

New Migration & Migration Policy in Japan

Lunch event with Prof. Dr. David Chiavacci, Institute of Asian and Oriental Studies, University of Zurich, 24 November 2015



Japan might not be the first countries that comes to our minds when thinking of migration; foreign residents represent less than 2% of the population. However, as David Chiavacci, Mercator Professor in Social Science of Japan, demonstrated in his lunch talk on "New Migration & Migration Policy in Japan", Japan has turned into a new immigration country, and is as such structurally dependent on foreign workers in particular in the export industry. Secondly, Japan's role needs to be seen in the broader context of the East Asia migration region. Finally, Prof. Chiavacci deconstructed the "Japan" case by highlighting how fragmented the migration debate and policymaking is.

Japan as a new immigration country

While until 1985 registered foreign residents were almost completely limited to the Korean minority, a sudden increase of new immigrants has been observed since the second half of the 1980s. Immigration has been strictly limited to a positive list of skilled workers. Yet, in the 1990s three side doors for continuous influx of immigrants opened, firstly for Nikkeijin (Japanese who emigrated from Japan mostly to Brazil and their descendants), secondly foreign students and thirdly training purposes.

Prof. Chiavacci shed light on the development of a "just-in-time" workforce of Nikkeijin that could be deployed flexibly to respond to changes in demand. In the 2000s new plants have been built in Japan for stronger cooperation of production and Research & Development (R&D), but also due to this flexible, mostly low-skilled workforce. The export industry, in particular second-tier suppliers to conglomerates, became structurally dependent on the new flexibility.

Embeddedness in East Asia Migration Region

Why has Japan turned into an immigration country in the 1980s? There are several dimensions to look at compared to the late 1960s. In terms of labour shortage that encourages immigration, the experience of the late 1960s was much more severe. Along these lines, the 1980s saw the climax of cultural uniqueness and ethnic homogeneity discourses, which should rather hinder immigration.

The main reason for change was Japan's evolving embeddedness in the East Asia migration region. In the 1960s East Asia was a non-migration region due to political instability and low economic development with the majority of workers in the agricultural sector. Contrarily, the 1980s brought strong economic growth and an increase of wage-dependent workers. While two decades earlier Japan was regionally isolated and even links to former colonies were weak, in the 1980s Japan turned into a regionally embedded attractive migration goal.

Prof. Chiavacci emphasised that the region has huge potential for migration judging from the differences in GDP and fertility rate.

Immigration policy in Japan

"Japan as a coherent and strategic actor in immigration policy does not exist", explained Prof. Chiavacci. Ideational and institutional fragmentation has influenced the migration debate, and actors with different perspectives barely talk to each other. Mainly, there are four perspectives, including national identity and cultural self-definition, economic development and labour market, national and public security, and foreign policy and human rights.

The different perspectives on the debate is illustrated by a poll that shows that public opinion is in favour of increasing immigrants, yet agrees that immigrants increase the crime rate compared to other industrialised countries.

Future scenarios

For Shinzo Abe, the Japanese Prime Minister, the immigration question is pivotal with regards to his economic agenda (Abenomics). He has made statements to radically increase foreign nannies, home-helps and caretakers, in particular to incentivise Japanese women to join the labour force.

To sum up, Prof. Chiavacci introduced four future scenarios:

1. Incremental scenario: Even though there are intense debates, so far the policy implications are very limited. Japanese immigration policy might continue in small steps.
2. Taiwanese scenario: Taiwan introduced a guest worker programme because of security and political concerns with China. This would be a security policy perspective.
3. Regional scenario: There is no multi-lateral agreement concerning migration so far, but it could have huge potential.
4. Immigration nation scenario: This is nowhere on the agenda as of now, but aggressive immigration plans have been put forward.

A fascinating talk – thank you for providing these insights to the Chamber, Prof. Chiavacci!