

Reconceptualizing ageing societies: Six years of global dialogue from Japan

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Abstract: This article synthesizes six years (2019–2024) of the "Super Active Ageing Society" (SAAS) international conference series, which reconceptualizes ageing not as a burden to society but as a source of societal vitality. The SAAS conferences uniquely integrate three traditionally isolated domains — health, economic resilience, and welfare — into a cohesive framework that positions older adults as active contributors to society. In addition to themes such as preventive health, asset longevity, and extended workforce participation, the conferences promote intergenerational collaboration and financial sustainability. To achieve what older adults aspire to — remaining healthy, economically secured, and socially connected — demands a cross-sectoral response. Evolving from interdisciplinary presentations to strategic dialogues, the conferences were attended by a diverse range of participants, including but not limited to policymakers, researchers, practitioners, students, industry leaders, and civil society representatives. Collaboration with the Well Aging Society Summit Asia-Japan (WASS) fostered dialogue on Japan's ageing-related industries, in synergy with the SAAS. In these bilingual (Japanese and English) conferences, over 40% of on-line participants tuned in to the English channel, underscoring the international interest in the ageing discourse. Over the course of six conferences, the concept of a super active ageing society — integrating health, financial well-being, and social participation — is refined, offering new perspectives for both domestic and international policies and business strategies. The outcomes of this conference series clearly underscore the need for innovation and social transformation in ageing societies, and provide valuable insight for ongoing and future policy and institutional design.

Keywords: population aging, healthy longevity, financial gerontology, super-aged society, active aging

1. Introduction

Global life expectancy has continued a long-term upward trajectory despite a temporary decline during the COVID-19 pandemic (1). Among all nations, Japan currently has the highest level of population aging, and how to respond to the growing elderly demographics has been the foremost challenge for Japanese healthcare and public health over the past half century. This situation has been addressed in previous articles published in Global Health & Medicine (2-4).

The population ageing phenomenon is not unique to Japan. Many countries, particularly those in Asia, are already experiencing, or are poised to experience similar demographic shifts. For example, according to the UN World Population Prospects (UNWPP) 2024 (5,6), projections for Southeast Asia, a region presently characterized by a youthful population, indicate that total population will peak around 2055 and then enter a phase of decline driven by population ageing and low fertility rates. Furthermore, the UNWPP 2024 indicates that

within 30 years (2025–2054), 48 countries and regions including Iran, Turkey and Vietnam are projected to reach peak population size. Consequently, the experience of Japan during the early transition into a super-aged society along with the challenges and responses encountered offers valuable lessons for other nations worldwide.

In recognition of this global relevance, an interdisciplinary conference series was proposed in 2018 by two visionary leaders: the late Tsuyoshi Sunohara, then Managing Executive Officer of Nikkei Inc., and Keizo Takemi, then Member of the House of Councilors, the National Diet of Japan. Both believed that the evolving challenges of population ageing demand interdisciplinary collaboration and collective wisdom of the global community for their resolution. Mr. Takemi delivered the opening address in all six conferences.

At the time of the inception of the conference series, the "2025 Problem" had already emerged as an urgent national issue. Such concerns have been repeatedly voiced by the national leaders, most recently by Prime

Minister Shigeru Ishiba in his Policy Speech (7) at the opening session of the 217th Session of the National Diet on January 24, 2025. The Prime Minister emphasized the need to redesign the socio-economic systems that were initially constructed during the era of population growth. By 2025, the post-war baby boom generation will reach age 75 and enter the late-elderly cohort, triggering a rapid increase in demand for medical and long-term care services. Since healthcare and nursing care costs per capita rise markedly after age 75, questions about the sustainability of existing systems have been a core concern since more than a decade ago. To address this, the Japanese government pursued the Social Security and Tax Joint Reform Package in 2013 with the aim to secure funding and overhauling benefit structures. In parallel, the Community-based Integrated Care System (8), designed to balance accessibility and affordability of services at the local level, took shape around 2018.

While the wave of ageing continues to progress, a new concern, the "2040 Problem", has surfaced. This refers to structural difficulties anticipated when the so-called "second baby boom" generation enters old age. Many in that cohort endured prolonged periods of unstable employment due to the economic downturn, potentially resulting in a large population of elderly individuals with low pension entitlements. Moreover, the rise in single-person households and rapid urbanization are expected to expose limitations in traditional, community-based, mutual-support frameworks.

Addressing these multifaceted challenges will require policy architectures that transcend conventional boundaries of healthcare and welfare, embracing asset formation and management, employment support, and promotion of social participation. Furthermore, sharing the Japanese experience on the international stage and incorporating insights from other countries will enrich policy development or even lead to more robust international collaboration. In light of these potential opportunities, Nikkei Inc. launched a series of six international conferences beginning in 2019. This paper synthesizes and shares the discussions and outcomes of those meetings, offering insights to inform future policy and societal initiatives.

2. Super active ageing society

The conference series was named "Super Active Ageing Society (SAAS) Conference". The term "super active ageing society" — the focal concept of the conferences — captures both the evolving image of older adults in contemporary Japan and the redefinition of their social roles. Over the past fifty years, public perceptions of the elderly in Japan have changed markedly. For decades, older adults were principally viewed as a socially vulnerable group of individuals who are passive beneficiaries of welfare services. Yet, as both overall life expectancy and healthy life expectancy extend, concepts

such as "purpose in life" and "social participation" have emerged, valuing the older people's active stance of engagement with society.

In the twenty-first century, with the rapid rise in proportion of older adults, their role transitions from passive recipients of medical and long-term care to proactive "agents of health promotion and prevention" through maintaining and enhancing their own health. Then on-going debates on "Social Security Reform for All Generations" (9,10) reconceptualize older adults not only as beneficiaries but also as contributors to societal vitality.

While the concurrent extension of average life expectancy and healthy life expectancy represents a welcome development, it has also brought to light growing concerns regarding the financial sustainability to support prolonged later life. Increasingly, individuals express the desire to live their extended post-retirement years without economic anxiety, thereby highlighting the need to extend what is now referred to as "asset longevity". To achieve this, several key strategies have been proposed: the promotion of preventive medicine to further extend healthy life expectancy, technological innovations that help maintain physical functions in later life, application of artificial intelligence and big data to dramatically improve efficiency of medical and long-term care services, reconfiguration of employment systems to encourage older adults' continued participation in the workforce, and advancement of asset management practices tailored to ageing populations.

However, realization of these strategies requires more than technological or policy adjustments. It calls for a fundamental redefinition of ageing itself, reconstruction of intergenerational support systems, and interdisciplinary research that bridges medicine, engineering, economics, and legislation. Such research must be conducted through collaborative frameworks between academia and industry, with the aim to generate new industries and innovations suited to the realities of super-aged societies.

Just as the field of gerontology has long studied biological and social processes of ageing, the emergence of "financial gerontology" reflects growing recognition that asset longevity must evolve in tandem with extended life and health spans. This new discipline seeks to minimize the gap between financial and biological longevity through both theoretical investigation and practical application. Research activities in this domain aim to build a society in which older adults can enjoy both physical well-being and financial security. A pioneering initiative in this field is the "Study Group on Finance, Economics, and Healthcare in an Ageing Society" chaired by Professor Atsushi Seike. Established in 2016, the group's work culminated in publication of "Financial Gerontology" (11) in 2017, marking a significant milestone in the development of this emerging academic discipline.

Reflecting these shifts, the Nikkei Conference was named "Super Active Ageing Society" to embody a model in which older adults both sustain their communities and, when necessary, receive appropriate support, thereby forging a truly reciprocal societal relationship. The term "vibrant society" first appeared in Japan's 2001 White Paper on the Ageing Society (12), which describes "a rich and vibrant society" as ideal for an ageing nation. This term shapes the core values of the SAAS conferences.

3. Conference planning, governance, and overview

The design and structure of the program were developed under direction of the Steering Committee, and core members who prepared the inaugural conference held in 2019 are listed in Supplementary Table S1 (<https://www.globalhealthmedicine.com/site/supplementaldata.html?ID=113>). Titles and affiliations are presented as of that time. The composition of the committee reflects participation of experts from a broad spectrum of fields, including medicine, public health, social security, economics, labor, social inclusion, welfare, and academia, demonstrating the cross-border and interdisciplinary nature of the initiative. Among the committee members, designated officials from Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW), Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI), and Japan Medical Association represented the corresponding organizations. A formal system was in place to ensure that successor was promptly appointed whenever a predecessor was reassigned.

In 2021, METI nominated Professor Fumiaki Ikeno of Stanford University to join the Steering Committee as liaison person with the Well Ageing Society Summit Asia-Japan (WASS). To enhance gender and geographic balance, three overseas members were added in 2024: Professor Aya Goto (Harvard University), Professor John Eu-Li Wong (National University of Singapore; succeeding Professor Tan Chorh Chuan of Singapore's Ministry of Health), and Professor A. B. Dey (founding Professor of Geriatric Medicine at AIIMS, India). Despite these additions, the committee's core structure remained stable across six annual conferences, and the members have contributed to the conferences as planners, keynote speakers, and panelists. Notably, several international committee members including Professors Tan, Fried, Pigott, and Wong played pivotal roles in conceptualizing conference framework and facilitating invitation of distinguished global speakers.

Industry experts and moderators in later sessions also joined the Committee on an *ad hoc* basis to refine session themes and lead the session discussion. Professor Seike served as Chair of the Steering Committee, and the present author as Secretary-general. Nikkei Inc. served as organizer, providing secretariat services, coordinating speaker arrangements, and mobilizing resources from

sponsors.

The SAAS conference was convened annually in Tokyo from 2019 to 2024. Supplementary Table S2 (<https://www.globalhealthmedicine.com/site/supplementaldata.html?ID=113>) summarizes the dates, themes, and program structures of the conferences, and Supplementary Table S3 (<https://www.globalhealthmedicine.com/site/supplementaldata.html?ID=113>) lists major presentations. The six programs can be viewed *via* web links (13-18). The third (2021), fourth (2022), and fifth (2023) meetings were integrated with the WASS of METI, forming joint events aimed at solving super-aged society challenges and promoting healthcare industry innovation in Japan and across Asia. All sessions were bilingual (Japanese and English). Only the first conference in 2019 was held fully in-person, while all subsequent conferences adopted a hybrid format (in-person plus online). The outcomes of the conferences were published on the Nihon Keizai Shimbun, the Financial Times, and Nikkei Asia. To ensure broad domestic and international dissemination, the recorded sessions of each conference, in both Japanese and English, are freely accessible online *via* Nikkei Channel (19) for approximately one year following the event, after which they are replaced by the subsequent year's recordings. Highlights of the conferences from 2021 can be accessed online *via* Nikkei Asia (20-23).

4. Evolution of conference format and themes

Between 2019 and 2024, the program design of the annual SAAS conference series evolved in stages, drawing on accumulated insights and participant feedback. From the inaugural meeting in 2019 through the third meeting in 2021, the program featured a broad array of speakers to highlight the need for interdisciplinary collaboration across the health, economic, and social participation domains (Supplementary Table S3, <https://www.globalhealthmedicine.com/site/supplementaldata.html?ID=113>). The fifth (2023) and sixth meeting (2024), on the other hand, adopted a moderator-led format, strategically reducing the number of individual presentations and entrusting session chairs to summarize panel discussions and guide strategic dialogues. This shift signifies a purposeful progression beyond establishing conceptual foundations, advancing toward more substantial and focused practice-based and action-oriented debates. The full list of moderators in the 2023 and 2024 conferences is shown in Supplementary Table S4 (<https://www.globalhealthmedicine.com/site/supplementaldata.html?ID=113>).

As noted above, the WASS Conference was convened jointly with the SAAS Conference from 2021 to 2023. The 2021 WASS addressed personal health records; environmental, social, and governance investment; digital transformation in healthcare and long-term care; and response to global population ageing. The 2022 WASS

focused on industry policies such as inbound medical tourism, corporate health management, and digitalization of healthcare and long-term care in the web era. The 2023 WASS examined challenges and initiatives within the healthcare sector in Asia, and discussed regional collaboration and the export of institutional frameworks. The programs in 2021, 2022 and 2023 are included in the respective SAAS links (15-17).

5. Knowledge and social impact through six international conferences

Over six years, this international conference series has generated multifaceted outcomes such as promoting interdisciplinary cooperation, reframing domestic challenges as global issues, fostering intergenerational collaboration, engaging the private sector, and strengthening advocacy at home and abroad. The significance of each element is outlined below.

5.1. Expanding the horizons of interdisciplinary collaboration

The concept of a super active ageing society asserts that older individuals can fully contribute to societal vitality only when health, financial well-being, and social participation are seamlessly integrated. Realizing this vision requires collaboration among experts from medicine, economics, labor, welfare, and other fields, which underscores the importance of cross-sectoral collaboration. Accordingly, each year the conference structured its program around three core axes — health, finance and labor, and social participation. Each axis was expanded as needed by open sessions, synthesis sessions, and innovation sessions. In 2021 (the third conference) and 2022 (the fourth conference), lunchtime seminars with international focus were held in cooperation with the WHO Western Pacific Regional Office and the United States National Academy of Medicine. These two entities have developed a very comprehensive strategies; regional action plan on healthy ageing in the Western Pacific (24) and Global Roadmap for Healthy Longevity (25), respectively.

5.2. From domestic issues to global challenges

Traditionally, issues related to ageing have been viewed as a community-based health and welfare concern. However, as demographic shifts accelerate, ageing challenges have evolved into structural issues impacting the entire society. There is also growing recognition that global sharing of experiences and international deployment of human resources, services, and industries can yield mutual benefits. From this viewpoint, the third (2021) to the fifth SAAS Conference (2023) were partnered with the WASS of METI. This partnership fosters integration of international industrial

collaboration with policy dialogue, which serves as a valuable model for elevating domestic efforts to the level of global industrial policy.

5.3. Fostering intergenerational collaboration

Ageing is not an issue of one particular demographic cohort, but concerns societal sustainability across past, present, and future generations. This perspective was highlighted by active participation of young people in later conferences. In 2023, Mr. Shoichiro Hashimoto, a second-year high school student, raised the issue of ageism, which stems from the prejudice of younger generations toward older individuals and the sense of inferiority felt by many older adults. He emphasized that eliminating such attitudes would encourage greater social participation among senior citizens. In 2024, Associate Professor Takayuki Shiose of Kyoto University addressed the concept of co-creative learning between older and younger generations, introducing a gerontology study group composed of junior high school students. He noted that these generations have grown up in an ageing society and therefore naturally accept communities with a high proportion of senior citizens. They are also ready to contribute new ideas aiming to enhance well-being for all. These exchanges in panel discussions fostered meaningful intergenerational dialogue and cooperation.

5.4. Contributions from the private sector

Demographic shifts present both challenges and opportunities for the private sector, given the potential resources of older adults as workers, consumers, and social assets. Corporate presenters proposed new businesses such as secure management of seniors' financial assets, health investments aimed at improving quality of life, and work-style reforms to support continued employment among older adults. They also discussed the need for social systems and legal frameworks that encourage private sector initiatives in response to the rise in single-person elderly households, taking into account transformations in family and community structures.

5.5. Strengthening domestic and international advocacy

As shown in Figure 1, participants to the SAAS conferences grew steadily. The conferences were conducted with simultaneous Japanese–English interpretation, and the proportion of participants tuning in to the English channel increased each year, exceeding 40% in the most recent two conferences — an important indicator of enhanced international outreach. The attendee profile also diversified: industry representatives accounted for 73% of registrants in 2019, whereas the 2024 cohort included a balanced mix of healthcare and

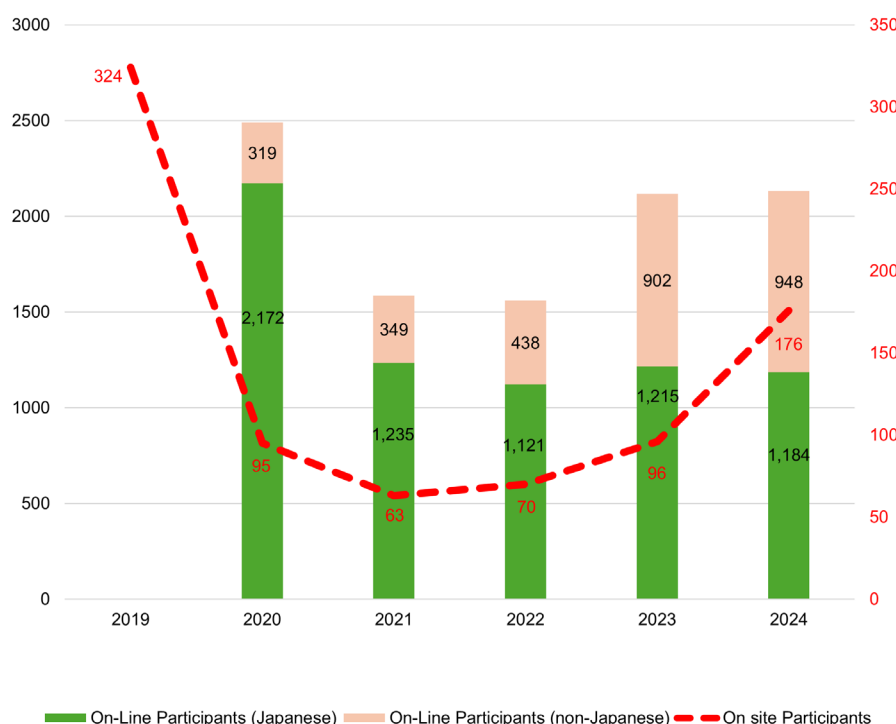


Figure 1. Changes in numbers of participants in the Super Active Aging Society Conference from 2019 to 2024. Green bar, on-line participants (Japanese channel); pink bar, on-line participants (English channel); red dashed line, on-site participants.

welfare professionals, public officials, and academics, confirming success of the conferences in attracting a wide range of stakeholders.

6. Conclusion

The SAAS Conferences approached the challenges of ageing societies not merely in the fields of welfare and healthcare, but as complex, structural issues spanning economics, industry, education, culture, and legal systems. Over the course of six conferences, the concept of a super active ageing society — integrating health, financial well-being, and social participation — was refined, offering new perspectives for both domestic and international policies and business strategies.

The reframing of domestic issues as global challenges fostered sharing of experiences across countries and encouraged international deployment of human resources and services, laying the groundwork for mutual benefits in both policy and industry. Through intergenerational cooperation and collaboration with the private sector, comprehensive discussions on societal sustainability were advanced, with active youth participation and creative proposals from interested businesses. Moreover, bilingual access and diverse participation strengthened advocacy both within and beyond national borders, contributing to greater international understanding and collaboration. The outcomes of this conference series clearly underscore the need for innovation and social transformation in ageing societies, and provide valuable insight for ongoing and future policy and institutional

design.

On July 29, 2025, a follow-up session was held with Professor Linda Fried, who visited Japan and delivered a keynote lecture entitled "*Healthy Ageing in a Changing Public Health Landscape: Creating the Opportunity for a Third Demographic Dividend*". Members of the Steering Committee who attended reaffirmed that connections and insights cultivated through the six conferences remain strong and continue to inspire new ideas, projects, and friendship. The relationships formed — across disciplines, generations, and borders — constitute a quiet yet enduring legacy. Each of the participants carries forward this shared sense of purpose and possibility, and all collectively commit to advancing the next phase of collaboration.

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