

## *Grassroots Collaboration, AAI's approach*

### **Part 3: Collaboration between experts and JOCV – experiences from Syria**

Since 1965, some 2,000 young Japanese volunteers have been sent every year to developing countries through the Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCV), aiming to contribute to development through working at the grassroots level with local people. There are over 140 categories of activities, including agriculture, forestry, fisheries, civil engineering, health and welfare, education, culture, sports etc. While working in their respective fields, young volunteers live under the same living conditions as the local community. Another main purpose of the JOCV scheme, apart from the technical aid, is to provide young Japanese with opportunities to expand their worldview, experience and understand the reality of developing countries.

While staying in Syria as a long-term expert from JICA, I had opportunities to discuss various issues regarding international cooperation with other experts and volunteers. These discussions included the concerns and complaints we had, and suggestions for improvements in the future, etc. A voluntary “ODA Study Group” was started from such informal discussions, in order to discuss and take some actions on such issues as ‘self-support and aid’ and ‘collaboration between experts and volunteers’. Since its establishment in July 2000, the group held meetings once or twice a month. The group decided to take up some specific actions, and started to try ‘horticultural therapy’ at a nursing institute (see Vol.32) in Kodseiya. Since then, several other activity groups were set up by the member in the same activity fields, or by those who can work in the common field with different expertises. These groups included, for example, horticulture group, UNRWA group, music group, sports group, etc.

One main topic of discussion at the ODA Study Group was the old and new problem of the ‘disparity between aid requests and the reality’. What is behind this problem is not unrelated to the way the JOCV scheme operates. No generalisation can be made as the situations vary depending on specialized fields and host countries. However, it seems that at the bottom of the JOCV scheme there is a notion that it is one way of educating Japanese young generations, and that their ‘growth’ (as a human and as an upright citizen) itself is the expected major outcome as opposed to the actual contribution the volunteers can make with their activities in the field. When JOCV was first started, it was considered good enough as long as the volunteers returned home alive, irrespective of their actual activities. This was probably due to the more difficult conditions in recipient countries and to the nature of activity fields, most of which were primary industrial activities (agriculture, forestry and fisheries). However as the years passed by, the types of activity fields have become diversified and an increasing number of volunteers are working in urban areas, and the situation surrounding JOCV volunteers is today very different from that in earlier days. There might be a need to diversify the volunteer scheme according to recent diversified needs and conditions, rather than grouping all the volunteers under the umbrella of JOCV.

At the same time, from the viewpoint of ‘grassroots development aid’ or ‘visible cooperation’, both of which are often stressed these days in the field of international cooperation, the JOCV scheme has a very significant importance. Under these circumstances, maybe there is a way to make use of the JOCV scheme in a more strategically viable manner. For instance, collaboration between experts and volunteers as seen in the case of the above Study Group seems very effective. In general, volunteers work at the field level and whatever problems they encounter are often not conveyed to the upper level, but experts can provide direct or lateral support in such cases. On the other hand, for the experts it would be useful to have such interaction with the field volunteers in terms of information gathering and other field activities at the grassroots level. Moreover, from the viewpoint of their ‘education’, collaboration with experts who have much experience and skills in the field of international cooperation would be quite beneficial for the volunteers. It may be necessary to think of some strategy to make full use of the grassroots potential of JOCV, while retaining its positive objectives pursued thus far.



After the preparation of a crop field



Flowers blooming in the garden



Musical gift for children