

The 50th Anniversary of Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers – The Countless Possibilities Brought About by JOCVs

■ What are Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCVs)?

2015 marks the 50th anniversary since the first batch of JOCVs departed for Laos in December 1965. Over the years, the JOCV program has attracted many young Japanese people from the ages of 20 to 39 who possess skills, knowledge, and experience in a variety of fields and share the wish to use what they know to help people in developing countries. It has brought these young people together in the aim of contributing to the continuing development and reconstruction of economies and societies in developing countries by living together with the local people of each country, speaking to them in their own languages, and cooperating with them on the issues their countries face. The JOCV program aims to deepen friendship and mutual understanding between Japan and partner countries during such efforts. It also hopes to foster an international perspective within the JOCVs, and to have them bring back their volunteer experiences to help Japanese society in the end. So far, more than 39,000 people have volunteered at the grassroots level in 88 countries around the world. Their efforts have been praised inside Japan and around the world for promoting the visibility of Japanese aid. During the First TICAD V Ministerial Meeting in May 2014, where Minister for Foreign Affairs Fumio Kishida and other foreign ministers from across Africa got together, the JOCV was highly appreciated by African countries, noting that they were playing a major role in each society and meeting the needs of Africa.



The first generation of Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers departing from Haneda Airport. (Photo: JICA)

■ The Dispatch of JOCVs

The JOCV program is implemented by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) through the ODA budget of the Japanese government. Recruitment and selection of volunteers take place twice a year, in spring

and fall. Applicants who pass the selection phase go on to preliminary training, and are then dispatched for a period of two years. Their jobs cover a tremendously wide range of areas – approximately 200 professions in 10 fields – everything from science and mathematics education, nursing or other forms of health and medical care, and automobile repair, to vegetable cultivation (for instance, see the column on page 140 about *soroban* (abacus) volunteers in Tonga). The following section discusses just a few of the activities undertaken by JOCVs.

■ Learning flexibility and courage in Paraguay

Mr. Takahiro Okamoto became a JOCV after graduating university, following a stint working as a substitute junior high school P.E. teacher. He volunteered out of the hope that he could use his skills in sports to make an international contribution. He was dispatched to work as a track and field coach with the Paraguay Track and Field Association.

Track and field is considered a minor sport in Paraguay. Mr. Okamoto set three themes for his activities in the country: promoting the sport, improving athletes' abilities, and improving the Paraguay Track and Field Association. For his efforts to improve athletes' abilities, he cooperated with other JOCVs and coached athletes, leading to the setting of 11 new domestic records in the sport over two years. Mr. Okamoto explained that one of his students told him that he would have to work in order to make a living as soon as he graduated from junior high school. Mr. Okamoto recalled how happy he was when he heard from a local teacher years after he had returned to Japan that the student had in fact continued on to attend a physical training school while working, had continued to



Paraguayan players and Mr. Takahiro Okamoto. (Photo: Takahiro Okamoto)

improve his track and field abilities, and was aiming to someday be an instructor himself.

Currently Mr. Okamoto is working for the Kyoto City government, having passed the Kyoto Civil Service Examination. He is employed in one of the positions allocated to JOCV alumni. He commented that although he was at first nervous about working as a civil servant, the things that he learned in Paraguay had been tremendously helpful in his new job, namely, a flexibility of thinking that allows him to “put himself in other’s shoes” and the courage not to panic even when something completely unexpected happens.



A Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteer, Mr. Fumiaki Shimizu (forest management), checking the state of a young tree that was planted with Vietnamese staff. (Photo: Yuki Kato / JICA)

■ Building a bridge between Japan and Thailand

Ms. Akiko Kato applied to JOCV under the Special Program for School Teachers after six years teaching at a school for the deaf in Japan. She was dispatched as a JOCV to a school for the deaf in Thailand. While working as a special education teacher in Thailand, Ms. Kato helped the children of her school feel closer to Japan. As she worked, she always tried to think of more ways for the deaf children of Japan and Thailand to develop mutual understanding with each other. To this end, she wrote a series of newsletters describing her school and students in Thailand and sent the letter regularly to the school that she used to work at in Japan. Her newsletters were put up in a bulletin board at the Japanese school. Teachers who saw the displayed letters from Thailand talked about Ms. Kato and her activities in Thailand in their classes, which helped to transform the students’ image of Thailand from a distant and unknown place across the sea to a country where one of their favorite teachers was living. The students grew interested in Thailand, and some even began to say that they wanted to actually visit the country. And so, one year after Ms. Kato was dispatched, her school in Thailand was visited by students, teachers, and parents from her former school for the deaf in Japan. The school visit only lasted for half a day, but in that time the Japanese children were

shown around school by the Thai students, had lunch at the same table, and played soccer together during recess. The visit to the Thai school helped turn Thailand into a familiar country for the Japanese students. Exchanges continued even after Ms. Kato returned to Japan. The year right after the end of her time as a JOCV, Ms. Kato went to Thailand again with students and teachers from Japan to visit her former dispatch site. The students introduced themselves in the Thai sign language that they had learned before their visit, learned how to make Thai food with the Thai students, and in turn taught the Thai students how to make fried *takoyaki* octopus balls. Both the Japanese and Thai students were able to feel closer to each other’s countries through this experience. Thanks to the connections forged by Ms. Kato, the students of Japan and Thailand were able to have the valuable experience of learning about another culture.

Ms. Kato commented on how in-service teachers working as JOCVs help to connect the children of Japan with the children in dispatched countries. “I tell the students in my class about the difficulties of using a foreign language to live abroad and about the things that helped with this and made me happy. I feel that through my experiences as a JOCV, I learned that things that I have been taking for granted as natural are not always ‘natural’ things around the world. I hope that I can communicate that experience to the children I teach.”

■ Expanding the JOCV program even further

There have been many changes to the social needs of both Japan and developing countries over the 50 year history of the JOCV program. The types of JICA volunteers have expanded from just the JOCV program to include the Senior Volunteers (SV) program for those aged between 40 and 69, the Youth Volunteers for *Nikkei* Communities program, and the Senior Volunteers for *Nikkei* Communities program for cooperation targeted at *Nikkei* communities. Work has proceeded forward on the cooperation system in order to make it possible for even more Japanese citizens to play active roles as JICA volunteers around the world.

Another one of the latest trends related to JOCVs is collaboration with private companies. For instance, when volunteers in the health and medical care sector went to Uganda to promote the practice of hand washing, they faced the problem that it was difficult for people to use soap in regions facing water shortages. The key to overcoming this situation was the cooperation of the Japanese medical soap and disinfectant manufacturer Saraya Co., Ltd., a company aiming to expand its business into Africa. Saraya cooperated with JICA to investigate whether the market in Uganda would accept the use of disinfectants that can be used without water. Such a disinfectant had the potential to resolve the issue facing the JOCVs, and for that reason, a JOCV who is well-versed in the local culture and has hands-on knowledge about the community got involved with

this project too. A JOCV nursing volunteer working for a hospital in Uganda worked to show how to use the disinfectant and explained its effects to hospital staff, and listened to the opinions of the hospital side about it. As a result, Saraya is now steadily preparing to introduce the disinfectant into the markets of Africa. These kinds of collaboration are being expanded at a time when Japanese companies are growing increasingly interested in developing countries as new markets.

Recently, there is also movement among Japanese companies, municipalities, and boards of education to support employees to serve as JOCVs while they work. In addition, some companies, municipalities and schools now hire returning JOCVs as public employees and teachers. Ms. Kato, who served



Ms. Akiko Kato reading a book aloud to children at a school for deaf people in Thailand. (Photo: Akiko Kato)

as a JOCV in Thailand by working as a teacher, and Mr. Okamoto, who was hired by the Kyoto City as a JOCV alumnus, are good examples of how the JOCV program has helped people to further their careers. Collaborations between JICA and universities offer additional examples. For instance, universities like Hiroshima University and Obihiro University of Agriculture and Veterinary Medicine are running programs in which students serve as JOCVs for a portion of their time at the schools. Through efforts like these, the JOCV program is garnering attention at home and abroad as an opportunity for people to develop a global mindset and experiences.

After the Great East Japan Earthquake, an issue for many of the affected municipalities was a lack of people to serve as public employees. In June 2014, over 100 people with experience as former JICA volunteers, including JOCVs, were accepted for positions with the Reconstruction Agency. The former JOCVs utilize their specializations in fields like civil engineering, construction, and education as well as the skills they developed through their volunteer experiences in planning, problem solving, and communications to serve each of the municipalities affected by the disaster.

Continued Glory for the JOCVs

In the above ways, JOCVs have managed to overcome a number of issues in developing countries while simultaneously building bridges of friendship and trust between the citizens of Japan and countries around the world. Even after they return to Japan, former JOCVs work in a variety of fields as professionals possessing global perspectives and experiences. Although JOCVs are exposed to the winds of change from new global trends, the trust and expectations of the world and the people of Japan in the JOCVs shall never waver.



A Malawian midwife at a hospital in Thyolo District, Malawi midwife and a Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteer, Ms. Miyuki Yokouchi (nurse), checking the health of a baby who was born on that day. (Photo: Kenshiro Imamura / JICA)