



Stories from the Field

Toward Drought-Resilient Agriculture in Zimbabwe: Empowering Smallholder Farmers in Zimbabwe

Unlocking Opportunities through High-Quality Sesame Production for the Japanese Market



Once known as the “breadbasket of southern Africa,” Zimbabwe has experienced repeated poor harvests of staple grain crops in recent years due to frequent El Niño-induced droughts. These shocks have led to widespread food insecurity among smallholder farmers. In response, there is an urgent need to strengthen climate resilience and improve the livelihoods of smallholder farmers through the introduction of sustainable agricultural practices.

In addition to providing food assistance to Zimbabwe, including rice, millet, and cooking oil, Japan has also recognized the high potential for sesame production in the country, a drought-resistant crop for which Japan is a major export destination. In partnership with the World Food Programme (WFP), a co-created project was launched in November 2024 to promote sesame production for export and strengthen the value chain. The initiative aims to enable smallholder farmers to adopt market-oriented agriculture.

Ms. OHASHI Chika from the WFP Zimbabwe Country Office plays a central role in this project. With over ten years of experience in United Nations agencies, she has worked across the fields of environmental management, natural resources management, disaster risk reduction, and humanitarian assistance. Her work is grounded in extensive field and operational experience, working closely with communities and people in need, with an approach shaped by her service as a Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteer (now JICA Overseas Cooperation Volunteer). Speaking on the project’s objectives, she explains: “Rather than focusing solely on crop production and equipment maintenance, we aim to adopt a ‘food systems’ approach, considering the entire process through which agricultural products reach consumers. This includes storage, shipment, sales, and import/export. By strengthening the resilience of the system as a whole, we seek to stabilize and diversify farmers’ sources of income.” In building the value chain under this project, the expertise of Japanese trading companies has been effectively leveraged. In addition, through the Grant Assistance for Grass-roots Human Security Projects, Japan has supported the provision of sesame storage warehouses and temporary storage containers to a local NGO partnered with WFP. This has enabled a comprehensive and collaborative public-private partnership approach, thereby realizing cooperation with Zimbabwe through broad partnerships with international organizations, private sector actors, the Government of Zimbabwe, and local NGOs.

Ms. Ohashi emphasizes the importance of close engagement with people and communities: “It is vital to meet with local people, understand the realities and needs on the ground, and to think together to identify effective, and often creative, ways of providing support. “With the goal of exporting to Japan under the project,



Staff of a Japanese trading company visiting sesame cultivation sites and discussing with smallholder farmers (Photo: WFP)

where quality standards and regulations on chemical residues are stringent, she has worked closely with private sector partners to conduct repeated field visits to rural communities. Through these efforts, approximately 3,000 farming households have been engaged and trained in chemical-free production practices, optimal harvesting times, and processing techniques. Improved sesame seed varieties, more suited to local conditions, were subsequently distributed. In the first year alone, 261.5 metric tons of high-quality sesame were successfully exported to a Japanese company producing edible sesame oil, generating approximately US\$210,000 for the local economy. Smallholder farmers expressed their appreciation: “Due to the severe drought, other crops like maize were completely wiped out, but sesame remained. We were able to harvest it and earn income, and we are proud that it meets Japanese quality standards and can be sold at a higher price.” Warehouses and storage facilities constructed through a local NGO, designed to create synergies with the project, have enhanced quality control while serving as aggregation and processing hubs. These facilities help reduce unfair pricing practices through intermediaries and protect smallholder farmers from exploitation. WFP is expanding its geographic coverage and aims to support over 14,500 households by the project’s conclusion in 2027, and is also exploring opportunities to scale up the model to other regions.

Ms. Ohashi also notes, “In building self-reliant communities locally, it is critical to promote a shift in mindset among smallholder farmers—from ‘grow and sell’ to ‘grow to sell’—through Japan’s Smallholder Horticulture Empowerment and Promotion (SHEP) approach^{*1}, with which I hope to further strengthen collaboration.” Highlighting that Zimbabwe has a relatively high literacy rate and that the government places strong emphasis on nurturing its youth, she expresses optimism for the future: “The potential of Zimbabwe’s youth is significant, and there is strong trust in Japan. As we advance collaboration with Japanese companies, I place great hope in the strength of the younger generation.”

Despite challenges such as recurrent droughts and price fluctuations, Zimbabwe’s smallholder farmers are taking pride in their work, driven by the aspiration to “grow high-quality crops that can be exported to Japan. This emerging sesame industry, built through the collaboration of diverse actors, is not only creating new livelihood opportunities, but represents a significant step forward in restoring hope for the future. Japan will continue its efforts to strengthen food security and resilience in an increasingly changing climate through ongoing support for smallholder farmers.



A project-supported smallholder farmer cleaning harvested sesame by removing impurities (Photo: WFP)

^{*1} See the glossary on page 38.



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Voices of Japanese Personnel Working in International Organizations

- Nurturing Young People as "Peacebuilders" in Sierra Leone -



Ms. YASHIRO Hoyumi, a Programme Analyst at the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Sierra Leone Office, has harbored an interest in peacebuilding since childhood. After working at an NGO in Bosnia and Herzegovina and at the Permanent Mission of Japan to the United Nations, she began serving in 2022 as a Junior Professional Officer (JPO), supported by Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs at the Peacebuilding Support Office within the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA-PBSO) at the UN Headquarters in New York. Driven by her desire to "work in the field, where I can engage more directly with the people we are trying to help," she was subsequently posted in 2024 to Sierra Leone, located on the Atlantic coast of West Africa.

While Sierra Leone's peacebuilding efforts following its civil war have earned a degree of recognition from the international community, deeply entrenched challenges such as poverty and inequality, which are underlying drivers of conflict, persist within the country to this day. Against this backdrop, Ms. Yashiro is engaged in a project to nurture young motorcycle taxi riders that run throughout the city as "peace agents."

Motorcycle taxis are a widely used and essential form of transportation in Sierra Leone. The majority of motorcycle taxi riders are young people between the ages of 18 and 35, including former combatants. At the same time, because the work offers unstable employment and income, riders are prone to harboring grievances against society, and frequent clashes with police as well as violent incidents among riders themselves have become a serious social problem.

With funding from the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund, to which Japan also contributes as a major donor, and in cooperation with the Government of Sierra Leone's Ministry of Youth Affairs, the UNDP Sierra Leone Country Office is pursuing three approaches designed to harness the strengths of motorcycle taxi riders, who move between communities and hold the potential to exert significant influence within society. The first approach supports trust-building between riders and the police by establishing mechanisms for regular dialogue between the two parties in the project's target areas across the country. The second approach provides riders with opportunities to learn about the prevention of sexual violence and conflict, promoting broader social change by encouraging attitudinal transformation among riders who come into daily contact with large numbers of citizens as passengers. The third provides economic support by partnering with the United Nations Capital Development Fund (UNCDF) to offer access to loans that can be used to purchase motorcycles, while also conducting financial literacy training for riders.



A training session on the prevention of sexual violence for motorcycle taxi riders (Photo: UNDP)



A dialogue session between the Bike Riders' Union and police authorities (Photo: UNDP)

As part of this initiative, Ms. Yashiro has led efforts including the organization of a peace agreement signing ceremony between riders, the police, and the Road Safety Authority, attended by approximately 100 participants, including the Minister of Youth Affairs of Sierra Leone, as well as 30 dialogue events involving these three parties. Reflecting on the value of the project, she says, "The factors that cause conflict are very multifaceted, and a multi-pronged approach is indispensable for peacebuilding. Rather than simply encouraging behavioral change among riders, I find that an approach drawing on the respective strengths of all stakeholders, including providing economic support as a source of motivation, is most effective." She also shares what she finds most rewarding: "Hearing from riders that 'there are fewer conflicts with police and fewer people around us getting involved in violence,' or that 'we've now become able to speak up when our fellow riders are doing something wrong,' are moments that make me truly feel that my work is contributing to the realization of a peaceful society, and that brings me real joy."

On the experience of working for an international organization, Ms. Yashiro reflects, "When you are in Japan, it is difficult to grasp the true severity of poverty and the challenges facing the world. But when you work on the ground, you can see the impact of a project in tangible terms, and that gives you a genuine sense of accomplishment." She also adds, "There are many Japanese staff members at international organizations, and while they are highly capable, my impression is that they are, in the best sense of the word, 'ordinary' people. I couldn't speak English myself until I studied abroad on an exchange program during university, so I once felt that working at the United Nations like this was a dream beyond reach."

From the African continent, she sends a message of encouragement to young people in Japan who aspire to work in the field of international cooperation: "If you have passion and professionalism, I am certain you will thrive. Please don't hesitate, take on the challenge, and I hope you find joy in contributing, through your own hands, to making the world a better place."



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Stories from the Field

From the Front Lines of Supporting Psychological Recovery: Psychosocial Support in Ukraine

- A Japanese NGO and Local Staff Working Together to Support Children Wounded by Conflict -



Three and a half years have passed since Russia began its aggression against Ukraine. As many people continue to be forced into displacement and the conflict drags on, the situation on the ground changes by the day, and the forms of support required are becoming increasingly diverse and complex.

In this context, Good Neighbors Japan (GNJP), a Japanese NGO engaged in activities to protect the mental and physical well-being of children, and its local partner organization The Tenth of April (TTA), with funding from Japan Platform (JPJ),^{*1} provided emergency humanitarian assistance to vulnerable people in Dnipropetrovsk Oblast in eastern Ukraine, which has taken in large numbers of internally displaced persons. With approximately 440,000 people in the oblast in need of support at the time the project launched at the end of 2024, GNJP and TTA delivered support that was closely attuned to the needs of local people. In addition to protection activities through case management providing individualized support including medical care, they also offered psychosocial support (PSS) aimed at helping those affected by the conflict to restore their dignity.

More than 96,000 are children among the internally displaced persons. Ms. IKEDA Hiromi of GNJP explains: "Children in Ukraine are carrying significant psychological burdens, including separation from or loss of family members, fear caused by air raids, and anxiety about the future. Through local facilitators, we provided trauma care to children based on an approach advocated by Dr. KUWAYAMA Norihiko, a Japanese psychosomatic medicine and psychiatry specialist and PSS expert." The approach involves using artistic expression, such as drawing and clay work to help participants confront painful life experiences, share hopes for the future with fellow group members, and process memories and emotions, with the aim of preventing the onset of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and restoring psychological well-being. Ms. Ikeda served as the coordinator of this program and conducted capacity-building training for local facilitators on how to deliver PSS effectively. She describes the outcomes of the initiative: "We had some concerns about whether a Japanese approach would be accepted, but the Ukrainian children were eager to express themselves and participated actively. In addition, as local psychologists adapted the PSS approach for adults, we were able to provide PSS to a cumulative total of 2,267 people, including 667 children over just one year."

Mr. Bohdan Pischanskyi of TTA, working as one of the local facilitators, has supported children by delivering PSS in underground shelters and schools. He shares the encouraging results: "During the PSS sessions, we saw children naturally reaching out to help others who were struggling. In schools where PSS was implemented, students began accepting each other, and this has also had a positive effect on their day-to-day school life." He also expresses his enthusiasm for continued efforts: "I want to support children in building their self-esteem and developing the ability to recover on their own."



A PSS session taking place while evacuated in an underground shelter (Mr. Pischanskyi is in the center left) (Photo: GNJP)



Children absorbed in drawing during a PSS session (Mr. Pischanskyi is in the center right) (Photo: GNJP)

Mr. Pischanskyi expresses his gratitude to Japan: "Thanks to support from Japan that also made use of local NGOs, the people of Ukraine were able to receive psychological care with peace of mind. We will never forget that Japan was by our side during Ukraine's most difficult times." Ms. Ikeda, for her part, reflects on the distinctive value of Japan's support: "One of the strengths of Japanese NGOs is our ability to work in partnership with local organizations to respond flexibly and rapidly to complex and wide-ranging needs, while providing a human face to our assistance." She also underscores an important point: "It is sometimes said that Ukraine's support needs are transitioning toward the reconstruction phase, but there are still many areas where emergency assistance remains necessary. We need to think about future support from both perspectives, and we want to continue providing comprehensive support that includes PSS."

The children and people of Ukraine are striving every day to overcome hardships without losing hope. Japan's support, delivered with close attentiveness to the people on the ground, will continue to contribute to generating the energy that they need to reclaim their everyday lives.

^{*1} See the glossary on page 151.



Stories from the Field

Supporting Business Development in Developing Countries as a Second Career

- A Japanese National Making a Global Contribution as a UN Volunteer -



Djibouti, located in the “Horn of Africa” region in northeastern Africa, has extremely little rainfall each year, making it prone to drought and subject to advancing desertification; only about 0.1% of its land is suitable for cultivation. With approximately 90% of its food supply dependent on imports, the country's people are facing food insecurity in the wake of surging global food prices.

With the aim of addressing this situation, the Government of Japan dispatched Mr. MURATA Atsushi to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Djibouti Country Office as a UN Expert Volunteer, through its “Stabilization Support to Address the Water and Food Crises Caused by Climate Change, Drought, and Other Factors in Sub-Saharan African Countries” initiative. After retiring, Mr. Murata applied for a UN Volunteer assignment in pursuit of his dream of working for the United Nations, and he is the first Japanese volunteer aged 60 or over to be dispatched.

From December 2024, over a period of ten months, Mr. Murata drew on his rich experience in Japan's food and consulting industries to analyze Djibouti's agricultural product markets and support value chain development under SCALA,^{*1} a joint project of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and UNDP. He describes the situation of local farmers upon his arrival: “While production had been stabilizing through the installation of solar panels and improvements to irrigation systems, when I mapped out the entire flow from production through distribution to sales, it became clear that the outlets for agricultural products were limited. I strongly felt that there was a need to build a mechanism that would enable farmers to access buyers and markets.” His proposal was to facilitate direct transactions between producers and buyers. Forming a tandem team^{*2} with Mr. Kadr Houssein, a nationally recruited UN Volunteer, and combining their respective local knowledge and expertise, they brokered a transaction between farmers and a major hotel, resulting in a mutually beneficial agreement. Reflecting also on the care taken to tailor the terms of the transaction to the realities of local agricultural cooperatives that do not hold bank accounts, such as arranging for payment to be made in cash, Mr. Murata expresses gratitude toward Mr. Houssein and looks ahead with hope: “Though it was small in scale, it became a meaningful pilot case for the country.” The effectiveness of the initiative is confirmed by the voice of a farmer who received support for irrigation of their farmland: “This project has brought great change to the community, and we are now approaching the cultivation and sale of agricultural products with greater enthusiasm and passion.”

At the same time, Mr. Murata also contributed to private sector development support based on his expertise working in the consulting industry. Given that improving youth unemployment and creating employment opportunities represent major challenges for Djibouti's sustainable growth, he contributed extensively to the drafting of numerous project proposals for private sector development. These included, in response to the ongoing housing construction boom in Djibouti, a proposal designed to enable young people to be employed on a short-term basis in the housing construction industry while receiving vocational training on the job.

Mr. Murata reflects on his experience as a UN Volunteer: “Being



Mr. Murata (left) shaking hands with Mr. Toily Kurbanov, Executive Coordinator of the United Nations Volunteers (UNV), prior to his deployment to Djibouti (Photo: UNV)



Mr. Murata (center) conducting interviews at a local agricultural cooperative together with Mr. Kadr Houssein (Photo: UNV)

a UNDP's local staff, I was able to make connections with Djiboutian government officials. When visiting rural areas, people expressed joy at meeting a Japanese UNDP staff member for the first time, and there were many occasions when expectations were voiced about the role of the Japanese government and Japanese companies. Although my involvement on the ground was short-term, I feel that I was able to contribute to building a relationship of friendship between Japan and Djibouti.” He also offers encouragement to others who may be inspired to follow a similar path: “As public-private partnerships become ever more important in the field of development, there is a strong demand for personnel who can make an immediate contribution on the ground, and a career built in Japan's private sector is something that can be put to full use.” It is hoped that experienced and knowledgeable Japanese senior professionals like Mr. Murata will increasingly make their mark in the field of development cooperation in the years to come.

^{*1} Acronym for Scaling up Climate Ambition on Land Use and Agriculture.

^{*2} A mechanism in the field of development and related areas that pairs an international UN Volunteer with a national UN Volunteer from the host country. This is a UNV initiative designed to promote knowledge sharing by combining local experience with global expertise.



Dissemination of Mushroom Cultivation Technology and Industry Promotion by a Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteer

Bhutan, nestled at the foot of the Himalayas and known for its unique philosophy of “Gross National Happiness,” has little flatland, making it difficult to secure extensive agricultural land; the country depends on imports for most of its agricultural produce, including its staple food of rice. In this context, mushrooms that can be cultivated in mountainous areas have attracted attention as a source of income for farmers. The National Mushroom Centre (NMC) in the capital, Thimphu, provides farmers with support in mushroom cultivation and breeding. Shiitake and oyster mushrooms have traditionally been the main species, but yields for both have stagnated due to price competition with other countries and restrictions on forest use under the constitution, prompting a search for new mushroom species to cultivate.

The species that attracted attention was nameko, a mushroom well known to Japanese people. One of the key contributors to this new initiative in Bhutan, where there had previously been no tradition of cultivating or eating nameko, is Dr. KUMATA Atsushi, a JICA Overseas Cooperation Volunteer. Dr. Kumata had spent many years working as an official in the Fukushima Prefecture Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries Department, where he was engaged in research and dissemination activities related to mushrooms. Upon retiring, he applied to the JICA Overseas Cooperation Volunteer program in pursuit of a dream he had been unable to fulfill during his working years: “to give back to society by applying my specialized knowledge on the ground in international cooperation.” He explains why he requested a posting to Bhutan: “It seemed like the place where I could make the most of my expertise. It is a mountainous country with some of the world’s richest biodiversity, abundant in mushroom species, and I expected there would be many discoveries to be made.”

Shortly after arriving, Dr. Kumata discovered nameko growing wild in the mountains. Joint research with Fukushima University, including morphological and genetic analysis, confirmed that it was the same species as the nameko native to Japan, marking the first step toward spreading nameko cultivation in Bhutan. Based at the NMC, his host institution, Dr. Kumata launched a project to provide guidance on nameko cultivation to local farmers. In June 2024, the project was formally adopted as a support initiative of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), and today approximately 40 producers across three dzongkhags in Bhutan are engaged in nameko cultivation.

In order to encourage local farmers to engage actively with



Dr. Kumata (second from left) presenting prototype nameko products to Minister of Agriculture and Livestock Younten Phuntsho (Photo: NMC)

this new initiative, Dr. Kumata traveled to the mountain areas where cultivation would actually take place to provide technical guidance, and outside of these guidance activities, he deepened his interactions with local people and built relationships of trust. Mr. Karma Thinley, an NMC staff member, recalls the impression this made: “In the harsh conditions of mountain villages, from food to sanitation, conditions that even we Bhutanese would hesitate to endure, Dr. Kumata, a Japanese national, fit in with the local people more naturally than anyone.”

Another advantage is that log cultivation is possible in Bhutan. Log-cultivated nameko, prized for its excellent flavor and high quality, is increasingly attracting interest as an export product. Dr. Chenchu Dukpa, Programme Director of the NMC, casts an enthusiastic eye toward overseas markets: “With a view to exporting to countries where there is a niche demand for rare, high-quality log-cultivated nameko, we have been working with processors and exporters, and prospects for sales channels are beginning to take shape. Our production volumes are still small, but I would love for people in Japan to have the chance to taste Bhutan’s nameko, a species with a flavor all its own.”

New international exchanges centered on nameko are also taking shape. Motivated by a desire to deepen the bonds between Bhutan, which provided support to Japan at the time of the Great East Japan Earthquake, and Fukushima Prefecture, well known as a nameko-producing region, Dr. Kumata arranged for NMC staff and FAO Bhutan Country Office staff to visit Japan in April 2025, where they undertook approximately two weeks of training at production sites and universities in Fukushima Prefecture. Through visits to private companies as well, participants deepened their knowledge of the latest cultivation technologies and distribution processes, giving new momentum to the expansion of cultivation going forward. Dr. Kumata reflects on the potential to bring what he has learned in Bhutan back to Japan: “If we can produce high value-added crops, it can bring income to communities even in mountainous areas, and lead to the revitalization of those communities. I wonder whether these insights could also be applied to regional development in Japan.” Each nameko mushroom may be small, but together they are forging a powerful bond between Japan and Bhutan, opening new possibilities for the revitalization of local communities.



Dr. Kumata (first from left) introducing nameko cultivation in an isolated village (Photo: NMC)