

Part I

60th Anniversary of the Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCVs): The Power to Change the World and Japan



A JOCV visiting model schools in rural areas of Guatemala to conduct demonstration lessons and provide support to teachers alongside children attending rural schools (Photo: JICA)

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An Overview of JOCVs: The Power of JICA Volunteers Change the World, Change Japan

In 2025, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) Volunteer Program marked the 60th anniversary of its founding. The program is known worldwide as a unique form of international contribution that combines volunteer activities around the world with technical cooperation utilizing ODA. A cumulative total of more than 58,000 JOCVs have been dispatched through the program to 99 countries to date, contributing to the development of developing countries as the very embodiment of Japan's "visible development cooperation."

The JICA Volunteer Program not only contributes to the socio-economic development of developing countries, but also to the promotion of mutual understanding and friendship between Japan and these countries by cultivating people's affinity for Japan. Its contributions are highly acclaimed both domestically and internationally. Moreover, the JOCVs, who have addressed various challenges in developing countries through their activities, are starting their own businesses aimed at solving social challenges after they return to Japan, contributing to the overseas expansion of Japanese companies into developing countries, and to the revitalization of Japan's local communities. The way in which JOCVs give back to society through the experience they have gained has also attracted attention. This section looks back on the trajectory of the JOCVs from their founding to the present day.

(1) 60 Years of History

Japan, which pursued national reconstruction and recovery while receiving substantial support from the international community, began its own international cooperation in the 1950s. Against this backdrop, in order to give shape to the growing interest among Japanese youth in development cooperation activities at the time, a plan was conceived, led by private youth organizations and politicians, to send applicants overseas. The "Japan Youth Overseas Cooperation Volunteers Program" was formally established on April 20, 1965. Its implementation was entrusted to the then Overseas Technical Cooperation Agency, ¹ within which the Secretariat of the JOCVs was set up. In December of the same year, a memorable first group of five JOCVs was dispatched to Laos, and the program subsequently expanded its areas of activity to Africa (1966), the Middle East (1967), Central America (1968), Oceania (1972), South America (1978), and Eastern Europe (1992).

In August 1974, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) was established as the implementing agency for the Japanese government's international cooperation and took over the program as one of its key initiatives. At this time, the Japanese name of the program was also changed to the current "Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCVs)."

In 1990, with the aging of society, there was an increase among the senior generations who seek to make their long lives more meaningful and take an interest in volunteer activities. In response to this demand of the time, the "Senior Cooperation Experts Program" was established and was renamed the "Senior Volunteer Program" in FY1996. In addition, the Government of Japan believed that the continued efforts by people of Japanese descent and Nikkei communities abroad to enrich their lives would ultimately contribute to the development of their countries of residence while also benefitting Japan. Based on the view that it would therefore be beneficial for the Government of Japan to support them to the extent possible, the new "Youth and Senior Volunteers for Nikkei Communities" was established in 1996.

In 2016, in recognition of its contributions to the economic and social development of the Asia region, the JOCVs received the Ramon Magsaysay Award, often referred to as "Asia's Nobel Prize."

In 2018, the dispatch framework was reviewed, and the categories were revised to include "Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers/Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers for Nikkei Communities," along with "Senior Volunteers/Senior Volunteers for Nikkei Communities," for assignments requiring a certain level of experience and technical expertise. The collective name for all of

¹ A special public corporation established in 1962 to implement technical cooperation in developing countries. It was later merged with other organizations to form the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) in 1974.

these programs was changed to the “Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCVs),” which remains in use today.

In 2020, due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the JOCVs faced an unprecedented situation since its inception: the JOCVs from around the world were forced to return to Japan temporarily. As the waiting period grew longer with no clear prospect of reassignment, the JOCVs continued various forms of volunteer work and online classes in Japan. As the prolonged restrictions on movement began to ease, the dispatches were resumed one after another, starting with Viet Nam in October 2020, and in July 2023, the number of volunteers in active service surpassed 1,000 for the first time since dispatches were resumed. The JOCVs, which began its journey 60 years ago with dispatches to Laos, has

overcome the hardships of the COVID-19 pandemic, carried on its history, and continues to operate around



The first Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers departing for Laos, December 1965 (Photo: JICA)

Chart I-1 Chronology of JICA Volunteer Program

April 20, 1965	Japan Youth Overseas Cooperation Volunteers Program (JICA Volunteer Program) launched
December 24, 1965	First dispatch of five JOCVs (Laos)
1966	The first JOCVs dispatched to Africa (Kenya)
1967	The first JOCVs dispatched to the Middle East (Morocco)
1968	The first JOCVs dispatched to Central American countries (El Salvador)
1972	The first JOCVs dispatched to the Oceania region (Western Samoa)
August 1974	Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) established
August 1974	Renamed from “Japan Youth Overseas Cooperation Volunteers Program” to the “Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers”
1978	The first JOCVs dispatched to South America (Paraguay)
1990	“Senior Volunteer program” initiated Reached 10,000 volunteers dispatched
1992	The first JOCVs dispatched to Eastern Europe (Hungary)
1996	“Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers for Nikkei Communities” and “Senior Volunteers for Nikkei Communities” programs initiated
October 2003	JICA established as an incorporated administrative agency
2017	Reached 50,000 volunteers dispatched
2018	Revised the dispatch program and adopted “Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteer” as the collective name for all categories

Chart I-2 Types of JICA Volunteer Program

Type	Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (Under 45 years old) / Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (Over 45 years old)	Senior Volunteers	Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers for Nikkei Communities (Under 45 years old) / Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers for Nikkei Communities (Over 45 years old)	Senior Volunteers for Nikkei Communities
Overview	Active in Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, Oceania, the Middle East, and Europe. JOCVs apply their own skills and experience, living and working together with local people to contribute to nation-building in developing countries.		Active in Nikkei (Japanese descendant) communities in Latin America. JOCVs apply their own skills and experience, living and working together with Nikkei people and their communities to contribute to the development of the Latin America and the Caribbean region.	
Fields of activity / Occupational categories (examples)	Community development, information communication technology, vegetable growing, electronic engineering, automobile maintenance, business administration, youth activities, sports, science education, primary school education, nursing, infectious disease/HIV-AIDS control, welfare and education for persons with disabilities, Japanese language education, social work, animal husbandry and feed and forage crops, public health nursing, and others		Japanese language education, animal husbandry and feed and forage crops, business administration, social work, public health nursing, and others	

the world today.

The JOCVs was established to achieve three objectives: (i) to cooperate in the economic and social development, as well as the reconstruction of developing countries, (ii) to deepen mutual understanding and coexistence in cross-cultural societies, and (iii) to give back the volunteer experience to society. Its core philosophy remains unchanged today. Japanese citizens between the ages of 20 and 69 who are committed to international cooperation and possess relevant technical skills, knowledge, and experience are dispatched to work across approximately 180 job categories in 9 fields, namely planning and administration, commerce and tourism, public services, human resources, agriculture, forestry and fisheries, health and medical care, mining and manufacturing, social welfare, and energy. By living and working alongside local communities in developing countries, the volunteers cooperate and contribute to the economic and social development of those regions while promoting mutual understanding. Moreover, upon returning home, they leverage the experience acquired through their overseas service to address social challenges in Japan and beyond.

(2) Characteristics of Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCVs): Diverse Partnerships and Expanding Reach into Society

Drawing on experience gained through grassroots activities in the field, the JICA Volunteer Program has formed organic partnerships with universities, companies, local governments, and local communities in Japan. As a result, it has evolved into an important means for fostering global human resources who bridge Japan with the rest of the world in both directions, and for promoting the overseas business development of various entities. This section introduces some of the notable recent initiatives of the program.

■ Partnerships with Private Companies, Universities, Local Governments, and Other Entities

Amid the growing internationalization of society and the economy, since 2012, the JOCVs has been engaged in full-scale partnerships with a diverse range of actors, including the private sector, academic institutions such as universities, and local governments.

Through dispatch in partnership with private companies, employees are sent overseas as JOCVs and return to their companies with the knowledge they gain in the field. This mechanism helps to develop global human resources, to strengthen Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) ² activities, and promote business expansion overseas. Some companies dispatch employees and, through their technical support and educational activities on the ground, leverage this experience for in-house human resources development. Moreover, others support the dispatch of their employees as JOCVs by establishing special extended leave systems for volunteer activities.

In partnerships with universities, educational programs are being implemented in which students learn about development challenges prior to dispatch and, through practical activities in the field, gain an understanding of the relationship between local and international communities. This helps students develop an interest in international cooperation at an early stage and contributes to the development of human resources who will be active in this field in the future. From FY2026, the “Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (Science and Technology Research Cooperation)” program will also be launched, dispatching young researchers affiliated with Japanese universities and research institutions as JOCVs for periods of one to two years. The program is expected to contribute to global brain circulation through providing guidance to local researchers and engaging in joint research. Furthermore, through the “Special Participation System for Active Teachers,” which allows school teachers to participate in JOCVs’ activities while retaining their current employment status, a cumulative total of more than 1,600 teachers were dispatched as of December 2025. They have contributed to improvements in the quality of education in developing countries, and many continue to apply their experience in educational and other fields after returning to Japan, helping to foster an international outlook among Japanese students.

In partnerships with local governments, there is a growing number of cases in which local government officials are dispatched as JOCVs, and in which returned volunteers engage in efforts to promote international understanding and revitalization in their local communities. The “GLOCAL Program (Pre-departure Type)” ³ is a program that, prior to dispatch, provides opportunities for participants to take part in activities such as regional revitalization implemented by local governments and other entities, and to acquire knowledge and experience related to revitalizing local communities in Japan. It enables JOCVs to develop the capabilities they need during their assignments and also serves as an important catalyst for them to give back to

² An abbreviation for Corporate Social Responsibility. A concept that calls for companies to incorporate considerations for social equity, the environment, and other matters into their business activities, to act responsibly toward stakeholders such as employees, investors, and local communities, and to uphold their accountability.

³ For details, see the JICA website: https://www.jica.go.jp/volunteer/glocal_program/

their local governments, leveraging their experiences overseas upon returning to Japan.

At the Theme Weeks event at the Expo 2025 Osaka, Kansai, Japan, in an effort to communicate the philosophy and achievements of the JICA Volunteer Program both to the international and domestic audience, returned volunteers, as well as representatives of local governments and experts, took the stage under the theme of “The Power of JICA Volunteers - Change the World, Change Japan -” introducing concrete examples of community-building efforts aimed at achieving regional revitalization.

System Design to Support Returned JOCVs in Giving Back Their Experience to Society

One of the major characteristics of the JICA Volunteer Program is that the JOCVs create new value after completing their overseas assignment by applying the experience they gained while living and working alongside local residents in developing countries. Through immersion in environments where language, culture, and values differ from those of Japan, JOCVs develop a global perspective as well as the ability to identify challenges independently and work collaboratively with others to solve them. In recent years, as concerns have been raised about increasingly inward-looking tendencies among Japan’s younger generations, these competencies are considered valuable assets for addressing challenges both at home and abroad. To enable former JOCVs to fully utilize their experience and capabilities, JICA actively supports their post-assignment careers, including promoting initiatives in partnership with private companies and organizations, universities, and local governments.

As part of these efforts, JICA launched the Social Entrepreneur Project “BLUE”⁴ for those with JOCV experience. This project supports former JOCVs who draw on the experience and capabilities they developed through their JOCV service to address social challenges through business initiatives in sectors such as education, agriculture, welfare, and the environment. Implemented in partnership with a human resources development company, the initiative has already produced notable examples of returned volunteers establishing businesses that create spaces for children in Japan, or businesses that promote effective use of local resources. Through such endeavors, “BLUE” fosters the creation of new social value grounded in JOCVs’ experience. A related event “Start UP with Africa! powered by JICA BLUE” was held during the 9th Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD 9) in 2025 (see Part IV,

Section 8 on page 126 for details). At the event, returned volunteers who had started businesses in Africa through “BLUE” shared their experiences, creating opportunities for young people from Japan and Africa to work together and take on new forms of collaboration, such as social entrepreneurship and technical cooperation.

In 2023, the “Returned Volunteers Commendation for Giving Back to Society,” which recognizes returned volunteers working to address social challenges both at home and abroad and in both the public and private sectors, was launched. This is part of efforts to collect and showcase good practices of such initiatives, in order to build momentum for returned volunteers to give back to society. At the third commendation in 2025, seven recipients were selected for their activities in areas such as supporting children with diverse backgrounds and challenges, people affected by disasters, and initiatives that link sports and development.⁵



JOCV candidates experiencing farm work in Ama Town, Shimane Prefecture, through the GLOCAL Program, together with local farmers (Photo: JICA)



Participants in the “Entrepreneurship Idea Consultation Session” held as a part of the JICA Social Entrepreneur Project “BLUE” (Photo: JICA)

⁴ An abbreviation for “Break the Line, Unleash your Entrepreneurship.” For details, see the JICA website: <https://blue.jica.go.jp/>

⁵ For details on the third Returned Volunteers Commendation for Giving Back to Society held on July 14, 2025, and the activities of each recipient, see the JICA website: <https://www.jica.go.jp/volunteer/obog/syakaikangen/>