

# Japan's ageing society

## SUMMARY

Japan is aging fast. Its 'super-aged' society is the oldest in the world: 28.7 % of the population are 65 or older, with women forming the majority. The country is also home to a record 80 000 centenarians. By 2036, people aged 65 and over will represent a third of the population.

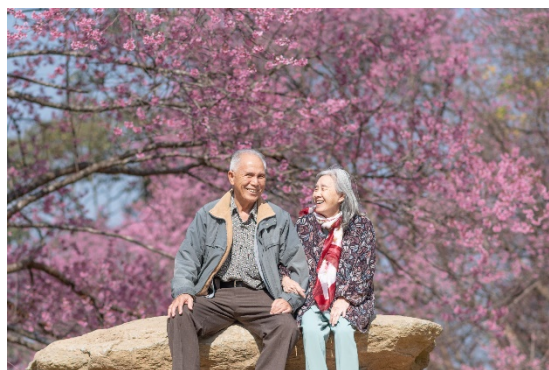
Since 2011, the Japanese population has also been shrinking: it is a rare case of large country whose overall population is becoming smaller in prosperous and peaceful times. Japan's population is expected to drop from 127 million in 2015 to 88 million by 2065.

Japan's demographic crisis is the consequence of the combination of two elements: a high life expectancy and a low fertility rate. In 2018, Japan had the second highest life expectancy in the world. Meanwhile, since the 1970s the country has failed to raise its fertility rate to the replacement level. The working culture, a deterioration of employment opportunities for young men and the traditional gender division of labour are possible explanations for this trend.

The consequences of the country's aging and shrinking population include economic crisis, budgetary challenges, pressure on job markets and depopulation of rural areas. The silver economy is meanwhile flourishing and Japan is at the forefront of robot development to face a declining labour force and to take care of its elderly. The government's efforts to address the demographic crisis have yet to succeed however, and immigration has been limited.

Tokyo is engaged in global health cooperation and succeeded in incorporating the concept of human security in the sustainable development goals. It has also been active in international cooperation on ageing, with a focus on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) region.

The EU's own ageing society is not far behind Japan. It could benefit from learning from Japan's experience, and cooperating on all aspects relating to demographic challenges, including on 'agetech': technology making comfortable longevity accessible to all.



### In this Briefing

- A rapidly ageing country
- The root of the phenomenon
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- Government policies
- Demography: A challenge common to Japan and the EU

## A rapidly ageing country

### A 'super-aged' society

With a [median age of 48](#), the world's highest,<sup>1</sup> Japan is the globe's fastest ageing country. It can be defined as a '[super-aged](#)' society, i.e. a country where more than one in five of the population is 65 or over. In Japan, in fact, more than one in four people are 65 or over – [28.7 % of the population](#), making up 36.17 million (almost the population of Poland), according to government statistics released in September 2020; this makes Japan the country with the oldest population by far. The EU average in 2019 was 20.46 % (see box). Almost one in three women in Japan is 65 or over (31.6 %). People aged 70 or over represent 22.2 % of the total population, and one in four women now falls within this age range (25.4 %). The population aged 90 and over had already reached [two million](#) in 2017. Japan also has a record number of [centenarians](#): over 80 000. This figure is expected to rise to [440 000](#) by 2050. Most of Japan's centenarians (approximately 88 %) are women. In November 2019, Japan was home to 150 [supercentenarians](#) (people aged 110 or over).

### A shrinking (and ageing) population

Japan's demographic 'pyramid' lost its shape in the 1990s, when a structural shift resulted in a bulge in the middle-aged and older area. The current impression is more of an urn (see box on next page), with the pyramid covering a smaller area, representing a diminished population. Japan had a baby boom right after World War II, but this was much [shorter-lived](#) than in other countries (from 1947 to 1949). A [second baby boom](#) followed from 1971 to 1974. However, since 1974, the country has [failed to raise its fertility rate](#) to the replacement level of 2.1. The issue gained national attention in 1990, with the so-called '[1.57 shock](#)', when Japan's birth rate fell to its lowest recorded level in history. In 2018, the rate was [1.42](#) children per woman (it was [1.55](#) in the EU, ranging from 1.23 in Malta to 1.88 in France). Japan's population has been constantly [shrinking since 2011](#): in 2019, it diminished by 276 000 people, decreasing in 40 out of 47 prefectures. If Japanese nationals only are considered, the population [fell by 487 000](#) people, which means that immigration only partially offsets the falling numbers of Japanese locals. Based on October 2020 projections, the population was [125.59 million](#).

The forecasts for Japan's population size are especially alarming. In 2017, the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research estimated that Japan's population was expected to decrease from 127 million in 2015 to around 111 million by 2040, to fall below 100 million by 2053, and to drop to [88 million by 2065](#).

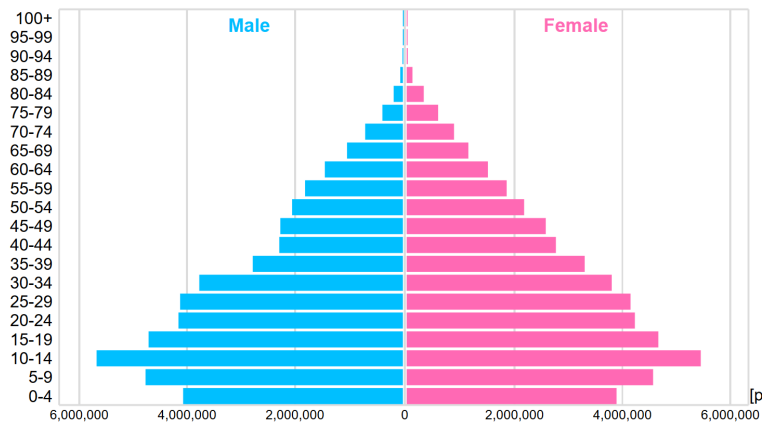
These projections consider a medium-fertility scenario; in the case of a low-fertility scenario, the population would drop to 82 million by 2065. By 2036, the number of people aged 65 and over will make up one-third of the population. While their number is set to begin falling after 2042, their share of the population will rise to 38 % in the 2060s. In the EU, one in three people will be over 65 by 2060. [Respect for the Aged Day](#) (*Keiro no Hi*) has been a Japanese national holiday since 1966. It is currently celebrated on the third Tuesday of September.

Table 1 – Countries with the largest share of population aged 65 or over, 2019

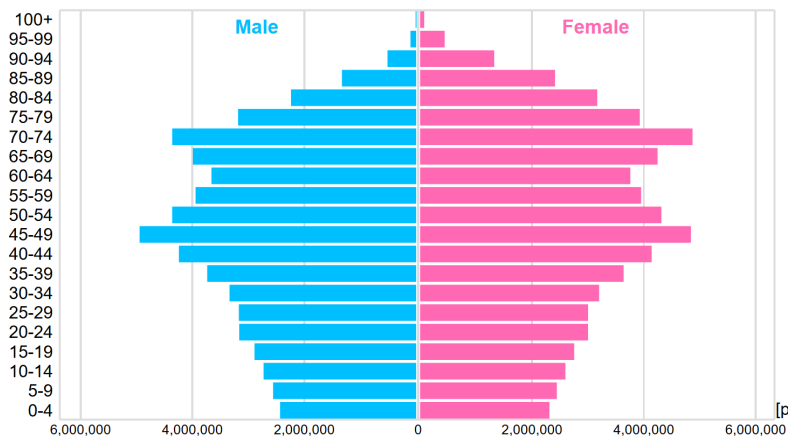
Country	65+ %
Japan	28.00
Italy	23.01
Portugal	22.36
Finland	22.14
Greece	21.94
Germany	21.56
Bulgaria	21.25
Croatia	20.86
Malta	20.82
(EU)	20.46
France	20.39
Latvia	20.34
Sweden	20.20
Slovenia	20.19
Lithuania	20.16
Estonia	19.99
Denmark	19.97
Czechia	19.80
Hungary	19.69
Spain	19.65
Netherlands	19.61
(World)	9.10

Figure 1 – Japan's demographic pyramid in 1960, 2020 and 2045

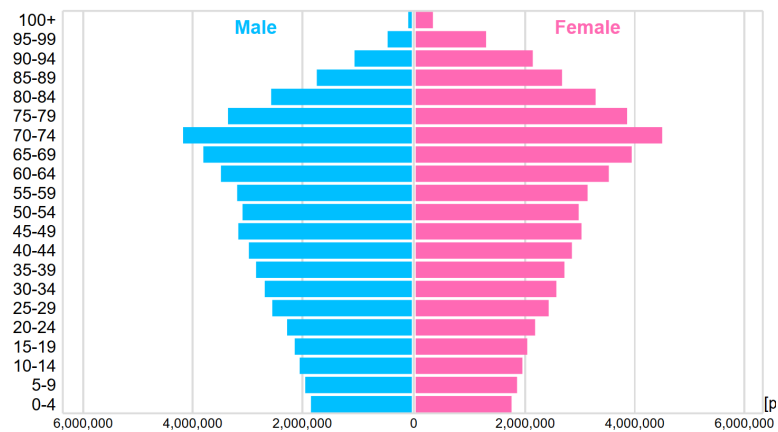
1960



2020



2045



Source: [Statistics Dashboard](#), Government of Japan. Data for 2020 and 2045 are projections.

## The root of the phenomenon

### Japanese people live longer

Japan's demographic crisis is the consequence of the combination of two elements: high life expectancy and a low fertility rate. Life expectancy for the Japanese population has increased steadily over the past few decades. In [2019](#) it was 87.45 years for women and 81.41 for men. In 2018, at 87.32, Japan had the world's [second highest](#) rate after Hong Kong for life expectancy at birth. Life expectancy at birth in the [EU-27](#) was estimated at 81.0 in 2018: 83.7 for women and 78.2 for men.

Several factors have combined to improve health among the Japanese population: traditionally healthy [dietary habits](#), access to clean water, universal health insurance coverage (UHC), a hygiene-conscious culture, and old people's active lifestyles. Experts also point at [further elements](#). Economic development, for instance, has been associated with major factors of decline in older adult mortality in high-income countries during the twentieth century. Nevertheless, Japan's economic recession in the 1990s did not prevent life expectancy from continuing to grow during and after the recession. On top of this, there is the example of Okinawa prefecture, which is socio-economically the country's least developed region, but has retained the highest life expectancy ranking for many years. Other possible explanations include [genetics](#), a low level of income inequality, and a high level of social cohesion.

### Japanese have fewer children

Japan's [fertility rate](#) began to decline in the 1970s.<sup>2</sup> It reached its minimum in 2005 ([1.26](#)), then bounced back, though never to replacement levels. In 2016 it began declining again (to [1.36](#) in 2019). This is combined with [increasing age at first marriage](#) and [decreasing rates of marriage](#): in 2015, the proportion of people who had never married aged 50 was at a record high of 23.4 % for men and 14.1 % for women. This has contributed to a lower birth rate –in Japan in 2018 a mere [2.3 %](#) of children were born outside marriage. The Covid-19 pandemic has [added](#) to this trend: the number of notified pregnancies in the three months to July 2020 fell 11.4 % from a year earlier, while the number of marriages over the same period dropped by 36.9 %.

According to Matsutani Akihiko, professor emeritus in applied economics at the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies, Japan's ongoing population decrease is [not related to its low birth rate](#), but rather to an increase in the number of deaths of people born during the baby boom right before World War II. The pace of deaths will increase until it peaks in around 2030, resulting in an acceleration in the decline in population. After that, the population will keep falling because of the low birth rate.

One of the main reasons for this lower birth rate is the [deterioration of employment](#) opportunities for young men, who could find life-long jobs more easily in the past. This [affects](#) their possibilities of settling down, including their marriage chances: some argue that Japanese women tend to seek men in stable [employment and a level of education](#) higher than their own. A 2019 study on [virginity rates](#) showed that the lack of heterosexual sexual experience is rising, and that men with permanent, full-time and well-paid jobs were more likely to have had sex.

Japan's working culture is partly responsible. [Long working hours](#) due to social norms and work conventions, and subsequent stress and fatigue, have also been connected to the low fertility rate. However, the main problem may lie in the persistence of the traditional gender division of tasks within families, which places a heavy obligation on women to take care both of childcare and their household. In addition, as the education system is highly competitive and expensive, mothers often have to make sure that their children are successful. Although mothers are often employed, they also have to shoulder the [burden of family responsibilities](#), balancing them with their work obligations, while [children's day care](#) facilities are often [insufficient](#). Furthermore, [employers are not keen](#) to recognise fathers' right to take parental leave to look after their children. Japanese legislation has allowed fathers to take up to a year of paid leave to care for children since the 1990s, the same as for new mothers. Yet the participation rate among men in Japan is low: around 7 %,

usually for less than two weeks. When in January 2020 for the first time a member of the government (Environment Minister Koizumi Shinjiro, youngest son of popular former Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro) announced he would take two weeks of paternity leave spread over three months, he caused a [culture shock](#). The government is [considering](#) making it mandatory for companies to recommend that employees take paternity leave.

#### When others judge

*Matahara* is the contraction of two English words: 'maternity' and 'harassment'. Japan's law bans [discrimination against pregnant women](#) in the workplace, but until recently the law was not applied. Many Japanese employers are resistant to their female employees' pregnancy. They disregard requests for reduced working hours, revoke titles and tasks, and sometimes fire pregnant employees. Adult children opting to live with parents are sometimes referred to as '[parasite singles](#)'. Although they often suffer from a lack of economic opportunities, Japanese society places the blame on them. Heterosexual young men who lack interest in romance or sex and reject masculine gender norms are referred to as '[herbivore men](#)' and some media portray them negatively.

## Socioeconomic consequences of an ageing society

Though Japan has been successful in remaining relatively stable socially and raising living standards, analysts [argue](#) that demographics have hampered the country's economic growth. According to Yi Fuxian, scientist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Japan's **economic crisis** is essentially a [demographic crisis](#). The declining numbers of young people in the labour force has led to a shortage of workers in manufacturing and the ageing of the workforce has provoked a decline in production and innovation, and therefore a drop in Japan's manufacturing exports as a share of global exports. The growing elderly population is bringing down savings, while the decreasing labour force is resulting in a declining return on investment, and reducing the investment rate. In November 2018, an International Monetary Fund (IMF) staff [paper](#) estimated that Japan's economic growth would decline by 0.8 % on average each year over the next 40 years due to demographics alone.

An ageing society results in challenging **budget consequences**. Japan's health expenditure reached 10.9 % of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2018 and, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), is projected to reach [12.1 % by 2030](#). (The EU average in 2017 was [9.9 %](#), with Germany and France leading at 11.3 %). Japan's estimated [expenditure per capita](#) on healthcare totalled ¥337 000 (€2 730) in 2018, with a clear difference between ages. Spending on people aged under 75 was ¥222 000 (€1 800), whereas for patients aged 75 and older it was more than four times greater: ¥939 000 (€ 7 600). Public spending on pensions as a percentage of GDP rose to a level higher than the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) average – though not excessively: it was [9.4 % in 2015](#), lower than that of 10 other countries, with Greece in first place (16.9 %) and Germany in 10th (10.1 %). Japan's public debt amounts to around [240 %](#) of GDP. In order to reduce it and fund social welfare programmes, in October 2019, the government [increased the sales tax](#) from 8 % to 10 %.

**Poverty** is [growing](#) among the elderly: in 2018, one million people aged 65 and over were receiving public assistance in Japan, accounting for almost half of all public assistance recipients (who number close to 2.1 million). The relative poverty rate of older people aged over 65 is 19.6 %, compared with 13.5 % on average in the [OECD](#). The issue of poverty is especially acute among [old women](#): in 2017, the poverty rate among women aged 65 and over was 22 %. Despite a decreasing overall crime rate, [senior shoplifting](#) is on the [rise](#). Some older people repeat offend as a way to return to prison, where they have companions and access to free meals, accommodation and healthcare. A growing number of seniors **live alone** and experience *kodokushi* (a [lonely death](#)), while local authorities struggle to dispose of their belongings when they die in public care homes, as next of kin can be difficult to trace.

There is also pressure on the labour market. Japan has the highest old-age to working-age ratio in the OECD. The dependency ratio (the ratio of dependents – people younger than 15 or older than 64 – to the working-age population) is increasing: it was [47.1 %](#) in 2019, but the government projects that, by 2060, there will be almost one elderly person for each person of working age. [Women's](#)

[labour force](#) participation has increased in recent years – from 48.3 % in 2012 to 52.7 % in 2020 – but remains much lower than the EU average, which stood at [67 %](#) in 2018. However, the shrinking and ageing of the population in the coming years will translate into fewer and older workers. Japan's potential [labour force](#) – people between the ages of 15 and 64 as a share of the total population – recovered from its lowest point in 2012 (59.1 %) to 62.1 % in 2019, but is well below its 1960s level. The [OECD](#) suggests further boosting the employment rate of those aged 55 and changing the incentives to work for those aged 60 to 64. The pension eligibility age is 65, but often companies fix a [mandatory retirement](#) at 60 and then reemploy workers until they are 65. The government is planning to adopt legislation that would allow companies to allow workers to work [until 70](#). These provisions would not be mandatory: companies would be able to choose from five different options. Considering the limited inflow of foreign workers, the [labour shortage](#) is worsening and there is a limited number of job applicants – Japan's unemployment rate was [3.1 %](#) in October 2020, against a ratio of openings to applicants at 1.04 (104 openings for every 100 people looking for work). The [Self-Defence Forces](#) (SDF) have not met their recruiting targets since 2014. In 2018, the SDF raised the maximum age for new recruits from 26 to 32; the retirement age for senior officers also began to rise gradually as of 2020.<sup>3</sup>

As a result of the above, the number of people aged **65 or over remaining in the workforce** is on the increase: according to government statistics released in September 2020, the number was a record 8.92 million, up for the 16th consecutive year. This group represents 13.3 % of the entire workforce. In 2018, [47 % of the 65-69 year old were employed](#), compared with 22 % for the OECD on average. This is the consequence of a high average effective age of labour market exit: 71 for men, 69 for women, while it was at 65.4 and 63.5 respectively across OECD countries.

The **farming population** is shrinking dramatically (from 5.42 million in the 1985 [agricultural census](#) to 2.09 million in 2015) and some **rural municipalities** are at risk of disappearance, while the agricultural sector now faces a severe labour shortage. Farmers are also ageing. In 2015, of the 1.75 million people primarily engaged in agriculture, 63.5 % were aged 65 or over, a percentage that has tripled in 30 years. In 2014, former minister for internal affairs Masuda Hiroya published [Local Extinctions](#): a report based on National Institution of Population and Social Security Research figures showing that 896 cities, towns and villages throughout Japan were facing extinction by 2040. The number of **unoccupied houses** (and shops) is on the rise: in October 2018, these represented 13.5 % of all houses ([8.5 million](#)).

Demography also has an impact on **education**. A shrinking child population is leading local governments around Japan to close schools: more than [200](#) elementary and junior high schools closed across Japan in 2018. [Universities are also struggling](#) to cope with a shrinking population. The percentage of private universities that have faced shortfalls in student enrolment compared to the quota authorised by the government has been increasing in recent years. The decrease in the size of the youth population [reduces competition](#) among the young people being screened for the domestic education system, who tend not to engage seriously in competition-oriented learning.

[Japan](#) is a [pioneering](#) country when it comes to its **silver economy**. Several companies, including home appliance manufacturers, are [adapting](#) their products to a rapidly growing elderly market. Already years ago, adult diapers for incontinence were predicted to [outsell](#) baby pampers. More than 20 million [raku](#) ('easy') mobile phones have been sold in the Japanese market. In the above-mentioned struggling agricultural sector, [vertical farming](#) is taking off. The banking sector, on the contrary, seems to be lagging behind in adapting to the ageing population, in part because of its discomfort with the fact that financial fraudsters tend to target the elderly: in 2018, 78 % of the victims of scams in Japan were over 65. However, some banks are beginning to adapt to the requirements of a clientele who hold [half of Japan's US\\$17 trillion](#) in **personal financial assets**. Meanwhile, regional banks are facing increasing difficulties in covering operating costs, and analysts are predicting a wave of mergers to enable them to cut costs and sustain their profitability: this [expectation](#) has grown, as demonstrated by rising share values since the 71-year old Suga Yoshihide became Prime Minister in September 2020. In November 2020, the Bank of Japan approved a

[scheme incentivising](#) regional banks to merge or introduce cost-cutting measures using interest rate policies. The [silver economy](#) is set to play a major role in [the EU too](#): by 2025, economic activity sustained by the spending of the silver economy is expected to reach €6.4 trillion, equivalent to 31.5 % of EU GDP.

### 'The land of rising robots'

This was the title of a 2018 OECD [podcast](#): the combination of a rapidly declining labour force and an increasingly old population in need of care has provided an incentive for the development of robots and artificial intelligence (AI). Japan is at the cutting edge of [agetechnology](#). In 2014, then Prime Minister Abe Shinzō proclaimed the achievement of a '[new industrial revolution driven by robots](#)' as a one of the measures of a revised [Japan revitalisation strategy](#). The same year the government set up a [robot revolution realisation council](#) and in 2015 adopted a [new robot strategy](#). While in the West, robots are portrayed as a potential threat to jobs and elder care is seen as a task where a human touch is essential, Japanese media have helped to build confidence in robots. The latter are now [increasingly present in nursing homes](#), growing numbers of which are facing the challenge of a shortfall of specialised care workers, and every greater numbers of residents. The government is looking at potential market development, both internally and abroad. The Ministry of the Economy has estimated that the domestic industry alone will grow to ¥400 billion (€3.2 billion) by 2035.

## Government policies

### Family policies

Following the '1.57 shock', the government in 1994 created the '[Angel Plan](#)' to assist couples in raising children, by expanding [family policies](#) and programmes in childcare service, parental leave schemes and monetary assistance (child allowances). The plan was revised several times; in 2009, the government added the goal of raising the percentage of women who remain in the labour force, along other goals aimed at improving the work-life balance. The Abe government repeatedly recognised the need to reverse the demographic trend. In 2015, it fixed a goal to raise the fertility rate to 1.8 by 2025, with little progress so far. In his 2018 new year address to the nation, Abe defined Japan's ageing society and low birth rate as '[the most significant challenge](#) to the survival of the nation since the mid-nineteenth century'. In October 2019, the government introduced [free](#) preschool education and day-care services for children aged 3 to 5. However, critics [argue](#) that the government would do better to prioritise raising the capacity of day-care services instead. In May 2020, the cabinet announced a new package calling for increased economic support for childbirth and child-rearing – including reducing the financial burden of fertility treatment, raising child allowances, expanding the programme for free higher education, and introducing higher allowances for paternity leave. It is still unclear how these new programmes would be financed. As soon as Suga became Prime Minister, he identified the [coverage of fertility treatment](#) on public health insurance as one of the four most urgent issues to address quickly. The Japanese parental leave system is quite generous – parents are entitled to up to 24 months of paid leave. Meanwhile, primary and secondary education are free, and the healthcare system (which has been key to successful management of the [Covid-19](#) pandemic) covers the entire population. It has not helped the birth rate to grow, however, as Japan's corporate culture remains characterised by long working hours and puts

### A solution: Empowering women

Kito Hiroshi, president of the University of Shizuoka and expert on population issues, recognises the importance of financial assistance for families. He [argues](#), however, that Japan needs to work on gender discrimination to increase the fertility rate: 'the number of births will not go up unless we create a society where men and women are equal, no matter how long it takes to achieve that goal'. Japan's performance in international gender equality comparisons is poor. In the World Economic Forum's 2020 [Global Gender Gap Index](#), Japan ranks 121 out of 153 countries, the last of the most developed, and dropping 11 positions in comparison with 2019. Former Prime Minister Abe's policy dubbed '[womenomics](#)', designed to promote gender equality, has [not achieved](#) the government's goals: there is still much to do to achieve [women's empowerment](#) in Japan.

pressure on citizens wishing to attain a work-life balance. Kato Hisakazu, professor at Meiji University suggests [supporting young families](#).

## Immigration – A taboo

Homogenous and insular, [Japan is not an immigrant-friendly country](#): entrants are temporary 'guest workers' who will eventually return home. This applies to [refugees too](#): in 2018, only 42 out of 10 493 applicants (0.4 % of the total) were granted refugee or special resident status. In June 2019, 2.82 million people, a mere 2 %<sup>4</sup> of the population, were foreign residents. According to Chris Burgess, professor at Tsuda College, 'the ethno-nationalistic discourse has acted as a consistent barrier to the social integration of all newcomers, preventing the development of proper support infrastructure'. Until 2018, Japan's immigration legislation granted working residence status only to highly skilled professionals; other foreign workers were included in groups such as technical trainees from developing countries in the framework of aid programmes and students working part-time. In December 2018, the Japanese Diet adopted new legislation introducing a new visa status for two categories of workers. Under the first category, foreign workers with vocational skills in specified fields are allowed to stay in the country for up to five years, however they cannot bring their families. Under a second more limited category, foreigners with more advanced skills are allowed to bring their families and are permitted to live in the country indefinitely. This marks the first time in the post-war period that Japan has officially accepted blue-collar foreign workers. The government estimated a quota of 345 000 in five years and the scheme entered into force in April 2019. At the end of December 2019, only 1 621 workers had been accepted under the scheme, a mere [3 %](#) of the government quota for the 2019 fiscal year. In fact, many Japanese [firms resist hiring foreign workers](#) as they are concerned about aspects such as additional costs for education and possible cultural issues.

## Japan's involvement in global health and active ageing cooperation

Building on the country's health achievements, Japan has engaged in global health cooperation. Tokyo has been promoting the concept of [human security](#), which also encompasses health, a topic regularly included on the agenda of G7 and G8 summits hosted by Japan. The Health and Medical Strategy Promotion Act was passed in 2014, followed by the [healthcare policy](#), which was revised in 2017. It contains several references to overseas activities (many of which relate to promoting the creation of new industries and facilitating overseas expansion in the health and medical care sector), as well as to support for the establishment of health and welfare policies dealing with the ageing population in the ASEAN region and beyond. Japan has [focused on the ASEAN](#) region in its

### Health and welfare policies addressing an ageing society

Universal health coverage has been in place since [1961](#) and free healthcare for the elderly was introduced in 1973. In the 1980s, social phenomena such as '[social hospitalisation](#)' and 'bedridden elderly people' exploded, increasing medical costs. As a result, long-term care insurance ([LTCI](#)) including welfare services, separate from the medical care insurance scheme, was introduced in 2000. It provides institutional care, home healthcare services, and community-based services. The second term of the large-scale project 'Healthy Japan 21', a 10-year plan begun in 2013, defined five sets of [targets](#). The first one includes [two targets](#) focusing on the elderly: the extension of 'healthy life expectancy' (average time spent without limitation to daily activities) and the reduction of health disparities (variations among prefectures in average time spent without limitations to daily activities).

In the framework of the '[comprehensive reform](#) of social security and tax' aimed at [reducing health care expenditure](#), in 2012 the government launched the 'community-based integrated care system' ([CbICS](#)). It includes four elements: self-help (*Jijo*) provided by the individual or their family; mutual aid (*Go-jo*) provided through an informal network involving local health volunteers; social solidarity care (*Kyo-jo*) provided by organised social security programmes such as LTCI; government care (*Ko-jo*) provided by public medical and welfare services or by public assistance funded by tax revenues. The first two (self-help and mutual aid) are key when it comes to achieving the goal of reducing the financial burden. Municipalities are urged to establish CbICS by 2025, with strong encouragement of municipal autonomy.



[international cooperation on ageing](#): this includes the [Japan-ASEAN Health initiative](#) (which supports human resources development for the promotion of healthy lifestyles, preventing disease and raising healthcare standards in ASEAN countries), the [Japan-ASEAN Universal Health Coverage \(UHC\) initiative](#), with a focus on [population ageing](#), and the [ASEAN-Japan Active Aging Conference](#). In 2015 the government adopted [Japan 2035](#), which outlines Japan's vision for health care in 2035 and its goal to become a global health leader and to offer a health model for other countries confronted with rapid ageing.

Tokyo succeeded in having the concept of [human security](#) incorporated into the United Nations sustainable development goals (SDGs) adopted in September 2015. These include [goal 3](#) – Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages – and, in particular, target 3.8, which calls for universal health coverage (UHC) – something that Japan (along with [France](#)) championed throughout the negotiation process. In May 2016, the government set up the [SDGs Promotion Headquarters](#) and in December 2016 adopted the [SDGs Implementation Guiding Principles](#), revised in December 2019. In July 2016, the Headquarters adopted the Basic Principles of the Asia Health and Wellbeing Initiative ([AHWIN](#)), revised in July 2018. Following government's initiatives, the Japan Business Federation launched [Society 5.0 for SDGs](#). Japan was the promoter of the [Group of Friends of UHC](#), established in December 2018, an informal platform for UN member states to build global momentum towards achieving UHC by 2030.

Japan hosted the first G7 summit after the adoption of the SDGs in May 2016 in Ise-Shima, where UHC was on the agenda and featured in the [Leaders' Declaration](#). The summit endorsed the [G7 Ise-Shima Vision for Global Health](#) promoting healthy and active ageing, including in research and innovation. The Sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD VI), held in August 2016 in Nairobi (the first time outside Japan), included health as a major agenda item; and the Nairobi [Declaration](#) and [Implementation Plan](#) support UHC in Africa. Since 2016, there have been G20 meetings of health ministers: in October 2019 the [Okayama Declaration](#) was the first to focus on population ageing.

## Demography: A challenge common to Japan and the EU

As Table 1 shows, most of the EU's Member States are close behind Japan on the way to becoming super-ageing societies, and – as the EPRS [Demographic outlook for the European Union 2020](#) shows – the EU represents a shrinking proportion of the global population. Certainly, in some respects, the EU differs from Japan. For instance, while Japan has no official immigration policy, and the country welcomes very few refugees, the EU has a [policy](#) largely based on the [European agenda on migration](#), and has welcomed huge numbers of migrants and refugees (especially in 2015), with migration becoming increasingly important for expanding or maintaining the EU population.

The EU and Japan are democratic partners sharing many values and have cemented their relationship, both in [trade](#) and with the EU-Japan [Strategic Partnership Agreement](#). While the latter, signed in July 2018, does [not mention the ageing society](#), it envisages cooperation on many issues relating to the demographic challenges to come, including on science, technology and innovation; employment and social affairs; and health. The EU could benefit from tracking Japanese experience closely and trying to anticipate the effects of an ageing population on welfare, budgets, job markets and society. [People-to-people](#) exchanges could also be envisaged. While economists have been warning about the '[Japanification](#)' of the world economy for many years, the term could also be used for [demographic](#) issues: in its article [Shrinkonomics: Lessons from Japan](#) the IMF states that 'Japan is the world's laboratory for drawing policy lessons on ageing, dwindling populations'. For instance, Tokyo's [programme for building e-government](#), launched in 2003, has emphasised the importance of the accessibility of electronic government-related documentation for the elderly and the disabled and has focused on multi-access environment upgrades and convenience as well as on universal design. Furthermore, Japan is a global [leader](#) in urban planning, designing cities that enable independent living: [RISTEX](#) (Research Institute for Science and Technology for Society) is implementing projects [Redesigning Communities for Aged Society](#). The government has been

promoting a '[compact city](#)' concept that allows older residents to access retail and medical services easily. An ageing society brings new challenges for [urban planning](#) and the need to design more [liveable cities](#).

The first Japan-EU [policy forum on silver ICT](#) (information and communication technology) took place in Brussels in 2013. Robotics in elder care is another potential field for cooperation: approximately 400 Danish old people's homes use a [Japanese-made robot](#) as a therapy animal designed to stimulate patients with Alzheimer's and Dementia. Japanese and EU researchers have already set up cooperation ventures in this area, though projects such as [ROBOT@CWE](#), [ROBOSOM](#) and [BIOMOT](#). When it comes to [services](#), EU companies, using a start-up approach, are deploying their expertise in Japan in sectors such as healthcare and biotech, as well as in financial services, addressing Japan's ageing population requirements directly. The WHO (World Health Organization) initiative [Decade of healthy ageing](#) could present another field of cooperation for the EU and Japan.

### Ageing: An Asian affair

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has acknowledged that all the [G-20](#) countries are in the midst of stark demographic change, though their ageing speed varies: G-20 Asian countries are already fairly advanced in this process. In 2017, an IMF regional outlook report ([Asia: At Risk of Growing Old before Becoming Rich?](#)) pointed out that the Asian continent is ageing fast and shifting from being the biggest contributor to the global working-age population to subtracting hundreds of millions of people from it. This trend began at different times in [different countries](#) and is taking place at different rates. Nevertheless it is common to the entire continent, especially northeast Asia, where countries such as China, South Korea and Taiwan are following closely in Japan's demographic tracks. [South Korea](#)'s population declined for the first time in [2020](#). The country has an extremely [low fertility rate](#) and may become, like Japan, a 'super-aged society' by [2024](#). [China](#) looks set to follow the same path as Japan. In 2019, the South Morning China Post published an [analysis](#) ('Worse than Japan: how China's looming demographic crisis will doom its economic dream') reporting that since 2000, China's total fertility rate has been lower than Japan's and warning that China's ageing crisis will be more severe than Japan's, and its economic outlook bleaker.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The median age is the age at which exactly half the population is older and the other half is younger.
- <sup>2</sup> This trend was anticipated by a blip in 1966, linked to astrology and superstition, that made many Japanese families decide not to have children that year, to avoid the risk of giving birth to a girl who would have been a '[fire horse woman](#)'.
- <sup>3</sup> Even the ranks of [yakuza](#) (organised crime gangs) are shrinking and their members' average age is rising.
- <sup>4</sup> Chris Burgess argues that the 2.0 % figure is based not on the foreign-born population (as for the other countries) but on the 'population of foreign citizens' and includes the second, third and fourth generation of so-called '[old-comer Koreans](#)'.

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