2023).

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