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Is Japan Externalising Border control through Development Cooperation with Vietnam?

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Abstract

This study examines how Japan's border control intersects with development cooperation in governing mobility between Japan and Vietnam. Comparing two major cooperation projects—anti-trafficking measures and the regulation of migration brokers — it finds sharply diverging outcomes. The former retained a humanitarian and diplomatic orientation and did not become part of Japan's efforts to prevent irregular migration. The latter, though framed as protecting migrant rights, underestimated Vietnam's structural dependence on brokers and the agency of actors within the migration system. As concerns increased over the irregularisation of Vietnamese workers in Japan, broker elimination was advanced as a component of Japan's externalised border control. However, resistance from stakeholders in both countries limited the project's effectiveness, undermining its function as either border-control measure or development cooperation. From a decolonial perspective, the study demonstrates that security-oriented migration management has increasingly shaped Japan–Vietnam cooperation, with risks for both security outcomes and developmental objectives.

Keywords

Keywords: Externalised Border control, Development Cooperation, Human Trafficking, Migration Brokers, Decolonial Approach

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List of Abbreviations

DCA	Department of Child Affairs, MOLISA
DOLAB	Department of Overseas Labour, MOLISA
IOM	International Organization for Migration
JICA	Japan International Cooperation Agency
MOFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Japan)
MOLISA	Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (Vietnam)
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OSA	Official Security Assistance
SO	Sending Organisation (= Recruitment Agency for Labour Migrant) in Vietnam

Introduction

Migration has increasingly become a central factor in international development. In many developing countries, remittances sent by migrants now exceed *Official Development Assistance* (ODA) provided by governments and, more recently, have even surpassed *Foreign Direct Investment* (FDI) driven by companies (IOM, 2024, p.36), making them a crucial component of national economies. Yet the developmental impact of migration remains contested. Research highlights the contribution of remittances to poverty alleviation (Adams and Page, 2005) and the significance of *social remittances* (Levitt and Lamba-Nieves, 2010). At the same time, concerns have been raised about currency overvaluation (Taylor, 1999), widening inequalities (de Haas, Castles, and Miller, 2019, pp.333–335), and the potential shift of state development responsibilities onto individuals (Carling, 2020, p.116). Migration, therefore, exerts both positive and negative effects on development.

Scholars continue to debate how migrants should be understood within development policy, particularly whether migrants should be framed as contributors to development or as populations to be managed. Development cooperation has traditionally sought to address the "root causes" of migration (Boswell, 2003, p.624). Yet evidence suggests that economic growth can also stimulate mobility (IMF, 2020, p.84; Clemens, 2022, p.3: Clemens, 2014). Furthermore, SDG Target 10.7 promotes the facilitation of "orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration." This dual framing sees migrants both as agents of development and as subjects of control.

Against this backdrop, the *externalisation* of border control has emerged as a key concept. This refers to policies through which destination countries delegate aspects of border management to sending countries, thereby seeking to govern and select potential migrants prior to departure (Cobarrubias et al., 2023, p.1). European efforts to curtail migration through aid to African states exemplify this approach, blurring boundaries between development assistance and security objectives. In certain cases, development cooperation prioritises the border control interests of donor states over the development needs of recipient countries (Dannecker and Piper, 2021, p.312), raising concerns about diminished development effectiveness and the reinforcement of *neo-colonial* relationships (Opi, 2021, p.1).

Japan, as a major migration destination in Asia, has also expanded its development cooperation in the field of labour migration. Vietnam is a particularly important partner both diplomatically and economically, serving as Japan's largest source of migrant workers (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2025). Challenges associated with Vietnamese migration are increasingly perceived as security risks in Japan (Umeda, 2021). Accordingly, the interplay between development cooperation and border control in the Japan–Vietnam context is a matter of both academic and policy significance.

This study addresses the following research question: *In the context of development cooperation on labour migration between Japan and Vietnam, in what ways is Japan's border control externalised, and to what extent does it function?* It focuses on two major ODA projects—anti-trafficking measures and the regulation of migration brokers—to determine whether they constitute examples of externalised border control and, if so, how they operate in Vietnam. The study first explores the intersection between border control externalisation and these initiatives through existing literature, then develops a theoretical framework grounded in a *decolonial approach* and finally applies this framework using qualitative data from interviews and fieldwork in Vietnam.

Literature Review

This section reviews existing scholarship on the intersection between development cooperation and the *externalisation* of border control, in line with the focus of this study. The section first clarifies the conceptual characteristics of *externalised border control*, then examines two key areas of development intervention—anti-trafficking measures and the regulation of migration brokers—in relation to border control. Finally, it identifies common features across these cases and derives implications for the theoretical framework of this research.

Characteristics of Externalised Border control

Externalised border control refers to "the process through which states directly or indirectly operate activities related to border control outside their sovereign territories, namely in other countries or on the high seas" (Cobarrubias et al., 2023, p.1). Most interventions target irregular migration and are seen as "measures taken by states in locations beyond their territorial borders to obstruct, deter or otherwise avert the arrival of refugees, asylum seekers and other migrants who do not have prior authorisation to enter their intended country of destination" (Crisp, 2019, para. 4).

The concept attracted scholarly attention in the 1990s (see Figure 1), a period when migration increasingly became associated with security threats and terrorism (Boswell, 2003, p.623). As a result, migration was reframed as an issue of international security (Lahav and Lavenex, 2013, p.755). A prominent early example is Australia's offshore processing of refugee applications in third countries, initiated in 1991 (Crisp,2019). Such policies have been widely criticised as a means for destination countries to sidestep human rights obligations within their own territories (Joppke, 1998). Thus, externalisation functions both as a security-driven strategy to deter irregular migration and as a mechanism for shifting legal and moral responsibility outside the state.

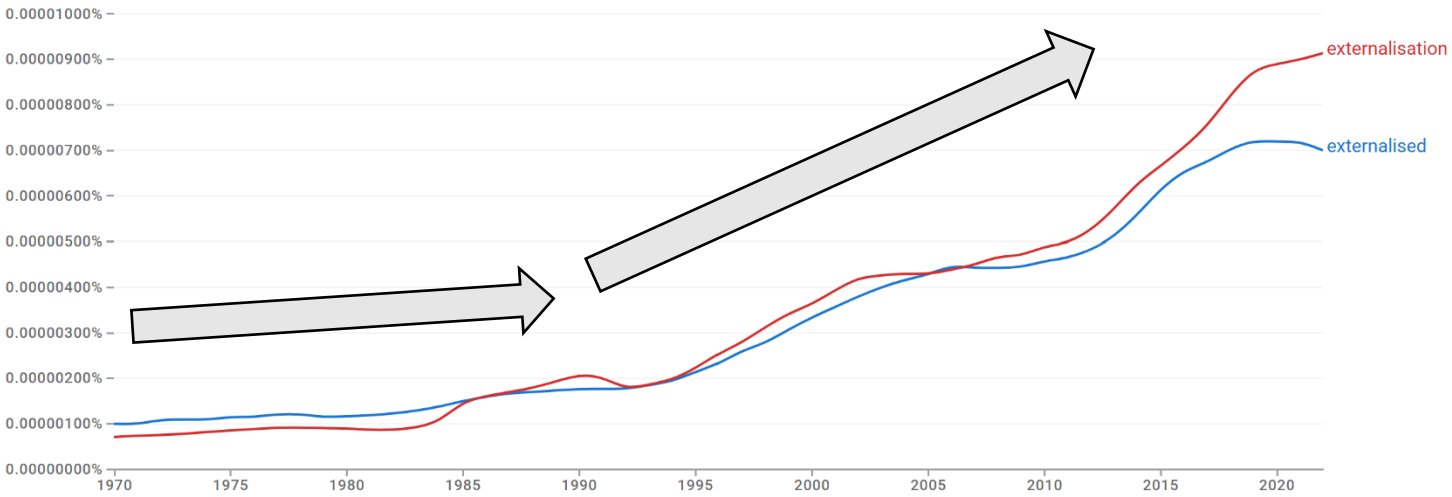

Figure 1: Trends in the Use of "Externalisation / Externalised "

(Source: author using Google Ngram Viewer, 2025)

Externalisation has additionally been conceptualised as a form of "*remote control*" (Zolberg, 1997, p.308; cited in Ostrand and Statham, 2020, p.25), encompassing practices that regulate

mobility beyond the destination state's territory (FitzGerald, 2020, p.9). Examples include visa screening in countries of departure, airline carrier checks, and hyper-territorial arrangements such as airport transit zones treated as outside national jurisdiction (FitzGerald, 2020, pp.4–5). More recent scholarship also highlights symbolic and discursive forms of externalisation, including awareness campaigns designed to deter irregular migration (Collyer and King, 2014). In short, externalisation is not confined to responses to irregular migration but is characterised by the advance regulation of mobility itself.

Overall, the essence of externalised border control lies in the deliberate management of migrants outside the territory of the receiving state. This approach blurs the geographical boundaries while relocating legal responsibility. As such, externalisation should be understood not merely as a border management technique but as a political project that reshapes human rights norms and power relations between sending and receiving countries.

Anti-Trafficking and Border control

The characteristic features of externalisation—intervention beyond territorial borders and discretionary application—are clearly visible in anti-trafficking measures. Human trafficking is commonly defined as "*processes where persons (victims) have been moved either voluntarily (by deceptive or fraudulent recruitment, for example) or involuntarily (by abduction or kidnapping, for example) by traffickers… across or within national borders*" (Yea, 2015, p.1085). While this definition highlights movement and exploitation, its breadth groups together diverse situations, enabling states to emphasise cross-border mobility in ways that align with security or migration-control priorities.

Human trafficking is thus frequently framed as an "external security threat" (FitzGerald, 2016, p.184) linked to organised crime and sexual slavery. This framing simplifies complex socio-economic drivers and casts mobility itself as suspect, legitimising extraterritorial controls under the guise of humanitarian concern (FitzGerald, 2016, p.188; Berman, 2003, p.39).

In practice, however, less than 1% of estimated victims receive protection (Yea, 2020, p.514). Anti-trafficking discourse tends to emphasise women and children as "innocent victims" (ibid., p.519), while men in forced labour and other groups remain invisible (ibid., p.525). Voluntary sex work or irregular migration is often excluded or criminalised (Lainez, 2020, p.165; Dottridge, 2021, p.23). Such distinctions—forced vs voluntary, regular vs irregular—are ultimately "a matter of political judgment" (O'Connell-Davidson, 2015, p.136), allowing states to avoid protection obligations while implementing restrictive measures.

This discretionary "image politics" (Yea, 2015, p.1082) also shapes development cooperation. The UK's anti-trafficking programs in the Greater Mekong Subregion extended beyond technical assistance into border policing and neoliberal reforms, effectively supporting British border control aims (FitzGerald, 2016, pp.192–193). These interventions operated as forms of "conditionality" (Stiglitz, 2002), transforming development cooperation into a diplomatic "carrot-and-stick" mechanism (Guinn, 2008, p.138).

At the same time, the drivers of human trafficking extend far beyond criminal networks. Structural factors such as economic inequality, gender norms, and global labour markets play major roles (Castles, 2004b, p.221; Silvey and Parreñas, 2019, p.3468; Lewis et al., 2015b, p.19). Receiving states also bear partial responsibility (Strauss, 2012, p.143; FitzGerald, 2016, p.189). The EU acknowledges that addressing such root causes is essential for effective migration management (EC, 2015, p.8; Collyer, 2023, p.272). Moreover, many victims do not fit simple

victim/criminal binaries: legally employed workers may enter exploitation (Bélanger, 2014, p.103), and some rescued individuals re-enter irregular migration (Gentleman, 2017).

Yet these realities are rarely reflected in policy. Western states often avoid confronting global systems that generate trafficking or their own complicity (Lewis et al., 2015a, p.586; Berman, 2003, p.58). Even international organisations, including the ILO, sidestep debates that might challenge capitalism (Lerche, 2007, p.431). Sensationalist campaigns frequently obscure discrimination in receiving states (Tyszler, 2019, p.13), reinforcing hierarchies of race, class, and nationality (Kempadoo, 2005, cited in Silvey, 2006, pp.74–75). As a result, migrant agency is overlooked, rights to mobility denied (Olayiwola, 2024, p.354), and instability exacerbated (Yea, 2020, p.526). Overall, anti-trafficking policies embedded in externalised border control fail to address structural drivers or migrant agency and may reproduce the precarities they purport to resolve.

Broker Regulation and Border control

Broker regulation further illustrates the discretionary nature of externalisation. Brokers are commonly defined as "people or organisations that provide assistance to facilitate migration, including arranging travel and housing and obtaining employment contracts, visas, and required insurance" (Williams et al., 2020, p.968). Policy discourse, however, frequently frames them either as criminals engaged in trafficking and smuggling (McKeown, 2012) or as exploiters profiting from labour-market gaps (Andrees, Nasri, and Swiniarski, 2015; Kuptsch, 2006). Migrants, in turn, are often portrayed as innocent, passive victims (Hennebry, Grass, and McLaughlin, 2016, p.46). This dichotomy legitimises policies aimed at eliminating brokers (Castles, 2004a, p.875) through measures such as "zero-fee" recruitment schemes.

Yet in practice, states frequently rely on brokers to manage migration flows remotely (Walton-Roberts, 2021, pp.2335–2336; Muranaka, 2023, p.699). Broker regulation therefore functions simultaneously as exclusion and utilisation—an archetypal form of externalised border control.

Within development cooperation, this dynamic becomes more pronounced, as bilateral migration agreements often reflect the asymmetrical power relations (Chung, Hollifield, and Tian, 2023, p.497). The EU-funded Centre for Legal Migration Promotion in Cape Verde is illustrative: despite significant investment, its donor-driven orientation created distrust among migrants, resulting in only three users over three years, while most continued to rely on informal brokers (Åkesson and Alpes, 2018, pp.2693, 2702). EU-funded tightening of border control also pushed migrants toward more dangerous routes (Andersson, 2016, p.1062), in some cases exacerbating irregular migration (Faist, 2019, p.3). These cases show how broker regulation under the banner of development cooperation often fails to reflect lived experiences and may even produce counterproductive outcomes.

These outcomes stem from a fundamental misunderstanding of brokers' roles (Wee, Goh and Yeoh, 2019, p.2673). Brokers reach marginalised populations with limited digital access (Deshingkar, 2021b, p.329; Deshingkar, 2019, p.2647), provide training tailored to employment needs (Deshingkar et al., 2018, p.2728), assist with paperwork and contract negotiation (Awumbila et al., 2019, p.2656), and often operate more efficiently than formal institutions (Dottridge, 2020, p.414). Migrants may even trust brokers more than state agencies (Spaan, 1994, p.109; Adugna et al., 2021), knowingly accepting risks in pursuit of upward mobility (Bélanger and Silvey, 2019, pp.3430–3431; Deshingkar, 2019, pp.2648–2649). This "constrained agency" (Deshingkar, 2023, p.608) reflects not only financial costs but also non-monetary factors

such as waiting times and family separation (Waite, 2009). Consequently, eliminating brokers does little to address underlying structural drivers.

Broker regulation embedded within externalised border control obscures these complexities. Brokers are institutional products of restrictive migration regimes (Surak, 2018, p.488; Fabian, 2003, p.501; Portes and DeWind, 2006, p.846; Lindquist, 2012, p.74; Axelsson et al., 2022, p.594), and even highly skilled migrants rely on them (Newland, 2013, p.8; Muranaka, 2020, p.516). Migration systems are co-constructed through broker-state interactions (Xiang and Lindquist, 2014; Deshingkar, 2019, p.2641), with states themselves functioning as accomplices (Carens, 2010, p.29). Externalised border control demonises brokers while masking the roles of state policies in producing migrant precarity (Deshingkar, 2021a, p.147). As a result, policies intended to eliminate brokers may inadvertently reinforce their necessity.

Conditions for Incorporation into Externalised Border control

The preceding analyses demonstrate how development cooperation becomes subsumed within externalised border control across anti-trafficking and broker-regulation. Three common conditions enable this incorporation.

First, donor-driven conditionalities. Anti-trafficking policies frame organised crime as an external threat, justifying restrictive interventions. Broker-regulation policies rely on dichotomies that legitimise donor-led attempts to prevent irregular migration. Such conditionalities impose humanitarian or rights-based norms that ultimately serve donor priorities.

Second, a security-over-development logic. Anti-trafficking prioritises security concerns, leaving victim protection limited. Broker regulation acknowledges exploitation but neglects the structural drivers of brokerage. This security-first approach, together with the discretionary use of power, reflects the political nature of externalised border control.

Third, the neglect of root causes. Sensationalist anti-trafficking narratives obscure structural inequalities and receiving-state responsibilities. Broker-elimination overlook brokers' functional roles and migrants' agency. This pattern of avoidance constitutes another hallmark of externalised border control.

In sum, development cooperation becomes incorporated into externalised border control when *donor conditionalities*, *a security-first logic*, and *the neglect of root causes* converge. These conditions form the conceptual basis for the theoretical framework developed in the next chapter.

Theoretical Framework

This section outlines the theoretical framework through which the research questions are addressed. The study adopts a decolonial approach as its conceptional foundation and, in line with the two sub-questions, develops four analytical criteria (see Figure 2). Criteria a–c derive from the concept of *coloniality* in decolonial theory and are used to evaluate whether Japanese ODA projects exhibit the structural logics of externalised BORDER CONTROL (Sub-RQ1). Criterion d draws on *assemblage theory* and assesses how externalisation actually functions through the actions of diverse actors (Sub-RQ2).

a) **Donor conditionalities:** whether Japan introduces border-control related conditions—often framed through human rights norms—as prerequisites for project implementation.

b) Security first: whether the design and delivery of projects prioritise Japan's security concerns.

c) Unaddressed root causes: whether structural and historical factors are neglected, enabling Japan to sidestep moral responsibility.

d) Relevant stakeholders' agency: whether stakeholders act with their own agency rather than simply complying with Japanese authority.

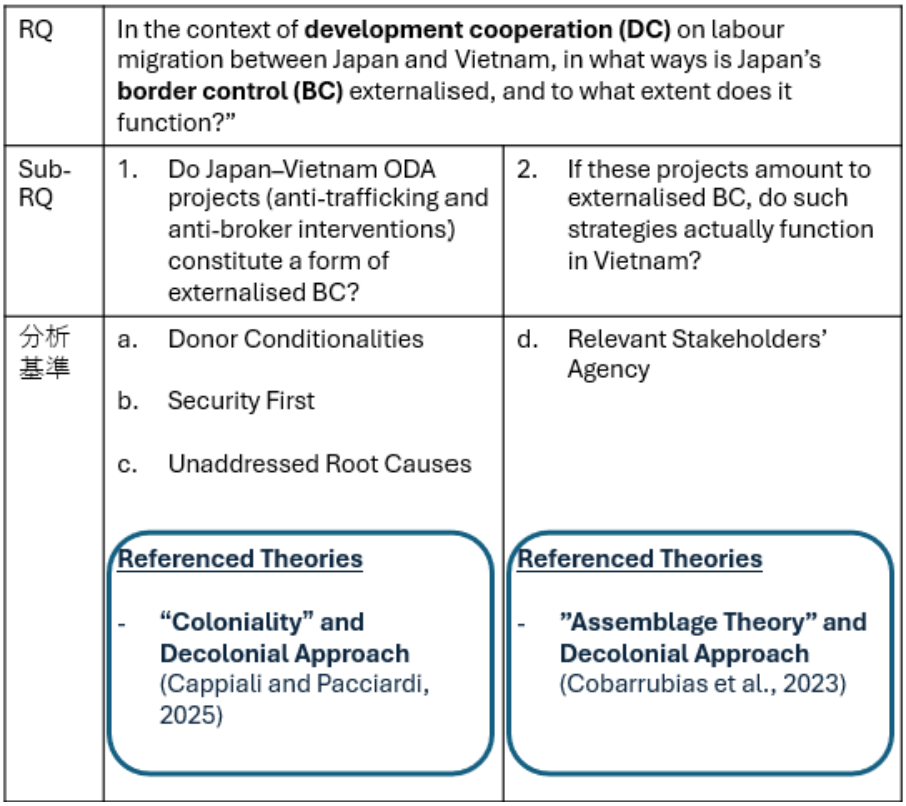

Figure 2: Theoretical Framework

Addressing Sub-Research Question 1: Externalisation and Coloniality

Sub-Research Question 1asks whether Japanese ODA projects constitute a form of externalised border control in Vietnam. The first three criteria — *a) donor conditionalities; b) security first; c) unaddressed root causes* — correspond to the structural features of externalisation identified in the Literature Review and are conceptually grounded in the notion of *coloniality*.

Coloniality refers to enduring structures of domination and exploitation that persist beyond the formal end of colonialism (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013, p.16). Externalisation represents a paradigmatic manifestation of this logic (Cappiali and Pacciardi, 2025, p.305), often materialising when powerful states impose subordinate roles on weaker ones under the guise of "cooperative" partnership (FitzGerald, 2020, p.5).

Although Japan did not colonise Vietnam, the bilateral relationship has long been characterised by structural asymmetries: Japan has long been the largest provider of ODA to Vietnam (Nguyen Hoang Tien, 2020, p.127), and Vietnam's administrative and diplomatic responses are partly constrained by dependence on Japanese markets, investment, and labour-migration opportunities. Japan's ability to set regulatory standards for migrant recruitment and mobility governance further reinforces this asymmetry, enabling it to shape cooperation agendas and

decision-making processes. These dynamics reproduce the logic of coloniality even in the absence of formal colonial rule.

From this perspective: *a) Donor conditionalities* reinforce asymmetrical relations by presenting conditionality in the language of humanitarianism or rights; *b) Security first* recentres the security priorities of destination states, reproducing North–South hierarchies; *c) Unaddressed root causes* sustain entrenched "patterns of sovereignty" (Lake, 2009, p.63) by deliberately overlooking structural and historical inequalities. Taken together, criteria a–c can therefore be understood as concrete expressions of *coloniality*.

Critiquing Externalised Border control from a Decolonial Approach

Determining whether development cooperation functions as externalised border control requires examining not only donor intentions but also how externalisation operates in practice. A decolonial perspective is essential here because it highlights how marginalised actors resist, interpret, or adapt to restrictive policies, thus challenging *coloniality* and exposing its contradictions (Cappiali and Pacciardi, 2025, p.318).

First, contestation extends beyond "undesired migrants" to include origin-country governments and non-state actors. Turkey, for instance, has leveraged its "refugee gatekeeper" role to extract concessions from the EU through rent-seeking strategies (Tsourapas, 2019, p.474). International organisations, NGOs, CSOs, and private companies also participate in externalisation, often generating friction and divergence from donor intentions (Cobarrubias et al., 2023, p.2).

Second, actors within the receiving-state institutions do not form a homogeneous body. Earlier studies often assumed that officials uniformly reproduced Northern-biased migration paradigms (Dannecker, 2009, p.120). However, policy implementation is shaped by *street-level dynamics* (Lipsky, 1980). Liaison officers may reinforce asymmetries regimes (Ostrand and Statham, 2022, p.4000) while simultaneously exercising discretion that diverges from central directives (Ostrand and Statham, 2021, p.27).

In short, externalisation is not reducible to top-down *remote control*; it is continually reshaped through multi-layered interactions, producing resistance, refraction, or divergence (Stock, Üstübici and Schultz, 2019). This insight establishes the relevance of relevant stakeholders' agency as an independent analytical criterion for Sub-Research Question 2.

Addressing Sub-Research Question 2: Assemblage and Functionality

Sub-Research Question 2 asks whether externalised border control actually functions in Vietnam. To address this, the study introduces criterion *d) relevant stakeholders' agency*. This criterion draws on the *decolonial approach*, analytically grounded in *assemblage theory* (Cobarrubias et al., 2023, p.6). Initially rooted in critiques of hierarchical power (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987), assemblage theory has evolved into a meso-level framework for analysing the multi-layered and contingent nature of social structures (Landa, 2006). In migration and border studies, it has been applied to the multiplicity of borders (Sohn, 2016, p.184), the contingency of security practices (Allen and Vollmer, 2018, p.27), and hybrid actor roles (Casas-Cortés and Cobarrubias, 2019). Yet much of this literature remains constrained by methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Schiller, 2002).

To address this limitation, Cobarrubias et al. (2023, p.6) reconceptualise assemblage as "*a process of 'co-functioning' whereby heterogeneous elements come together in a non-*

homogeneous grouping" (Anderson and McFarlane, 2011, p.125). This definition relativises state-led externalisation as only one element of broader assemblage and foregrounds the role of diverse, non-homogeneous actors beyond state-centred perspectives.

From this standpoint, the study assumes that—even where development cooperation is incorporated into externalised border control— *relevant stakeholders* do not form a unitary body with shared goals. Instead, they exist as heterogeneous groupings whose actions may reinforce, reshape, or undermine externalisation. Accordingly, the analysis focuses on how these forms of agency shape the (dys)functionality of externalised border control.

The theoretical framework developed here therefore conceptualises externalised border control as an extension of *coloniality*, while simultaneously incorporating stakeholder agency through *assemblage theory*. This dual perspective provides a critical lens for analysing how development cooperation becomes embedded within externalised border control, how it functions in practice, and the conditions under which it may fail.

Methodology

This study examines two ODA projects implemented by Japan in Vietnam. A qualitative approach was adopted, combining document analysis with semi-structured interviews.

The empirical focus is on two major development cooperation projects concerning labour migration between Japan and Vietnam:

1. *Hotline Project: Project for Strengthening the Operation of Hotline for Counselling and Supporting Trafficked Survivors* (JICA, 2017), and
2. *Direct Matching Project: Project of Supporting to Connect Job Information for Vietnamese Workers to Work Abroad under Contract* (JICA, 2023a).

The two projects differ substantially in their objectives and policy contexts. The Hotline Project represents Japan's long-standing anti-trafficking engagement in Vietnam, building on earlier cooperation since 2009 to expand counselling services and strengthen victim-support mechanisms. In contrast, the Direct Matching Project is a recent initiative aimed at reducing recruitment costs and reliance on brokers by creating a direct job-matching system for prospective Vietnamese workers. As the latter project is ongoing, no prior research has examined both initiatives in depth.

In Japan, ODA—defined as concessional funding provided by governments or official agencies primarily to promote economic development and welfare (OECD, n.d.)—is administered by *the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA)* and implemented by the *Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA)*.

Document analysis

Document analysis drew upon project reports and related materials collected from JICA archives and relevant institutions. Where available, associated survey data were also utilised. For the anti-trafficking project, baseline and endline surveys were compared to assess changes in hotline usage. In the broker-regulation project, the author, in collaboration with a local research institute, conducted a questionnaire survey with 50 Sending Organisations (Vietnamese Recruitment agencies for labour migrants) and 1,000 workers in Hung Yen and Nghe An provinces. The questionnaire covered key dimensions of recruitment practices relevant to brokerage dynamics. For workers, items included: whether they had used brokers during the

application process; the circumstances and motivations underlying their reliance on brokers; any additional payments or informal fees beyond official charges; and their perceptions of the advantages and risks associated with broker involvement. For Sending Organisations, the survey examined their use of brokers and collaborators, payment structures, and assessments of the role that brokers play in recruitment outcomes. Together, these items generated comparable data on brokerage reliance, cost structures, and perceived functions across both workers and SOs. This survey was further supplemented by in-depth interviews with SOs, workers, and institutional stakeholders.

Some of these data sources were not publicly available. However, reproducibility has been ensured through triangulation with academic presentations and publicly accessible information.

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of 32 stakeholders across both projects. Participants included: i. JICA staff; ii. Contractors and consultants; iii. Vietnamese government officials; iv. Representatives of international and research organisations; v. Sending Organisation (SO) personnel, including brokers; and vi. Prospective migrants encountered during field visits. A detailed breakdown of the number of interviews conducted with each stakeholder category is provided in *the Appendix*.

Interviews were guided by a questionnaire developed in line with the analytical criteria. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Sussex Research Ethics Committee and the author's supervisor. With support from the JICA Vietnam Office, research instruments were translated into Vietnamese, and interpreters accompanied selected interviews.

Each interview generally lasted around one hour. The eight prospective migrants participated in a joint 30-minute session. Most interviews took place during a five-day field trip to Hanoi; those unable to attend were interviewed online or in Tokyo. To safeguard anonymity, individual names and institutional affiliations are withheld. Participants' profiles are summarised in *the Appendix*.

Through this combined methodology, the following chapters assess the two projects against the theoretical framework, examining how Japanese ODA manifests as externalised border control, and how such interventions function—or fail to function—in practice.

Case Study 1: Anti-Trafficking (Hotline Project)

Japan has engaged in anti-trafficking measures in Vietnam through ODA initiatives for more than a decade. Following a joint survey with the Vietnam Women's Union in 2009, the *Project for the Establishment of Anti-Trafficking in Persons Hotline* (2012–2016, JPY 170 million) was launched. This initiative expanded an existing child helpline operated by *the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA)* and created a dedicated call centre to support trafficking victims. Building on this foundation, a second phase entitled the *Project for Strengthening the Operation of Hotline for Counselling and Supporting Trafficked Survivors* (2018–2022, JPY 300 million) established three additional regional call centres and considerably reinforced the national system for prevention and victim support (JICA, 2017).

This *Hotline Project* was coordinated between private consultants contracted by JICA and MOLISA's *Department of Child Affairs (DCA)* and relied on inter-ministerial cooperation. It also developed a framework for collaboration with international organisations and NGOs through

regular consultations, and expanded research through joint studies with domestic institutions. Drawing on interviews with practitioners in both Japan and Vietnam, as well as with staff from international organisations and research institutes, this study assesses the project against the four analytical criteria outlined in the theoretical framework, with particular attention to its relevance for border-control externalisation.

Limited Conditionalities and Strong Vietnamese Ownership (Criterion a)

Regarding donor conditionalities (criterion a), there is little evidence that Japan imposed stringent requirements. The sole precondition outlined in the project cooperation document was that MOLISA's anti-trafficking policies remain broadly unchanged (JICA, 2012), which did not compel institutional reform. In practice, Japanese requests were limited to routine ODA commitments, such as assigning counterpart personnel and providing office space (*Project Stakeholder A, Vietnam*). Even after implementation began, additional funds beyond the original allocation were approved for establishing call centres, and awareness-raising activities were adjusted flexibly in line with Vietnamese preferences (*Project Stakeholder D, Japan*). The project was thus marked by an absence of strict conditionalities.

This lack can be partly explained by its origins. Rather than being driven by Japan, the initiative emerged from a wider international context. Since 2009, Japan had expanded anti-trafficking cooperation with Thailand and promoted cross-border responses within ASEAN (JICA, 2019). Meanwhile, Vietnam was strengthening its domestic framework through a national action plan and bilateral agreements with neighbouring countries. Yet it lacked an agreement with China, its largest destination for trafficking victims, until 2010 (JICA, 2012, p.ii). This asymmetry in Vietnam-China relations was a major driver of Vietnam's request for Japanese involvement.

During the project, Vietnam also requested Japan's participation as an observer in the Senior Officials' Meeting of *the Coordinated Mekong Ministerial Initiative against Trafficking (COMMIT)*. As one interviewee noted:

> China faces severe trafficking problems but holds a dominant position, and Vietnam cannot effectively counter this through bilateral or ASEAN frameworks. For this reason, Japanese engagement was highly valued (Project Stakeholder D, Japan).

Furthermore, the project's counterpart agency was *the DCA*—rather than *the Department of Overseas Labour (DOLAB)*, which oversees international migration—indicating that Japan's influence over Vietnam's migration management remained limited at that time. Unlike cases such as the UK's conditional approach in the Greater Mekong Subregion, which required explicit institutional reforms (FitzGerald, 2016, pp.192–193), Japan's involvement responded primarily to Vietnam's diplomatic needs, especially its challenges in negotiating with China.

Diplomatic Significance over Security Concerns (Criterion b)

With respect to security first (criterion b), there is little evidence that Japanese security priorities were central to the project. Approximately 80% of Vietnamese trafficking victims were sent to China, with the remainder in Southeast Asia and Europe—meaning inflows to Japan were negligible (*Project Stakeholder B, Vietnam*). Anti-trafficking initiatives in Vietnam therefore did not address a direct "external security threat" (FitzGerald, 2016, p.184) to Japan.

Although anti-trafficking efforts may indirectly facilitate orderly migration (*International Organization Staff L, Vietnam*), the overall scale was limited: roughly 700 victims annually and

3,000 hotline consultations, compared with approximately 80,000 Vietnamese labour migrants entering Japan each year (*Research Institute Staff M, Vietnam*). Moreover, project materials addressed a broader spectrum of victims, including male forced labourers and abducted children (*Project Stakeholder C, Japan*). These factors suggest that Japanese border-security concerns were not driving the initiative.

Instead, the project functioned primarily as humanitarian assistance with diplomatic visibility. It is listed in the annual report of *the Council for the Promotion of Measures against Trafficking in Persons* (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, 2024, p.63), a body established after Japan's 2004 downgrade in *the US Trafficking in Persons Report*. As one interviewee observed:

> JICA implements many ODA projects in Vietnam, but consultations with Japanese ministries mainly occur for large-scale loans involving politicians. For the Hotline Project, MOFA made no inquiries and the Cabinet Secretariat only once. The project was praised as a clear, internationally recognisable humanitarian initiative (Project Stakeholder C, Japan).

Thus, the Hotline Project is better understood as humanitarian assistance serving diplomatic engagement, rather than an instrument for border-control externalisation.

Limited Engagement with Root Causes (Criterion c)

From the perspective of unaddressed root causes (criterion c), the project focused primarily on preventive measures. Its core activities consisted of counselling and information provision and did not directly address structural drivers such as poverty or employment creation. Stakeholders emphasised technical tasks, including call-centre expansion and counsellor training (*Project Stakeholder D, Japan*). Outreach to vulnerable populations was limited, as noted by one interviewee:

> By expanding call centres to three locations, introducing multilingual services, and conducting public awareness campaigns, recognition increased from 12% to 53%. However, regional constraints and low literacy meant coverage did not reach all ethnic minority communities (Project Stakeholder A, Vietnam).

Importantly, those most at risk of cross-border trafficking are not necessarily the poorest, but people with some resources and networks (Carling and Schewel, 2018, p.957; de Haas, 2021, p.7). Some victims reportedly paid USD 5,000–6,000 to migrate to Chinese economic zones via Cambodia, only to fall into trafficking (*Project Stakeholder A, Vietnam*). Universal hotline coverage was therefore not essential to reach those most affected.

Structural issues such as rural development and employment were addressed through other donor frameworks (*Research Institute Staff M, Vietnam*). As one international organisation representative explained:

> Japan established call centres along borders with China, Laos, and Cambodia. The Hotline Project was Vietnam's first development-cooperation initiative, enabling other donors to focus on detection, prosecution, victim support, and legislative reform (International Organization Staff L, Vietnam).

Thus, the Hotline Project concentrated on technical preventive measures, with deeper structural issues largely left to other initiatives.

Organisational Cooperation and Individual-Level Resistance (Criterion d)

Across criteria a–c, the Hotline project shows minimal engagement with root causes and limited evidence of border control externalisation. Concerning relevant stakeholders' agency (criterion d), Japanese control was limited, while stakeholder participation was largely cooperative.

At the organisational level, project implementation proceeded smoothly. JICA's role centred on public relations and participation in meetings. Inter-agency coordination around call centres improved, and amendments to *the Law on Prevention and Combat of Human Trafficking* enabled operations to continue independently of ODA. Following MOLISA's dissolution in 2025, *the DCA* was integrated into *the Ministry of Health*, and call centres continued with domestic funding—indicating sustainable institutional ownership.

At the individual level, however, resistance emerged. Some smugglers misused hotline materials to disguise illegal brokerage (*Project Stakeholder A, Vietnam*). Prospective irregular migrants avoided official hotlines, choosing informal networks; in some cases, women turned to surrogate motherhood in China for income (*Project Stakeholder D, Japan*). Victims sometimes refrained from reporting abuses, framing their experience as "bad luck" compared to the perceived successes of others (*International Organization Staff L, Vietnam*). These dynamics underscore the relationship between trafficking and irregular migration, and how certain populations viewed the hotline as a risk, prompting avoidance.

Nevertheless, stakeholder engagement overall remained positive. Figure 3 (overleaf) illustrates stakeholder agency, with blue indicating cooperation and red indicating resistance; cooperative participation clearly predominated.

The Hotline Project does not constitute a typical case of border control externalisation by Japanese security priorities. Rather, it reflects cooperation shaped by Vietnam's geopolitical concerns vis-à-vis China and Japan's humanitarian diplomacy, influenced also by U.S. criticism. Although engagement with structural drivers was limited and outreach to poorer or irregular migrants constrained, resistance remained relatively minor. Organisational cooperation was strong, producing comparatively positive outcomes within a modest budget and timeframe. The project therefore stands as a relatively successful ODA initiative.

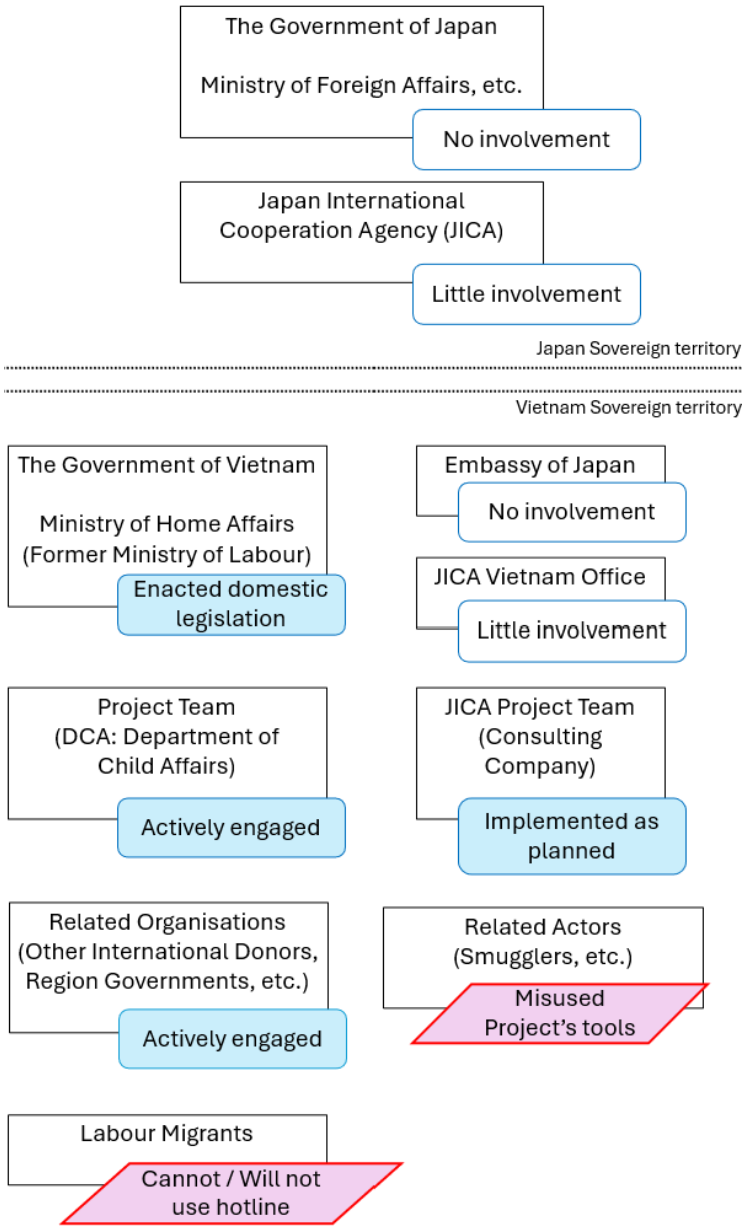

Figure 3: Relevant Stakeholders' Agency in the Hotline Project

Case Study 2: Broker Regulation (Direct Matching Project)

In 2023, in collaboration with the Department of Overseas Labour (DOLAB), JICA launched the Project of Supporting to Connect Job Information for Vietnamese Workers to Work Abroad under Contract (2023-2028, JPY 370 million). Commonly referred to as the Direct Matching Project, this initiative aims to enhance transparency in labour recruitment and reduce migrants' financial burdens by enduring prospective Vietnamese workers to access job information and apply to Sending Organisations (SOs) without intermediary brokers (JICA, 2023a). Following administrative reforms transferring DOLAB to the Ministry of Home Affairs in 2024, the matching system was officially launched in 2025, with nationwide dissemination planned thereafter.

Before assessing project outcomes, it is essential to clarify the specific brokerage context in Vietnam. The term broker differs from its common usage in broader migration studies. Historically, overseas labour deployment has been state-managed as part of Vietnam's poverty-reduction strategy. While market reforms have encouraged privatisation, workers must still migrate through DOLAB-licensed SOs. Under a conventional definition, SOs could be understood as public brokers, yet in Vietnam the term typically refers to "individuals or institutions mediating between SOs and jobseekers." These include public employment centres, relatives, neighbours, returned migrants, and influential local figures (Shire, 2020, p.443). Unlicensed companies or individuals often borrow SO licences to operate sending services (Hoang, 2020, p.35). Thus, even in legitimate recruitment, both formal and informal brokers are deeply embedded (Lindquist, Xiang and Yeoh, 2012, p.14; Williams and Hughes, 2020, p.968).

The proliferation of multi-layered broker networks substantially increases migration costs (Tanabe and Korekawa, 2022, p.93). Vietnamese workers typically pay around USD 6,400 to migrate to Taiwan, USD 10,000 to South Korea, and up to USD 12,000 to Japan (IOM, 2020). State audit reports note that the statutory cap of USD 3,600 is routinely exceeded, often reaching USD 7,000–8,000 (Umeda, 2022, p.17). These additional charges stem from commissions paid by SOs to brokers, or from companies operating under borrowed SO licences (Korekawa, 2020, p.369). Excessive bank lending into the sending industry entrenches debt-financed migration (Sunai, 2020, pp.51, 68). Consequently, Vietnam has been described as hosting "one of the most exploitative migration industries in the world" (Hoang, 2020, p.39). Notably, Vietnamese migrants heading to Japan incur roughly three times the deployment fees of Indonesian workers, despite Vietnam's lower economic level (Immigration Services Agency of Japan, 2022). This debt-driven migration contributes directly to precarious employment and, in some cases, to migrant disappearance and irregular status in Japan (Ishizuka, 2018).

Against this backdrop, Japanese ODA interventions targeting brokers are relatively recent. The Direct Matching Project represents Japan's first attempt to institutionalise direct recruitment channels. The following subsections evaluate the project against the four analytical criteria. This study draws on interviews with Vietnamese and Japanese implementers, representatives of international organisations and research institutions, SOs, migrant workers, and brokers, to assess whether the project functions as an instrument of border-control externalisation.

Japanese-Led Initiative (Criterion a)

Regarding donor conditionalities (criterion a), the Direct Matching Project aligns with standard ODA practice. Its preconditions were limited to the Vietnamese government's commitment to support matching between workers and SOs (JICA, 2023a, p.8). The project was framed by JICA (2023b) as promoting migrant rights through broker elimination.

In practice, however, the initiative was strongly Japanese led. It emerged from direct appeals by the Japanese Ambassador and senior JICA officials to MOLISA. Unlike conventional ODA, typically initiated by recipient-government requests, JICA proactively drafted the initial proposal and utilised high-level dialogues to secure Vietnamese cooperation (*Project Stakeholder E, Vietnam*). Implementation further reflected Japanese ownership. Whereas the Hotline Project relied on private consultants, the Direct Matching project was managed by an officer dispatched from *Japan's Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare*. The matching system focused exclusively on deployment to Japan.

Thus, despite its formal alignment with standard ODA norms, the project exhibited a substantive power asymmetry driven by Japanese political initiative, extending beyond conventional donor conditionalities.

Japan's Security Priorities and Blurred Responsibility (Criterion b)

With respect to security first (criterion b), Japan's domestic anxieties are evident. Vietnamese workers constitute Japan's largest migrant group, and frequent cases of disappearances, overstays, and offences have been framed as public-security challenges (Yasuda, 2023). *MOFA* has linked these problems primarily to the high costs borne by workers during recruitment (Embassy of Japan in Vietnam, 2020a, pp.3–4). Political developments, including the rise of far-right parties (BBC, 2025), have shifted policy away from "coexistence" toward an "orderly society" (Japanese Government Cabinet Decision, 2025). These trends intensified pressures to curtail irregular migration.

Although the Direct Matching Project sought to reduce costs, measures that would directly alleviate workers' burdens—such as employer cost-sharing—proved politically and economically contentious (Nitta and Lang, 2025; JP-MIRAI, 2024). Japanese actors continued to leverage their market power to maintain practices such as hospitality expectations and kickbacks from SOs (Sawada, 2020; Embassy of Japan in Vietnam, 2021b). Employers' preference for "compliant" workers sustained harsh SO practices including military-style training (*Broker X, Japan*). Consequently, while the project was framed as enhancing rights, its underlying rationale lay in preventing irregular migration, thereby diffusing responsibility between Japan and Vietnam.

Inadequate Response to Root Causes (Criterion c)

From the perspective of unaddressed root causes (criterion c), the project does not sufficiently address structural drivers of brokerage dependence. Labour export is concentrated in poorer rural provinces (IOM, 2017, p.26), where ceremonial expenditures and family obligations reinforce debt-driven migration (Hoang, 2020, p.34). Limited internet penetration restricts workers' ability to access information directly, sustaining reliance on brokers (Ishimaru, 2025; Ishimaru, 2024; Hoang, 2024). Workers themselves described this dependence:

> I could have applied directly through the university based SO, but competition was fierce. A relative broker handled everything quickly, so I paid $1,500 plus fruit and chicken, went into debt, but saved $23,000 in three years. (SO Staff N, Vietnam).

Legally, workers are prohibited from paying intermediary fees (Embassy of Japan in Vietnam, 2020b, translating Law No. 69/2020/QH14, Article 7, Clause 8). Dispatches to Japan forbid SO payments to brokers, yet these restrictions do not apply to Taiwan or South Korea (Embassy of Japan in Vietnam, 2021a, translating Circular No. 21/2021/TT-BLDTBXH, Appendix X). Enforcement remains weak. Operationally, 96.2% of SOs rely on an average of 16.8 brokers (DOLAB, 2021), often labelled "collaborators" to cut personnel costs, though distinctions are vague" (*Project Stakeholder E, Vietnam*). SO executives elaborated:

> We allocate $1,000 per recruit to staff, which ends up with collaborators. Other companies spend $2,500–3,000 on hospitality, later recouped from workers. (SO Executive Q, Vietnam).

By contrast, compliance-oriented SOs demonstrated alternative practices:

> We neither charge workers nor pay collaborators. Instead, we fund scholarships for schools that introduce candidates. (SO Executive P, Vietnam)

> We built satellite campuses at regional universities and provided Japanese teachers, securing talent while supporting schools. (SO Executive R, Japan)

These examples indicate that development-oriented strategies can reduce broker reliance. Yet the Direct Matching Project focused narrowly on technical system development, with limited consideration for local trust networks or broader policy issues (*Project Stakeholders I and H, Japan*). As a result, it emphasised "broker elimination" without addressing the structural roots of dependence.

Resistance and Course Corrections (Criterion d)

This project meets all criteria a–c, indicating a strong tendency toward border control externalisation. Regarding relevant stakeholders' agency (criterion d), resistance was widespread on the Vietnamese side, while partial course corrections emerged among Japanese actors.

At the governmental level, Vietnamese agencies consistently delayed progress. A request process that would typically require months took over two years. Although Japan completed adoption procedures rapidly, implementation lagged by more than a year (*Project Stakeholder K, Japan*). Office shortages and frequent staff turnover hindered ownership. Even symbolic decisions, such as labelling a system demonstration as "co-hosted," required extensive negotiations (*Project Stakeholder G, Japan*). As one official noted:

> Cooperation projects in labour export are often unsustainable… after they end, activities become ineffective. (Project Stakeholder F, Vietnam)

At the SO level, concerns arose that recruitment data shared on the system could be misused by competitors or brokers (*SO Executive R, Vietnam*). A corruption scandal within *DOLAB* (VIETJO, 2025) further undermined trust, while brokers capitalised on perceptions that "low cost = illegality" to deter workers from using the platform (*SO Executive Q, Vietnam*).

On the Japanese side, liaison officers exercised greater "street-level agency" (Ostrand and Statham, 2021, p.30) than in the Hotline Project. They coordinated with NGOs and industry groups and proposed mobile consultation offices for selected local governments. Yet these efforts were blocked by the home ministry as exceeding ODA's mandate (*Project Stakeholder K, Japan*). Domestic initiatives promoting "*fair and ethical recruitment*" (JP-MIRAI, 2024), also faced resistance due to employer opposition to cost-sharing and political pressures (*Project Stakeholder J, Japan*).

Thus, the Direct Matching Project encountered persistent resistance and weak Vietnamese ownership, while Japanese corrective efforts were constrained. As illustrated in Figure 4, stakeholder agency was characterised primarily by resistance (red) and partial course corrections (orange).

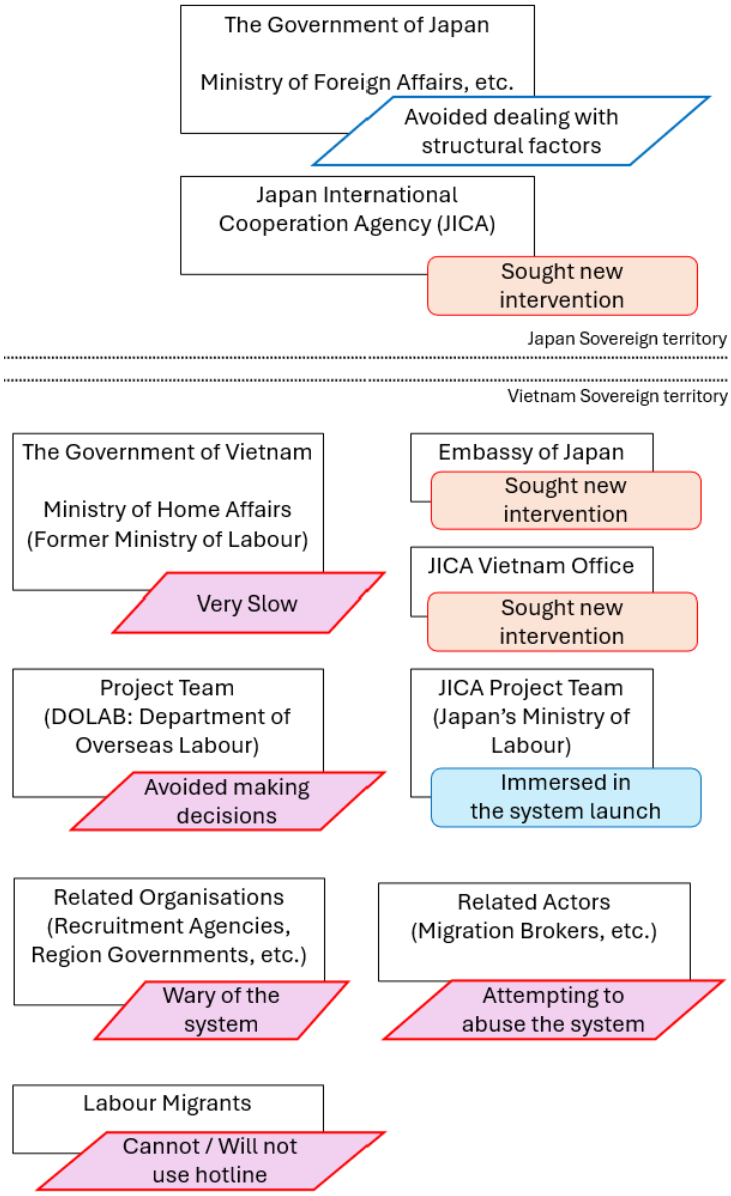

Figure 4: Relevant Stakeholders Agency in the Direct Matching Project

Promoted under the banner of human rights protection, the Direct Matching Project was deeply shaped by Japan's security priorities and ODA control mechanisms. Structural drivers of broker dependence and diverse forms of stakeholder agency were insufficiently addressed, reflecting a strongly externalised pattern of border control. Yet resistance in Vietnam and limited Japanese corrective measures produced ongoing frictions, undermining both effective implementation and consolidation of intended outcomes.

Discussion

This section compares the two case studies and seeks to answer the overarching research question.

Manifestations of Externalised Border control

With respect to Sub-question 1 – *Do Japan–Vietnam ODA projects (anti-trafficking and broker-regulations) constitute a form of externalised border control*? – the analysis reveals a clear divergence. The Hotline Project does not fall under bordercontrol, whereas the Direct Matching Project does. According to the analytical framework, only criterion c) Unaddressed Root Causes applied to the Hotline Project, while all three criteria were met in the case of the Direct Matching Project.

The presence of criterion c) in both projects underscores the structural challenges inherent in technical interventions. In the Hotline Project, an anti-trafficking function was appended to DCA's child helpline; in the Direct Matching Project, a direct-matching function was added to DOLAB's web portal. From a *decolonial perspective*, however, such technical interventions—although framed as neutral or transparency-enhancing (Grace and De Neve, 2021, p.2)—risk reproducing structural inequalities and entrenched power asymmetries (Fouksman and Klein, 2019, p.493). Thus, the mere presence of criterion c) does not constitute evidence of border control externalisation.

Consequently, the Hotline Project remained largely separate from border control, retaining a humanitarian character in line with traditional development cooperation. By contrast, the Direct Matching Project foregrounded Japan's security concerns and effectively transferred border control-related functions—specifically the selection of "desirable" migrants without brokers—to Vietnam. In other words, while the anti-trafficking project preserved the essential features of development cooperation, the broker-regulation initiative became subsumed under externalised border control.

Functionality of Externalised Border control

Turning to Sub-question 2 – *If these projects amount to externalised border control, do such strategies actually function in Vietnam?* – the findings indicate that the Direct Matching project did not exhibit full functionality, albeit for different reasons.

The project met all three criteria of border control externalisation, but in doing so, Japan's security-oriented priorities became overly pronounced. This produced resistance at every level in Vietnam. Meanwhile, within Japan, actors sought to reorient the project toward developmental objectives, both among field staff and domestic institutions. These attempts, however, encountered opposition from other parts of the Japanese government, generating internal contestation that did not align neatly with state-level control. As a result, the project failed to function effectively as an externalised border control. Simultaneously, these contested reorientations were constrained, limiting its developmental impact as well.

In sum, the Direct Matching Project was shaped so heavily by externalisation that it ultimately failed to function effectively either as border control or as development cooperation.

Externalisation of Border control within Development Cooperation

To answer the overarching research question – In the context of development cooperation on labour migration between Japan and Vietnam, in what ways is Japan's border control externalised, and to what extent does it function? – it is necessary to abstract from the two case studies and compare their trajectories.

The key distinction lies in their differential alignment with externalised border control. The Hotline Project remained largely separate from border control, retaining the characteristics of conventional development cooperation. By contrast, the Direct Matching Project represented a clear example of border control externalisation yet failed to function effectively either as border control or as development cooperation. As illustrated in Figure 5, this divergence stems from the fact that the Direct Matching Project met criteria a) Donor Conditionalities and b) Security First, whereas the Hotline Project did not.

	Anti-Trafficking (Hotline Project)	**Broker Regulation (Direct Matching Project)**
Analytical Criteria a. Donor Conditionalities	×	○
Analytical Criteria b. Security First	×	○
Analytical Criteria c. Unaddressed Root Causes	○	○
Sub-RQ 1. Constituting a form of externalised BC?	× (While DC entails its own challenges, it does not amount to BC)	○ (Strongly shaped by the securitisation of ODA)
Analytical Criteria d. Relevant Stakeholders' Agency	-	○
Sub-RQ 2. Such externalization actually functioning in Vietnam?	- (Not an instance of BC; functions as conventional DC)	× (Functions effectively as neither BC nor DC)
RQ. In DC on labour migration between Japan and Vietnam, in what ways is Japan's BC externalised, and to what extent does it function?"	Earlier forms of DC were grounded in diplomatic significance and remained distinct from BC. In recent years, however, the securitisation of ODA has subordinated DC to externalised BC, resulting in diminished effectiveness in both developmental and security terms.	

Figure 5: Analytical Findings of This Study

This difference is best understood in relation to the shifting policy environment. The Hotline Project (2012–22) operated during a period when Japanese ODA maintained a relatively traditional developmental orientation. The Direct Matching Project (2023–28), by contrast, was implemented in a markedly securitised ODA landscape. The 2023 revision of *Japan's Development Cooperation Charter* institutionalised *Official Security Assistance (OSA)* as defence-oriented aid to "like-minded" countries, explicitly in the context of geopolitical competition with China (Shiga, 2023, p.255). Vietnam has since been listed among potential OSA recipients (MOFA, 2025). Procedurally, this revision also enabled ODA projects to be initiated proactively by Japan, rather than solely in response to recipient requests (MOFA, 2023). These changes embody donor conditionalities and security-first logics and explain the stronger tendency toward border control externalisation in the latter project.

Taken together, these findings suggest that, while Japanese Vietnamese development cooperation in labour migration previously retained a more humanitarian and developmental orientation, recent years have witnessed an increasing "*securitisation of ODA*" (Shiga, 2023, p.255), with externalised border control characteristics becoming more pronounced. In practice, this shift has meant that project design and implementation increasingly prioritise Japan's security concerns, effectively transferring border control functions to Vietnam. This process has involved selecting "desirable migrants" without brokers and suppressing irregularisation among Vietnamese workers, while generating concerns and resistance on both sides. The outcome is paradoxical: externalisation has undermined functionality, rendering the projects ineffective as both border control and development cooperation.

Research Limitations and Challenges

First, this study relies on qualitative analysis of only two ODA projects in the migration sector in Vietnam. While this may limit generalisability, Japan's migration-related development cooperation remains extremely scarce, and the two projects examined here constitute the most prominent initiatives in Vietnam. The study therefore prioritises conceptual and empirical novelty in an area that have received little scholarly attention.

Second, both projects focus primarily on low-skilled workers, while initiatives targeting highly skilled migrants—such as university or vocational-school programmes—fall under educational cooperation frameworks. Although the externalisation of border control also applies to the facilitation of "desirable" high-skilled migration, the present study focuses on the intersection most clearly visible between border control and development cooperation: the exclusion of "undesirable" irregular migrants. Future research should broaden the empirical scope to other sectors of migration-related development cooperation and to other sending countries.

Third, the "*securitisation of Japanese ODA*" is a recent trend whose long-term implications require further examination. In infrastructure projects, development effectiveness may be preserved even under donor-interest-driven programming (Orita, 2022, p.4). By contrast, in migration, where human beings are the subject, donor-centred priorities more readily diverge from developmental objectives, raising concerns about ODA eligibility (OECD, 2023). Linking development cooperation to security risks producing what Cappiali and Pacciardi (2025, p.306) call "*soft externalisation policies*": measures framed in humanitarian terms but carrying dangers about domination and exploitation. Although Japan is the world's seventh-largest recipient of labour migrants (Korekawa, 2025, p.24; OECD, 2024), it continues to refuse recognising itself as an immigration country (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, 2018), treating migrants primarily as a labour resource (Kato, 2022, p.20).

Overall, this study aligns with prior scholarship that warns against the subordination of development cooperation to security agendas. By applying a *decolonial framework* centred on border control externalisation, it highlights how the securitisation of development cooperation risks transforming aid into an instrument of donor-centred global governance (Duffield, 2014, p.26). The case of EU assistance to Africa, widely criticised as "*neo-colonial engagement*" (Opi, 2021, p.1) that undermined the legitimacy of development cooperation, provides a cautionary parallel.

Conclusion

Migration and development exert mutually ambivalent influences, in which the externalisation of border control from receiving to sending countries and development cooperation from donors to recipients intersect in complex and layered ways. This study analysed Japan's externalised border control through a comparative examination of two major ODA projects in Vietnam—Japan's largest source of migrant workers—namely *the Hotline Project*, aimed at combating human trafficking, and *the Direct Matching Project*, designed to regulate brokers.

The literature review highlighted that externalised border control embodies three defining features: a securitised orientation toward deterring irregular migration, the discretionary circumvention of international responsibility, and a tendency to impose pre-emptive regulation on mobility more broadly. While these features intersect with development cooperation initiatives including anti-trafficking and broker regulation, they risk neglecting socio-economic contexts and the agency of affected actors. As such, they may fail to address root causes or even generate counterproductive effects. To capture these dynamics, this study adopted *a decolonial approach*, combining insights from *coloniality* and *assemblage theory*. On this basis, it identified three conditions under which development cooperation becomes subsumed into externalised border control — *donor conditionalities, security first, and unaddressed root causes* — and proposed *relevant stakeholders' agency* as an additional criterion for assessing whether development cooperation effectively functions as externalised border control.

The comparative analysis demonstrated that *the Hotline Project*, shaped by Vietnam's geopolitical concerns and Japan's humanitarian diplomacy, remained outside the scope of border-control externalisation and functioned as a conventional form of development cooperation. By contrast, *the Direct Matching Project*, though framed in the language of human rights protection, overlooked structural dependence on brokers and the agency of stakeholders. By prioritising Japan's security-oriented concerns over the irregularisation of Vietnamese workers, ODA was redirected towards broker elimination, accentuating its externalised border control character. This trajectory provoked resistance from Vietnamese actors as well as internal frictions within Japan, where some sought to recalibrate the initiative toward developmental objectives. Consequently, the project functioned effectively neither as border control nor as development cooperation.

This comparison illustrates that even within the same corridor and policy domain, the relationship between development cooperation and border control can vary significantly depending on the timing of project formation and the surrounding policy environment. Earlier forms of development cooperation retained humanitarian elements, whereas the recent *securitisation of ODA* has facilitated the externalisation of border control, privileging Japan's security priorities. As a result, responsibilities for migrant selection and irregularity control have

been shifted onto Vietnam, leading to dysfunctionality on both the border-control and development-cooperation fronts.

Theoretically, this study demonstrates through novel empirical evidence that the "fusion of security and development" has extended into the Japan–Vietnam migration nexus. This trend parallels the trajectory of EU–Africa cooperation, widely criticised as a form of *neo-colonial engagement*, and signals that Japan likewise risks undermining the legitimacy of its development cooperation.

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Appendix I

Table 1: List of Respondents for The In-depth Interview Survey

No.	Subject Attributes (Anonymized)	Date	Location
1	Hotline Project Stakeholder: A from Vietnam	July 15, 2025	Hanoi
2	Hotline Project Stakeholder: B from Vietnam	July 16, 2025	Hanoi
3	Hotline Project Stakeholder: C from Japan	July 24, 2025	Tokyo
4	Hotline Project Stakeholder: D from Japan	July 30, 2025	(Online)
5	Direct Matching Project Stakeholder: E from Vietnam	July 16, 2025	Hanoi
6	Direct Matching Project Stakeholder: F from Vietnam	August 4, 2025	(Online)
7	Direct Matching Project Stakeholder: G from Japan	July 16, 2025	Hanoi
8	Direct Matching Project Stakeholder: H from Japan	July 16, 2025	Hanoi
9	Direct Matching Project Stakeholder: I from Japan	July 16, 2025	Hanoi
10	Direct Matching Project Stakeholder: J from Japan	July 24, 2025	Tokyo
11	Direct Matching Project Stakeholder: K from Japan	July 24, 2025	Tokyo
12	International Organization Staff: L from Vietnam	July 9, 2025	(Online)
13	Research institute Staff: M from Vietnam	July 9, 2025	(Online)
14	Vietnamese SO(Sending Organisation) Staff: N from Vietnam	July 14, 2025	Hanoi
15	Vietnamese SO Executive: O from Vietnam	July 15, 2025	Hanoi
16	Vietnamese SO Executive: P from Vietnam	July 16, 2025	Hanoi
17	Vietnamese SO Executive: Q from Vietnam	July 22, 2025	(Online)
18	Vietnamese SO Executive: R from Japan	August 13, 2025	(Online)
19	Vietnamese SO Executive: S from Vietnam	August 13, 2025	(Online)
20	Recruitment Broker in Vietnam: T from Japan	July 13, 2025	Hanoi
21	Recruitment Broker in Vietnam: U from China	July 15, 2025	Hanoi
22	Recruitment Broker in Vietnam: V from Japan	July 14, 2025	Hanoi
23	Recruitment Broker in Vietnam: W from Vietnam	July 14, 2025	Hanoi
24	Recruitment Broker in Vietnam: X from Japan	July 14, 2025	Hanoi
25	Labour Migrant Applicant: Y-1 from Vietnam	July 14, 2025	Hanoi
26	Labour Migrant Applicant: Y-2 from Vietnam	July 14, 2025	Hanoi
27	Labour Migrant Applicant: Y-3 from Vietnam	July 14, 2025	Hanoi
28	Labour Migrant Applicant: Y-4 from Vietnam	July 14, 2025	Hanoi
29	Labour Migrant Applicant: Y-5 from Vietnam	July 14, 2025	Hanoi
30	Labour Migrant Applicant: Y-6 from Vietnam	July 14, 2025	Hanoi
31	Labour Migrant Applicant: Y-7 from Vietnam	July 14, 2025	Hanoi
32	Labour Migrant Applicant: Y-8 from Vietnam	July 14, 2025	Hanoi