Policy Note

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Translative Adaptation of Foreign Skills Formation Models

—Enhancing the Hands-on Approach for Co-creative Partnerships—

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SUMMARY

- In industrial development, developing countries often face the challenge of adjusting models initially designed for developed countries—such as those for skills formation—to fit their own economic, social, and institutional contexts. This highlights the importance of translative adaptation, because a model or concept may change its meaning when applied in a different cultural or institutional setting.
- Translative adaptation involves three interrelated processes: learning, adaptation, and scaling up. The analysis of five case studies confirms the importance of mindset, including a strong sense of ownership, throughout the process. It also reveals that the progress of translative adaptation varies depending on whether local counterparts have experienced or acquired the key enabling factors needed to sustain the adaptation process. These include: (i) self- and mutual learning; (ii) constructive clashes of opinion and healthy competition; and (iii) early government involvement and innovation.
- Development cooperation provided through a hands-on approach and based on an in-depth analysis of local characteristics is likely to promote translative adaptation. However, it does not always guarantee that counterparts go through all three stages of the translative adaptation process. To enhance a hands-on approach, five measures are recommended: (i) providing both formal and informal learning opportunities; (ii) adopting flexible intervention strategies throughout project implementation; (iii) embracing, but reconciling clashes of opinion between counterparts and experts; (iv) designing project activities that generate small successes; and (v) promoting mutual learning and communities of practice.

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1.Introduction

Skill development is a standard policy measure used to support industrial development, together with improvements in firm capacity, finance, business linkages, and innovation, among other areas. It is also one of the fields where various donor agencies, including Japan, have been actively supporting developing countries through development cooperation.

In current academic and policy discussions on skill development and technical and vocational education and training (TVET), the "employer-led skills formation system" has been widely recognized. This approach assumes that employers know their skill needs and are motivated to invest in training both existing and future workers. It is regarded as a common solution to the need to acquire up-to-date skills required by industry and has often been promoted in developing countries through donor-supported projects. Many developing countries have attempted to borrow this system, which was developed primarily based on the experiences of advanced economies. However, they have faced difficulties in securing the active participation of employers in TVET reform.

This suggests that developing countries should identify or develop a skills formation model that aligns with their social, economic, and institutional contexts, rather than simply trying to borrow foreign models. Learning about alternative skills policies is most useful when developing countries internalize these as their own models with a clear and coherent strategy and strong ownership. In short, "translative adaptation" of foreign models is required for effective policy learning.

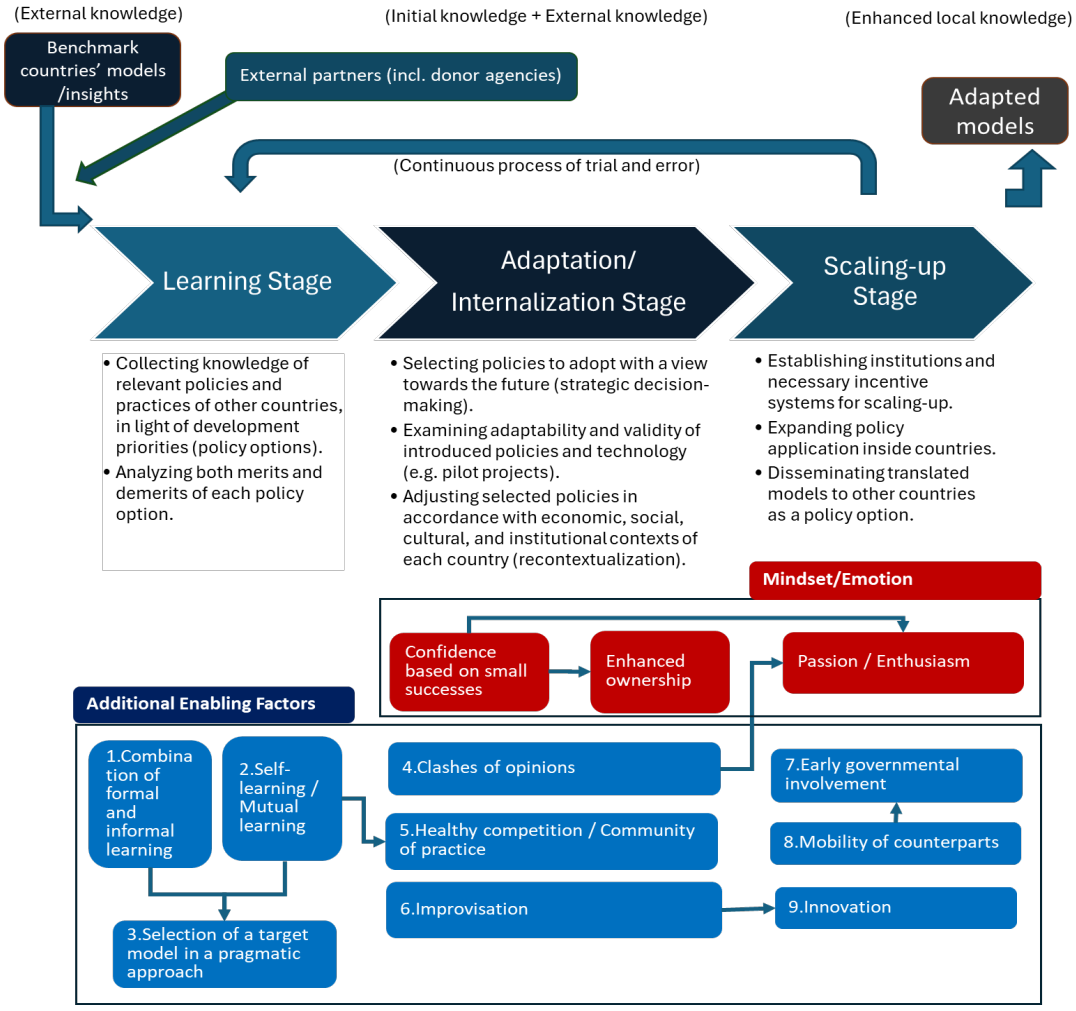
This policy note aims to provide policy recommendations to promote translative adaptation in development cooperation for skills formation, based on the key findings of "Translative Adaptation of Foreign Skills Formation Models: Cases of Japanese Development Cooperation in Southeast Asia," published in 2024. This volume, developed under the "Research Project on the Japanese Experience of Industrial Development and Development Cooperation: Analysis of Translative Adaptation Processes," analyzes five cases from Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam: (i) the enhancement of industry engagement systems through the Project for Human Resource Development of Technicians at the Hanoi University of Industry (HaUI) (the HaUI-JICA Project) in Vietnam; (ii) the development of TVET teacher training programs at the Center for Instructor and Advanced Skill Training (CIAST) in Malaysia; (iii) the development of the national skills evaluation system in Vietnam with technical cooperation provided under the HaUI-JICA Project and the Skill Evaluation System Promotion Program (SESPP), supported by the Japanese government (Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare); (iv) the skills evaluation sub-program of the Automotive Human Resource Development Project (AHRDP) in Thailand; and (v) a local skills development initiative under the Dong Nai Manufacturing Human Resources Development (MHRD) Project, supported by the Japanese government (Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry) and development cooperation agencies in Vietnam.

2.Key concepts and findings

The concept of "translative adaptation" was initially presented in the anthropological literature in opposition to the "clash of civilizations" thesis. It suggests that an item in one culture or system can change its meaning when transplanted to another culture or system (Maegawa 1998). Applying this concept to international development, we assume that developing countries need to adjust the models designed for use in developed countries according to their domestic economic and institutional contexts.

Translative adaptation consists of three stages: (i) learning; (ii) adaptation; and (iii) scaling up (see Figure 1). At the learning stage, the national counterparts in development cooperation projects, such as policymakers and staff at TVET institutions, are given opportunities to learn about various countries' policies and practices, including their strengths and weaknesses. At the adaptation stage, counterparts make strategic decisions when selecting suitable policies with strong local ownership. At the scaling-up stage, these adapted policies are then disseminated to other regions within a country or even to other countries.

Figure 1 : Enabling Factors for Translative Adaptation



Source: Mori, Ohno, and Yamada (2024, 230)

The analysis of the five cases shows that the progress of translative adaptation varies across cases (Figure2), depending on whether counterparts have experienced or acquired the factors that enable them to sustain the adaptation process. These include: (i) self- and mutual learning in the learning stage; (ii) clashes of opinion and healthy competition in the adaptation stage; and (iii) early involvement of government and innovation in the scaling-up stage.

Figure2 : Progress of Translative Adaptation in Selected Cases

No.	Case	Japanese model adapted	Country	Translative Adaptation Stage		
				Learning	Adaptation	Scaling-up
1	HaUI-JICA Project (Industry engagement in TVET)	Training process management (PDCA)	Vietnam			
2	CIAST project	National TVET instructor training program	Malaysia			
3	Development of national skill test in Vietnam (HaUI-JICA Project/SESPP)	HaUI-JICA Project (Machining Center)	Vietnam			
		SESPP (Machining, Electrical, etc.)				
4	AHRDP	National skills tests (automotive technology)	Thailand			
5	Dong Nai MHRD Project	5S and safety training	Vietnam			
		Institutional mechanism for local industry engagement				

Source: Mori, Ohno, and Yamada (2024, 224)

Foreign donors can be the catalyst for translative adaptation in developing countries as "transfer agents" who bring external knowledge and technologies through policy advice, development cooperation projects, and other mechanisms. The mode of delivery of development cooperation can be categorized in two ways. The first approach, named the "normative" approach, focuses on disseminating international best practices established in developed countries as norms. The second approach is a "hands-on" approach that, while referring to foreign models, emphasizes finding field-oriented solutions based on the in-depth analysis of the local economy, society, and institutions.

According to the findings from the case studies, development cooperation provided through a hands-on approach is more likely to promote translative adaptation than programs implemented using the normative approach. However, even though the hands-on approach may be associated with translative adaptation, its application does not always guarantee that counterparts go through all three stages of the translative adaptation process. The implementation of measures that address the enabling factors shown in Figure 1 will enhance the effectiveness of a hands-on approach and help counterparts advance the translative adaptation process, as explained in the next section.

3. Recommendations for enhancing the hands-on approach

While the strong ownership of counterparts is essential for promoting the translative adaptation of foreign models, donors and foreign experts must also continuously adjust their intervention strategies and develop their capacity to provide suitable prescriptions for each country's skills formation system. In particular, they need to be aware that translative adaptation is a dynamic process. After the completion of development cooperation projects, counterparts are expected to continuously customize adapted foreign models or may switch to adaptation of other countries' models or even develop a unique or hybrid model. Recognizing and promoting the dynamism of translative adaptation will lead to co-creative partnerships, through which counterparts and donors co-work in a participatory approach to deliver innovative and scalable project outputs. This section focuses on five recommendations to promote translative adaptation in development cooperation.

3.1 Provide both formal and informal learning opportunities

The combination of formal and informal learning opportunities is important. For example, one of the reasons for the successful scaling-up of 5S[1] and safety training in the Dong Nai MHRD Project was the combination of systematic formal learning for explicit knowledge and on-the-job training for tacit knowledge, led by Japanese experts. On the other hand, another component of the same project—the development of regional institutional mechanisms for industrial engagement in TVET—relied largely on on-the-job training. As a result, this component has remained in the learning stage.

In addition, we recommend providing counterparts with the opportunities to learn about the political, economic, social, and institutional contexts of the foreign skills formation models through formal and/or informal learning. This should help counterparts gain a clearer understanding of the factors that make foreign skills formation models work and whether those factors exist in their countries.

3.2 Adopt flexible intervention strategies

Foreign experts' intervention strategies should be continuously adjusted during project implementation. For example, the two partnering TVET institutions of the Dong Nai MHRD Project accelerated the adaptation of 5S and safety training when Japanese experts intentionally stepped back from intervening in the details of the training programs to encourage the development of institutional leadership. This approach provides a space for them to be creative. The insufficient counterpart-led creativity is likely to be one of the reasons that some cases—such as AHRDP and the development of institutional mechanisms for industry engagement in the Dong Nai MHRD Project—did not reach the scaling-up stage. In short, foreign experts should dynamically and flexibly change their technical guidance strategies as counterparts develop their capacities and promote their creativity in the adaptation stage, which will lead to innovation in the scaling-up stage.

[1] The 5S approach consists of: (i) sorting; (ii) setting in order; (iii) shining; (iv) standardizing; and (v) sustaining. It is widely recognized by enterprises as a useful means to improve productivity and work environments.

3.3 Embrace but reconcile clashes of opinions

Clashes of opinion between counterparts—who have a strong sense of ownership—and foreign experts are one of the key elements for promoting adaptation, as found in the case of the CIAST project. These clashes, or "conflicts" (Ohno 2022, 8), should be welcomed as opportunities for counterparts to refine their adaptation strategies and underlying logic. At the same time, such clashes of opinions are most beneficial when they are ultimately resolved and lead to better mutual understanding. According to the authors' experiences and observations in the HaUI-JICA Project and the Dong Nai MHRD Project, face-to-face formal and informal discussions often succeeded in reconciling these differences.

3.4 Generate small successes

Project activities should be designed to produce small successes, which can include interim outputs. Envisaging and pursuing impactful end results of projects is indeed important. However, when promoting translative adaptation, we have found that the accumulation of small successes enables counterparts to adapt and scale up foreign models. For example, HaUI and the two partnering TVET institutions in the Dong Nai MHRD Project have proceeded with adaptation and scaling up based on the confidence they built through positive feedback from inside and outside the institutions.

3.5 Promote mutual learning and communities of practice

The promotion of mutual learning and communities of practice should be integrated into technical cooperation. These elements are especially important for projects that cannot afford long-term resident foreign experts. If counterparts have sufficient opportunities to share their knowledge, challenges, and workable solutions and mutually learn with governments or other TVET institutions, they may proceed with adaptation and scaling up even without resident foreign experts. This is one of the key factors that explains the difference between the Dong Nai MHRD Project and SESPP, both of which have relied on the short-term missions of Japanese experts. The former reached the scaling-up stage through the promotion of mutual learning among partnering TVET institutions, while the latter has remained in the learning stage in part due to insufficient mutual learning settings among participants in project activities. Furthermore, it is desirable that communities of practice or mutual learning networks be sustained over the long term beyond the project implementation period, as the CIAST case implies. This can be achieved through a broader framework of bilateral economic cooperation—see Ohno and Mori (2024) for a case in Thailand—or networking between those with similar experiences, interests, and enthusiasm through training programs or the development of alumni societies of graduates or trainees.

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