

**NEAT Working Group on
Addressing Social Challenges Associated
with Population Ageing in East Asia**

Final Report

**Tokyo
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1. Background

The East Asia (ASEAN+3) region is experiencing rapid population ageing, bringing about significant structural changes to society and the economy. Japan, in particular, is one of the most aged societies in the world, with people aged 65 and over accounting for nearly 30% of the total population, and has therefore been among the first countries to confront various challenges arising from population ageing and declining birthrates. Meanwhile, ASEAN member states are also expected to experience rapid ageing in the coming decades, with the proportion of people aged 60 and over projected to increase from approximately 11% in 2020 to around 22% by 2050. In addition, both China and the Republic of Korea are also undergoing rapid population ageing and fertility decline. As such, East Asia as a whole is increasingly facing a common structural challenge though the specific manifestations, timing, and severity of that challenge vary considerably across countries.

The challenges associated with population ageing extend far beyond demographic change itself and affect a wide range of areas, including social security systems, labor markets, local communities, and even the nature of technological innovation. Declining working-age populations and labor shortages, particularly in the fields of healthcare and long-term care, economic slowdown, increasing pressure on social security finances, social isolation among the elderly, and the decline of local communities are all emerging in an interconnected and complex manner.

Against this backdrop, Japan, as a country that has responded to population ageing ahead of others, has accumulated a variety of institutional and social policy experiences. Under its universal health coverage system, Japan has maintained a framework that ensures access to necessary healthcare services for all citizens. Japan has also promoted the socialization of long-term care through the introduction of its long-term care insurance system. In addition, efforts have been made to secure employment opportunities for older persons through re-employment systems and more flexible working arrangements, resulting in comparatively high levels of elderly employment by international standards. Furthermore, Japan has promoted efforts to address ageing-related challenges through technological innovation, including the use of care robots and digital technologies. These experiences demonstrate the importance of viewing

population ageing not merely as a “burden,” but rather as an opportunity to redesign society and the economy. In other words, population ageing may be understood not simply as an extension of old age, but also as an expansion of the period during which people can live healthy and active lives.

In East Asia as well, regional efforts to address population ageing have gradually accumulated. Within the ASEAN+3 framework, the “ASEAN Plus Three Statement on Active Ageing” was adopted in 2016 under the concept of enabling older persons to remain active contributors to society. The Statement identified key areas of cooperation, including strengthening social protection and care systems, promoting healthy and independent ageing, expanding opportunities for social participation and employment among older persons, and sharing knowledge and best practices among member states. In addition, the promotion of Active Ageing and responses to population ageing have continued to be addressed under successive ASEAN+3 Cooperation Work Plans.

Furthermore, among Japan, China, and the Republic of Korea, the “Trilateral Seminar on Ageing and Low Fertility” has served as a platform for continuous policy dialogue and the sharing of experiences concerning ageing and declining birthrates. Practical discussions have been accumulated on a wide range of issues, including securing care workers, community-based integrated care systems, and the utilization of digital technologies. Between Japan and ASEAN, policy cooperation in the field of social security—including healthcare and long-term care—has also been promoted through the “ASEAN-Japan High-Level Officials Meeting on Caring Societies.” In addition, ASEAN established the “ASEAN Centre for Active Ageing and Innovation (ACAI)” as a regional hub to promote the sharing of knowledge and practical initiatives related to ageing.

Nevertheless, while these efforts have developed individually, East Asia has yet to establish an integrated and institutionalized framework for regional cooperation to address population ageing as a whole. As policies addressing the ageing are deeply rooted in each country’s social systems and views including not only economic structures and conditions but also various moral values such as perception toward family, filial piety as well as gender equality, it is difficult to establish unified institutions or framework for development. However, we may be able to share common value and philosophy under the flag of the promotion of Active and Healthy Ageing, that has been one of the dreams come true for any human beings.

At the same time, East Asia is experiencing in a relatively short period the ageing process that Western countries underwent over a much longer timespan, and the success or failure of its response may have profound implications not only for the region but also for the world as a whole. Whether ageing-related challenges can be overcome in a manner that realizes sustainable and vibrant societies will serve as an important test case for the future of the global economy and social security systems.

Based on this understanding, this Working Group seeks to view population ageing not as a “burden,” but as an opportunity for the redesign of society and the economy. Drawing upon the experiences and knowledge of Japan and other East Asian countries, the WG aims to present possible approaches to regional policy cooperation from a cross-sectoral perspective and to demonstrate an East Asian model to the international community.

2. Discussion Points

Based on the above background, this Working Group will examine the following three areas concerning responses to population ageing in East Asia.

(1) Strengthening Existing Regional Frameworks and Exploring Linkages for Cooperation on Population Ageing

This Working Group will review existing regional frameworks and dialogues, including the “ASEAN Plus Three Statement on Active Ageing,” the Trilateral Seminar on Ageing and Low Fertility among Japan, China and the Republic of Korea, and the ASEAN-Japan High-Level Officials Meeting on Caring Societies, in order to clarify their respective roles and functions and examine possible ways to strengthen these frameworks as well as enhance linkages among them. In particular, the WG will consider broad possibilities for developing regional responses and cooperation on population ageing, including through the utilization of regional hubs such as ACAI.

(2) Redesigning Sustainable Social Security Systems, Economies, and Labor in Response to Population Ageing

This Working Group will examine sustainable approaches to social security systems

in response to challenges such as rising social security expenditures and declining working-age populations. It will also discuss measures to reconcile population ageing with economic growth through promoting elderly employment and improving productivity. In addition, the WG will explore the potential of the “silver economy” as a new source of demand and markets, while considering the future direction of economies and labor systems from multiple perspectives.

(3) Reorganizing Local Communities and Utilizing Innovation

As family structures and local communities continue to change with the progression of population ageing, this Working Group will examine approaches for building sustainable local communities. Particular attention will be paid to the role and transformation of family- and community-based care, including the relationship between formal systems and informal support networks. Furthermore, the WG will discuss the potential of technological innovations—including care robots, AI, and digital health technologies—to address ageing-related challenges, while broadly examining the future shape of society and the relationship between such technologies, social systems, and local communities.

3. Discussions at the Working Group meeting

14 experts from APT countries and the sponsoring organization, the Japan Forum on International Relations (JFIR), took part in a working group meeting in Tokyo on 2 August 2026, which began with a keynote address. Due to hospitalization, the representative from the Philippines was unable to attend the meeting in person. Nevertheless, a pre-recorded video presentation was kindly provided and presented during the Working Group meeting, contributing to the discussions.

4. Policy Recommendations provided

Based on the discussions above, the Working Group on “Addressing Social Challenges Associated with Population Ageing in East Asia” summarized the policy recommendations. Specifically, key priorities have been put to maintaining the dignity of every individual as well as the enhancement of social participation among the elderly. Overarching principle: Each country’s demographic transition

occurs within a unique socioeconomic, cultural, and institutional context. The following recommendations are offered not as a uniform template but as a menu of options to be adapted to national and local circumstances. Regional cooperation should prioritize mutual learning, peer exchange, and the co-development of adaptable approaches over one-size-fits-all policy prescription.

The following six strategic areas are proposed as key priorities for regional cooperation and action in ASEAN Plus Three. The Working Group expects efforts for follow-up and review will be made in relevant existing Asean Plus Three arenas.

1. Promoting Independence and Social Solidarity

- 1) Institutionalize flexible public support systems for individual independence so that every person, regardless of disability or age, can maintain their dignity and live an independent daily life routine.
- 2) Establish mutual support relationships by all generations with public schemes of each country, where healthy people support sick people and working people support those who cannot work.
- 3) Secure a sustainable and stable financial foundation for long-term intergenerational solidarity, such as public income protection scheme and expand social security coverage to include informal and platform workers.
- 4) Encourage older persons to make voluntary efforts to maintain their own health by enhancing health literacy, secure personal savings, and live independently, thereby fostering deep understanding and support from the younger generation.
- 5) Nurture common understanding in local communities to think together about the meaning of a good life for every individual including the elderly, and accept inevitable disagreements, especially among different generations.
- 6) Promote broad public dialogue on the appropriate balance between benefits and burdens, involving both older and younger generations, to seek a fair and sustainable social security system, while addressing loneliness as a social disease through cultural interventions and tailored information access.
- 7) Pay specific attention to the vulnerability of older women, who are more likely to live longer, face cumulative gender disadvantages in pension entitlements and asset ownership, and experience higher rates of poverty and social isolation in old age. Policies should ensure gender-sensitive social protection and appropriate support for older women.

2. Enhancing Productive Engagement of Older Persons

- 1) Shift the policy paradigm to view older persons not as weak members of society or subjects of

discrimination, but as active and important contributors to society and drivers of inclusive growth through the silver economy and senior entrepreneurship, while scaling up the smart elderly care industry as a key pillar of economic development.

2) Broadly support and value diverse forms of social participation—not limited to paid work but including volunteer activities, NPO activities, housework, intergenerational mentorships, and self-care—as crucial components of productive engagement.

3) Monitor and recognize the physical and mental status of the elderly in each country in order to create ample opportunities to actively participate in community and economic activities according to their wishes.

4) Eliminate ageism and avoid using chronological age as a proxy for ability by reforming rigid employment conventions and rules to urge elderly to retire at certain age uniformly.

5) Urge employers to prepare the appropriate employment opportunities, allowing individuals to switch to less physically demanding jobs according to their capabilities in a fair manner, and to institutionalize flexible transition mechanisms such as phased retirement.

6) Foster a fulfillment of life for the elderly such as the opportunities for cultural leisure or art and music therapy and by the measures for social participation eliminate the situation where the older persons are left in isolation and loneliness.

7) Engage the private sector—including small and medium-sized enterprises—as a key partner in promoting productive ageing. Encourage employers to adopt age-friendly human resource practices, invest in lifelong learning and skills upgrading for older workers, and develop products and services for the silver economy that respond to the actual needs of older persons.

8) Develop transparent and ethical frameworks for migrant and cross-border labor in care sectors, recognizing that labor mobility can play a significant role in addressing care workforce shortages, while ensuring that the rights, qualifications, and social security portability of migrant care workers are protected.

3. Strengthening Community-Based Integrated Care Systems

1) Construct a Community-Based Integrated Care System in each daily life district to comprehensively provide medical care, long-term care, prevention, housing, age-friendly physical environments and urban design, and livelihood support so that older persons, including those with dementia, can maintain dignity and independence in their familiar neighborhoods.

2) Strengthen coordination between medical care and long-term care, clarifying the division of roles between "curing medical care" and "curing and supporting medical care" under multi-disciplinary

cooperation.

- 3) Establish “support centers” within each community as its hubs to address various needs of the elderly and their families living there, such as counseling, rights advocacy such as prevention of elder abuse, early screening for non-communicable diseases (NCDs), or preventive care.
- 4) Implement planned resource allocation based on regional mid- to long-term demographic projections, focusing on the balanced development of residential care, daily care, and home care.
- 5) Enhance community welfare to match diverse local resources—such as volunteers, NPOs, and private bodies—with the daily life support needs of older persons such as meal delivery or safety confirmation.
- 6) Upon policy making, comprehensively utilize advanced technology such as AI or digital health tools with a focus on digital inclusion of the elderly and maintaining non-digital pathways.
- 7) Strengthen knowledge and capacity of governmental institutions related to the ageing issues, both national and local, of each country in order to establish and implement appropriate policies on aging that fit respective socioeconomic context.
- 8) Address the urban-rural divide in ageing. Rural areas across East Asia are often ageing faster than urban centers due to youth outmigration, while having fewer healthcare facilities, care workers, and transport options. Governments should develop targeted strategies for rural ageing, including innovative service delivery models (e.g., mobile clinics, telemedicine, community-based care worker training), fiscal transfers to under-served areas, and policies to attract and retain care professionals in rural communities.
- 9) Strengthen the resilience of community care systems in the face of natural disasters, climate-related events, and public health emergencies. Ensure that emergency preparedness plans include specific provisions for older persons, including evacuation assistance, continuity of care, and prioritized aid for vulnerable elderly individuals.

4. Investing in the Care Economy for Gender Equality

- 1) Pay significant attention to the unpaid care work conventionally borne by female family members, and enhance high-quality formal public services to reduce the burden on family caregivers and correct gender inequalities in each respective society.
- 2) Support women's decent employment in child-rearing and caregiving ages by expanding the coverage and accessibility of public schemes to support long-term care.
- 3) Scale up public investment in social protection sectors such as health and care services to drive job creation and make the care economy one of the important pillars of sustainable employment growth.
- 4) Improve working conditions, wage levels, and social status of care workers - including migrant care

workers through ethical recruitment, appropriate recognition of skills, and portability of social security benefits if applicable - to guarantee decent work in the care sector, thereby securing a stable supply of high-quality services.

5) Foster a virtuous circle of the care economy, where public investment reduces unpaid care work, increases women's labor force participation, maintains productivity, and enhances tax revenues and household incomes.

6) Introduce robust work-life balance policies for family caregivers, including care leave options, respite care, training, and professional counseling.

5. Promoting Reablement Services for Dignified Living

1) Enhance the concept to “helping them do what they can do” rather than “doing instead” where appropriate, by focusing on restoring and maintaining the physical and cognitive abilities of older persons.

2) Support older persons to regain and maintain their self-management ability to control and solve their own daily life challenges which significantly impacts their overall well-being, while enhancing the use of advanced technologies such as AI companion robots or smart home environments for daily monitoring that might contribute to their well-being if appropriately applied, with attaching importance to bridging the digital divide through age-adopted websites and apps and systematic digital literacy training.

3) Systematize preventive home medicine and care services for older populations to detect early signs of physical decline and prevent frailty.

4) Improve older persons' quality of life (QOL) through active reablement, thereby reducing unnecessary long-term care dependence and conserving avoidable public financial resources.

5) Promote progressive integration of rehabilitation by training rehabilitation professionals such as physical, occupational, or speech therapists, and utilize their skills to provide systematic programs for the reablement of frail older persons or post-discharge patients at medical and social welfare institutions, as well as at community senior clubs or local exercise groups to systematically promote preventive activities.

6. Advancing International Cooperation and Sharing Regional Experiences

1) Share the historical development, policy formulation processes, and practical lessons, successes and challenges, by already aged countries to promote effective and efficient social support schemes amid population ageing.

- 2) Promote mutual learning of community-based care models in each respective countries, both successful models and failed practices, by establishing a common “knowledge bank” and enhancing the opportunities of policy dialogues among ASEAN plus Three countries.
- 3) Respect diverse cultural and social backgrounds across East Asia, and co-develop adaptable regional models for active ageing rather than relying on uniform policy transplants.
- 4) Facilitate collaborative R&D on technological innovations—including care robots, AI, and digital health technologies—while sharing knowledge on their integration with local communities and social systems.
- 5) Strengthen linkages among existing initiatives such as ACAI to establish regional frameworks, deepen mutual understanding for the development of social programs aimed at the elderly in line with each respective socioeconomic context, extract common lessons to be learned, and contribute the enhancement of dignity of all elderly people within ASEAN plus 3 countries and beyond, with paying attention to the cooperative frameworks for emergency readiness and prioritized aid for vulnerable older persons during natural disasters, pandemics, and other crises.
- 6) Strengthen data governance and statistical capacity for evidence-based policy-making. Promote the harmonization and comparability of key ageing-related indicators across countries—including healthy life expectancy, long-term care needs assessment, elderly poverty rates, and care workforce data—while respecting each country’s data standards and statistical systems. Support capacity-building for national statistical offices, particularly in countries at earlier stages of demographic transition, to improve the collection, analysis, and dissemination of ageing-related data.

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