

# The Impact of the "Sustainable Development Goals" on Japan's International Education Aid Policy

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**Abstract:** After the Dakar Forum, the Japanese government issued two key documents on international education aid: the 2002 Basic Education for Growth Initiative and the 2015 JICA Education Cooperation Report. A comparative study of their content reveals that, while maintaining consistency, the latter is an extension and development of the former. The reasons for this are closely linked to the international context in which both documents were created, particularly the United Nations' "Sustainable Development Goals" and the strategic importance of international education aid in Japan's foreign policy.

**Keywords:** Japan's International Educational Assistance; Initiative for Basic Education for Growth; JICA Education Cooperation Report; Sustainable Development Goals.

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## 1. Introduction

After the 2000 Dakar World Education Forum, the right to education gained global attention, and the quality of education, along with the new developments in universal education, was also emphasized. A series of educational concepts, such as lifelong learning, learning societies, and quality universal education, were widely disseminated and gradually accepted, becoming buzzwords in international education. The United Nations' Millennium Development Goals (2000), the Literacy Decade (2000-2010), and the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014) all placed education at the forefront of sustainable development and poverty reduction. Japan, which joined the Colombo Plan in 1954 and began providing official development assistance to developing countries, responded to the call for universal education by issuing the "Basic Education for Growth Initiative" (BEGIN) in 2002, focusing on basic education in recipient countries. Over the next decade, the international community and organizations made significant efforts, achieving certain outcomes. However, by 2015, there were still outstanding issues regarding the Millennium Development Goals and quality universal education. In September, the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit adopted the "2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development," calling on all nations to strive for the achievement of 17 Sustainable Development Goals. In response, Japan proposed a new international education cooperation strategy—the "Learning Strategy for Peace and Growth" (referred to as the "Learning Strategy"). This strategy aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education, strengthen the training of industrial human resources, and promote education cooperation for sustainable economic and social development, thereby building and expanding educational cooperation networks and providing lifelong learning opportunities for all. In October, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) published the "JICA Education Cooperation Report" (referred to as the "Report"), which elaborates on JICA's stance on international educational aid. Since the "Report" represents the implementation of the "Learning Strategy" and is a comprehensive embodiment of it, analyzing the "Report" is tantamount to interpreting the "Learning Strategy." A

comparative analysis of the educational aid concepts in the "Initiative" and the "Report" suggests that the educational aid philosophy promoted in the "Report" is centered around the Sustainable Development Goals, representing an enhancement and continuation of the "Initiative."

## 2. The Manifestation of Japan's International Educational Aid Policy after the Dakar Forum

### 2.1. From the Dakar Forum to 2015: The Full Implementation of Japan's International Educational Aid Policy in the "Initiative"

#### 2.1.1. Japan's Support for Self-reliant Developing Countries

In response to universal education, Japan explicitly stated that "the emphasis on commitment and support for self-reliant efforts by developing countries" is the first principle of its basic education aid. In 2003, the Japanese government released the "Outline of Development Assistance," which clarified that "supporting self-reliance" is one of the basic policies for implementing official development aid, further establishing the priority of this concept in Japan's international aid. The Japanese government believes that the realization of the Dakar goals requires political commitment from developing countries, along with their proactive efforts to increase and improve the quality of basic education opportunities. Japan's aid aims to respect and support these self-reliant efforts, focusing on institutional development and human resource training.

#### 2.1.2. Japan's Educational Aid Maintains a Humble Attitude and Respects the Autonomy of Recipient Countries

This aligns with the previously mentioned principle of "supporting self-reliance." The Japanese government and its aid agencies have repeatedly emphasized the need to consider the regional, national, and local particularities, and to approach aid from the perspective of the recipient countries to ensure the smooth implementation of assistance, working "jointly" with the recipient countries. Both donor and recipient countries should acknowledge the diversity of cultures and enhance mutual understanding. With the

acceleration of globalization and the increasing convergence of lifestyles, it has become more meaningful to care about, understand, and accept foreign cultures starting from a young age. In the process of educational aid, Japan has not only learned how to share successful experiences with recipient countries and enhance the internationalization of its educational institutions, such as universities, but has also cultivated volunteers with an international perspective, adaptability, and guidance skills. This has deepened understanding of foreign cultures and further advanced international education in schools.

### **2.1.3. Japan's Educational Aid is based on Japan's Educational Experience**

Japan places great importance on education, and its "Rice-Hundred-Bales Spirit" demonstrates the significant role that education played in Japan's development, serving as the driving force behind post-war growth. Since the Meiji period, Japan has accumulated a wealth of educational experience that is valuable for developing countries to learn from and adopt. These educational experiences have also become one of the guiding principles of Japan's international educational aid.

## **2.2. From 2015 to the Present: Japan's International Educational Aid Philosophy after 2015**

### **2.2.1. Mutual Trust as the Prerequisite for Implementing Educational Aid**

JICA firmly believes that trust is key to improving educational quality. For example, improving school operations requires alignment between schools and communities, as they work together to address common educational challenges encountered in enhancing children's educational quality. The foundation for this is the trust relationship between schools and communities. In the field of vocational and technical education and training, based on the trust between vocational schools and enterprises, the social needs are authentically reflected in the training, fostering a supportive relationship between the school and the business sector in assisting students. In the field of engineering education, Japanese universities and researchers from developing countries have established networks of social capital, where collaborative research and student guidance are conducted based on this trust. JICA not only provides technical solutions but also emphasizes the need for both parties to reach a consensus, respect each other, freely express opinions, and implement educational aid within a relationship of mutual trust.

### **2.2.2. Mutual Learning to Create Knowledge as a Pathway for Implementing Educational Aid**

JICA analyzes the experiences and knowledge accumulated through its aid to 150 countries from multiple dimensions, generating knowledge to address educational challenges and adding value to educational aid. In the future, greater emphasis will be placed on mutual learning, with a planned and systematic approach to strengthen this concept. For example, JICA uses the Lesson Study method to establish mechanisms for mutual learning at the levels of teachers, schools, regions, and globally, fostering the creation of professional communities to provide solutions to educational issues. The outcomes of this approach are disseminated through international conference presentations and publications. At the same time, Japan has strengths in

engineering education, and not only can developing countries benefit from Japan's experiences, but they can also create new knowledge by jointly addressing regional common challenges.

### **2.2.3. Equity and Inclusion as the Goal of Implementing Educational Aid**

Equity and inclusion are central principles in Japan's international educational aid. To achieve the 2030 Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 4), ensuring that everyone has equitable access to high-quality education, free from exclusion, and enhancing lifelong learning opportunities, Japan's international educational aid continues to focus on disadvantaged groups, including the poor, women, people with disabilities, minorities, and those affected by war and natural disasters. The goal is to reduce the recurrence of educational inequities.

## **3. The Relationship between the "Initiative for Basic Education for Growth" and the "JICA Education Cooperation Report"**

### **3.1. Consistency between the "Report" and the "Initiative"**

Both the 2003 "Initiative" and the 2015 "Report" regard mutual trust and mutual understanding as key principles of international educational aid. The "Initiative" emphasized that, for the expansion of basic education and the sustainability of educational activities, gaining the understanding of the parents of children in the recipient areas is crucial. The "Report" asserts that international educational aid should not only provide technical solutions but also build a relationship of mutual respect and open communication, which is essential for the successful implementation of educational cooperation. This demonstrates that trust became the fundamental tone of Japan's international educational aid philosophy after the Dakar Forum.

### **3.2. The "Report" as a Supplement to the "Initiative"**

The "Report" establishes "inclusion and peace" as the central concept of educational aid, providing a comprehensive and detailed explanation of the scope of educational aid from three perspectives. This expands the scope of aid, addressing areas that were not mentioned in the "Initiative," making the "Report" more comprehensive. Based on the "Report," Japan's international educational aid targets populations in disadvantaged environments and people in countries affected by war and disasters. Disadvantaged groups include women, who are increasingly underrepresented in science and engineering research teams, individuals with intellectual and physical disabilities, and illiterate populations in South Asian countries. Education aid to countries affected by war and disaster includes post-disaster psychological counseling, disaster preparedness education, and the construction and renovation of earthquake-resistant schools; improving the quality of schools and learning environments in post-conflict settings; and enhancing survival skills for refugees, veterans, women, and people with disabilities in warring countries. From these areas, it is clear that the "Report" is more comprehensive compared to the "Initiative."

### **3.3. The "Report" Expands Beyond the "Initiative"**

Although the "Initiative" does not explicitly state that Japan's aid is directed at basic education in recipient countries, its title implies that Japan's post-Dakar Forum educational aid mainly aims to improve basic education in developing countries. In this vertical relationship between developed and developing countries, Japan focused on transferring its excellent educational experiences, particularly in science and engineering education, to developing countries. The "Report," however, emphasizes the concept of knowledge co-creation in educational aid. Knowledge co-creation shifts the focus from a one-way collaboration from developed to developing countries to a joint research approach between developed and developing countries, building a mutually beneficial relationship. While knowledge co-creation does not entirely abandon basic science and engineering education, it strengthens scientific and technological capabilities by training talent in innovation to meet societal needs and global development. On the other hand, it fully leverages Japan's strengths in engineering education and technological advancements to promote joint research and the development of knowledge networks among key universities in Asia. Japan's educational programs for developing countries not only foster the cultivation of outstanding talent overseas but also allow the resources, experiences, and outcomes gained abroad to feed back into promoting innovation and development in Japan's domestic industries. Additionally, these programs help enhance the international competence of Japanese teachers, which in turn contributes to the internationalization of Japan's primary and secondary education.

## **4. Reasons Why the "Report" Inherits and Surpass the "Initiative"**

The "Initiative" was developed in the context of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) set by the Dakar Forum, while the "Report" is aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). A comprehensive analysis of these two frameworks reveals the reasons for the transformation in Japan's international educational aid policy as follows:

### **4.1. Changes in the International Environment**

The establishment of "Universal Education" and the "Millennium Development Goals" in 2000 triggered significant changes in the educational landscape. Many countries advanced their educational programs, establishing clear education policies and strategies. However, due to the standardization of education, the diversity and differences among countries were difficult to highlight. The frequent use of international assessments of academic performance allowed comparisons of children's learning abilities across countries, which also led to discussions and research on the multidimensional definitions and measurements of "educational quality" and "learning abilities." The "Millennium Development Goals" addressed eight areas, but overlooked important aspects of international educational development, such as employment, gender equality beyond primary education, and social development. As a result, the "Initiative" focused primarily on solving basic education issues, lacking a focus on sustainable development. On one hand, the continued increase in the number of private schools

and universities, along with the involvement of non-governmental organizations and private enterprises, raised the issue of how to increase educational opportunities while ensuring quality. The introduction of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) into education raised expectations for improved learning quality, but the backwardness of infrastructure led to a widening gap in digital equipment. Education could not break free from the constraints of poverty, culture, and tradition on its own. The increase in conflicts and disasters worldwide also contributed to the changing environment. In 2014, approximately 60 million people sought refuge due to conflicts, and over 170 million children were affected by disasters annually. Schools became targets of attack. Amid the diversification of challenges and changes in the environment, the introduction of the "Sustainable Development Goals" (SDGs) included 17 development goals, of which the education-related goals focused on promoting welfare across all age groups; ensuring inclusive, equitable, and high-quality education with lifelong learning opportunities; and achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls. The concepts of inclusion and peace permeate the entire SDG framework and naturally became one of the core educational aid philosophies in the "Report." Educational aid transitioned from a vertical relationship between developed and developing countries to a dialogue between the two, collaborating on shared issues. In response to these challenges and environmental changes, JICA conducted scientific analyses, coordinated flexible and innovative solutions, and acted as a catalyst for knowledge creation.

### **4.2. Educational International Aid act as an Important Strategy for Japan's National Diplomacy and Economic Development.**

Educational international aid is a key component of Japan's diplomatic and economic strategies. Through educational aid and cultural influence directed at developing countries worldwide, Japan has continually enhanced its political image in the international community, becoming a critical pathway for building the country's soft power. Japan's transformation of its international educational aid philosophy has expanded its educational initiatives abroad, further advancing the internationalization of Japanese education. By penetrating foreign educational markets, Japan has also supported its own economic development. For example, Japan has exported its teacher education model to Thailand, its vocational education system to India, and its safety education for engineering laboratories to Myanmar. Japan places particular emphasis on advancing the ASEAN University Network to facilitate the sharing of information and resources between universities.

## **5. Conclusion**

Through a comparative analysis of the transformation of Japan's international educational aid philosophy after the Dakar Forum, it is evident that, following the "2030 Sustainable Development Agenda," Japan's international educational aid, based on mutual trust, makes use of Japan's rich experiences in education and technology. It emphasizes co-creation of knowledge with recipient countries, the cultivation of talent in scientific and technological innovation, and the development of individuals who contribute to social peace and national development, while strengthening the strategy of "going global" in education. The "2030

Sustainable Development Agenda" presents both opportunities and challenges for China. The concepts of the "Sustainable Development Goals" have been integrated into China's "Belt and Road" initiative, creating a favorable environment for international aid, spreading Chinese culture, and telling China's story in the countries along the Belt and Road.

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