

60 Years of Achievements by Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCVs)

Long-standing achievements of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) Volunteer Program include solving problems in developing countries and building friendly and trusting relations between the Governments of Japan and partner countries at the grassroots level.

JOCV experience also serves as a stepping stone for subsequent career development. After completing their assignments, many JOCVs draw on the experience cultivated through their activities to play active roles in more specialized workplaces such as international organizations, local governments, and private companies. Some returned volunteers can also be seen contributing to disaster recovery efforts and to regional revitalization in Japan.

(1) Solving Problems in Developing Countries

Operating across approximately 180 job categories, the JOCVs have tackled global issues across diverse fields alongside local communities, driven by a strong commitment to taking on challenges. Their activities, tailored to on-the-ground needs, have strengthened the economic and social foundations of developing countries and have served as a driving force that supports regional self-reliance.

One of the global challenges that the JOCVs work to address is food shortages. To support increased food production in the face of future population growth and climate change, the JOCVs in job categories such as “Food Crop and Rice Cultivation” and “Community Development” are helping tackle food security challenges. For example, in African countries experiencing rapid economic growth and population increase, rice consumption has risen due to its ease of preparation and long shelf life. To help meet growing demand, cooperation drawing on Japan’s rice cultivation technology is being offered. Fundamental techniques that support agricultural productivity include water management, seedling preparation, and the establishment of joint working arrangements. By transferring these techniques while working with local farmers, the JOCVs support the development of self-reliant farm management. These initiatives contribute to local food security and to the stabilization of rural economies.

There are also JOCVs dispatched in the “Community Development” job category who work to revitalize

local communities. Whether in Japan or in developing countries, the efforts to revitalize regional and local communities play an important role in promoting national development. Some JOCVs are promoting the “One Village One Product Movement,”⁶ a regional revitalization concept originating in Japan, to developing countries. Working together with local people, they help to create new businesses and address challenges such as poverty and depopulation. In another example, a JOCV who contributed to livelihood improvement in Sri Lanka launched her own fair-trade business after returning to Japan and has continued to engage in initiatives aimed at the self-reliance of developing countries even after the end of her assignment.

In addition, the JOCVs have contributed to the management of water resources, which are fundamental to both human well-being and development. Since 2008, the program has dispatched the “Water Security Action Team (W-SAT),” a group of JOCVs dedicated to addressing challenges in the safe water and sanitation



A JOCV who commercialized peanut oil as part of the “One Village One Product Movement” in Malawi (Photo: JICA)



A scene from W-SAT activities in Rwanda (Photo: JICA)

⁶ A movement that began in the late 1970s when then Governor of Oita Prefecture Hiramatsu proposed the concept. Under the slogan “Local but Global,” it is an initiative that aims to revitalize local communities by drawing on local resources to nurture world-class specialty products.



A JOCV engaging in activities such as maintaining meteorological observation equipment installed through Grants and delivering weather information using ICT (information and communications technology) at the Samoa Meteorology Division (Photo: JICA)



A JOCV carrying out activities to raise awareness on tuberculosis together with local volunteers in Zambia

sector in Africa. In accordance with the needs of each country, W-SAT continues its efforts to secure access to safe water and improve the sanitation environment.

As such, the JOCVs continue to carry out steady grassroots activities aimed at solving the diverse challenges faced by developing countries.

(2) Building Trust

The trust that Japan has built with the international community through more than 70 years of international cooperation is a precious asset for Japan. JOCVs travel to areas with harsh conditions, including in terms of basic living infrastructure, embed themselves deep in the societies of their countries, and work shoulder to shoulder with local people. As such, it can truly be said they stand on the front line of Japan's grassroots diplomacy and significantly contribute to building deeper relationships of trust between Japan and partner countries.

One example of an initiative uniquely suited to the hands-on approach of JOCVs is polio control in Bangladesh. Many medical experts dispatched by aid agencies are based in the capital. Therefore, JOCVs have traveled to rural villages that are not always adequately served by such support and, making full use of local languages, have persistently persuaded villagers of the importance of polio vaccination. These

steady awareness-raising activities about polio, aimed at villagers who cannot afford to travel to hospitals in urban areas, have yielded not only the quantitative outcome of higher vaccination rates, but have also helped build bonds with local people. This is a relationship of trust that only JOCVs, for whom "together with local people" is the essence of their work, can foster.

Furthermore, the long-term dispatch of JOCVs has contributed to enhancing trust in the Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers and, more broadly, in Japan as a whole. Building on the strong relationship between Japan and host countries that has been continuously cultivated through many years of JOCV activities, new seeds of exchange sown by JOCVs working at the grassroots level have gradually sprouted, and relationships of trust between Japan and these host countries have been built in ways that respect each other's cultures and values. For example, a JOCV dispatched from 1979 to 1980 as a mathematics and science teacher at a junior high school in Kenya taught using the soroban (Japanese abacus) method, and many of those former students have gone on to lead distinguished careers leveraging their mathematical and scientific abilities. Among them are the president of Kenya's Horticultural Crops Development Authority, dentists, university physics professors, and accountants. The relationships built through these sincere and persistent grassroots activities have been deeply imprinted in people's memories over the course of many years, becoming not only a symbol of friendship between the two countries but a medium leading to the strengthening of relations at the state level.

Now, 60 years on, the work of the JOCVs represents an accumulation of trust built across borders, strongly supporting the realization of the "co-creation" that Japan's ODA aims to achieve. The trust generated by overcoming differences in culture and values is the result of a true partnership that transcends the transactional giving and receiving of aid. The commitment to solving problems together with local communities lies at the foundation of Japan's international cooperation.



A JOCV checking on the status of polio vaccination in Bangladesh (Photo: JICA)



A JOCV considering measures to enhance the market value of cactus fruit at a cactus farm in Ecuador



A returned volunteer reuniting more than 30 years later with her former students, who had become the Prime Minister of Tonga and the Tongan Ambassador to Japan. On the right is former Prime Minister Hu'akavameiliku, and on the left is Ambassador Mangisi.

(3) Contributions to Disaster Recovery within Japan

The ability to identify local needs and the knowledge and experience of working with local people while making use of limited local resources and capabilities cultivated in the field of international cooperation have been widely applied to solving problems in Japanese society as well. In particular, returned JOCVs from across Japan play active roles in emergency assistance at the time of disasters, such as earthquakes and typhoons, as well as in medium- to long-term recovery activities.

The Japan Overseas Cooperative Association (JOCA), which was established primarily by returned volunteers with the aim of broadly spreading the spirit and experience cultivated through volunteer activities in developing countries throughout Japan, carries out support activities at the time of large-scale disasters. To date, it has contributed to local communities through activities such as supporting the operation of evacuation centers,

providing daily life support in temporary housing, and helping with the operation of volunteer centers, including during disasters such as the 2016 Kumamoto Earthquake and the 2019 Typhoon Disaster in Eastern Japan.

Likewise, the JOCV alumni associations in each prefecture work on the recovery and reconstruction of disaster-affected areas. Following the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011, the JOCV alumni associations of the six Tohoku prefectures jointly launched a fundraising campaign as emergency support, raising approximately ¥4.5 million in just two months. As part of continuing reconstruction support for the disaster-affected areas, the "Fukushima JOCV Association" organized the "Fukushima Support Tour," inviting returned JOCVs from outside the prefecture to experience the current situation in Fukushima firsthand, with the aim of dispelling the negative reputational perception of the prefecture. In response to the 2024 Noto Peninsula Earthquake, returned JOCVs not only provided support to the operation of evacuation centers, but also conducted welfare visits to temporary housing to help prevent disaster-related deaths caused by the physical and mental toll of prolonged displacement. The experience of carefully listening to the voices of individual members of local communities in developing countries is being put to use on the front lines of recovery support.

(4) Contributions to Regional Revitalization in Japan

Many returned volunteers contribute to regional revitalization in Japan by drawing on what they learned in their host countries. For example, a returned volunteer who worked to train instructors in education for people with disabilities in the Dominican Republic, inspired by the country's strong sense of community solidarity, has engaged in community-building in their home prefecture of Ishikawa since returning to Japan. They have converted a dilapidated building into a day service facility for the elderly, and have transformed the surrounding area into a gathering place for the local community by establishing recreational facilities and restaurants nearby.

In addition, a returned volunteer who engaged in nutrition guidance and income improvement support in Zambia developed a deeper interest in agriculture through their activities in Lusaka, the capital, where farmland is closely integrated into people's daily lives. They came to see farming as not only a means of livelihood, but also as a way of nurturing the capacity of young people for resilient living. Building on that vision, the returned volunteer has been actively organizing events to attract young people to farmland in their home prefecture of Shizuoka since completing their assignment. They work toward regional revitalization by fostering connections between young people and agriculture and raising awareness of farming as a career, including by creating opportunities for inquiry-based learning for students.

A returned volunteer who served as a nurse in Vanuatu now works as a public health nurse responsible for a hospital on a remote island in their home prefecture of Kagoshima after returning to Japan. The difficulty of providing adequate medical services due to poor access to central areas is a challenge common to both regions, and the returned volunteer draws on their experience of overcoming such barriers in Vanuatu in their local community work as well.

There are also many volunteers who, while working in foreign countries, rediscover what makes Japan special, and upon returning home, commit to local development. There are a variety of good examples, including support businesses for those wishing to relocate to more rural areas, the development of craft products that draw on traditional craft methods, and the operation of accommodation and entertainment facilities created by renovating abandoned schools.



A community gathering space in Komatsu City, Ishikawa Prefecture, created by a returned volunteer who renovated an abandoned temple (Photo: JICA)



A returned volunteer working on the development of agricultural technologies in collaboration with a high school in Iwata City, Shizuoka Prefecture (Photo: JICA)

(5) Contributions to the Promotion of Sports

Within the Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers, 28 sports, including track and field, swimming, baseball, judo, and football, exist as job categories. These "JOCVs for sports sector" contribute to international cooperation through sports. Their main activities include the development of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, the improvement of training environments,

the enhancement of the coaching capabilities of local instructors, and expanding participation in each sport. To date, they have been active in a total of 90 countries.

In addition, many JOCVs teach sports originating in Japan, such as kendo, judo, and karate, overseas. For example, a JOCV dispatched to Hungary, where kendo had not yet taken hold at the time, continued to promote kendo in Hungary even after completing their assignment, driven by a desire to connect with the world through the kendo they had practiced since childhood. As a result, the number of kendo practitioners in Hungary today has grown to 20 times the figure from 1992, the year the JOCV was dispatched. In this way, many JOCVs also contribute to international exchange through Japan's traditional sports.

JOCVs are sometimes assigned to sports organizations or Olympic and Paralympic committees to coach junior athletes or national teams, and in other cases, they engage in activities aimed at realizing an inclusive society through sports, including sports for people with disabilities and for women. In India, where judo was barely known and the number of coaches was limited, a JOCV was dispatched as the coach of the national team for judo for the visually impaired. Through the JOCV's dedicated coaching, two former students represented India at the 2024 Paralympic Games, with one of them winning a bronze medal, a truly remarkable achievement. As a result of coaching by JOCVs, a total of 133 athletes worldwide have competed in the Olympic or Paralympic Games since the 1988 Seoul Games, with a combined medal count of three gold, four silver, and one bronze.



A returned volunteer who continues to promote kendo in Hungary even after completing their assignment



A JOCV coaching judo to members of the general public in India (Photo: JICA)