

# Volunteer Movement Gains Momentum

Familiarity with the word “volunteer” spread in Japan in the 1970s and the 1980s. During the 1970s, with the proliferation of electric household appliances that helped decrease the labor of housework, people began to have more leisure time, and interest in contributing to society increased. Recognizing the value of volunteer work, the government began issuing subsidies to volunteer centers through the social welfare councils of local municipalities. In the 1980s, Japan participated in UN volunteer programs for the first time, and interest rose in international volunteer work.

In the 1990s, corporations began to engage in programs contributing to betterment of society. Some began to give employees days off to do volunteer work and Nippon Keidanren, the country’s major economic federation, launched the “1 Percent Club,” its members agreeing to set aside 1 percent of their profits for social services. And in 1991, the postal ministry started the “International Volunteer Savings” program, under which a proportion of interest earned was donated to international volunteer activities (discontinued in 2007).

## New Era of Volunteering

Amid this heightened awareness of the ways volunteer work contributes to society, the 1995 Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake struck Japan, resulting in over 50,000 dead or injured. Volunteers poured into the disaster area from all over Japan, an estimated 1.4 million during the thirteen months following the devastating tremors. Most were young people offering to help for the first time. They served meals, organized and distributed relief goods, collected and transported trash, helped at evacuation sites, provided information to disaster victims, and gave many other forms of support, attracting much attention. Dubbed “Year 1 of the Volunteer Era” from the recognition volunteer activities won and the heightened interest they enjoyed thereafter, 1995



Volunteers cooked and served food for survivors of the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake in January 1995.

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*Interest in volunteer activities has recently been increasing in Japan. Many people are involved in volunteer activities, finding through them not only a way to contribute to society, but many personal rewards as well.*

became a watershed. From that time on, when a volcanic eruption, earthquake, flooding from a typhoon, or other natural disaster struck, volunteers would quickly gather at the site, and their work has become an essential part of relief activities.

## Increasing Volunteers

The number of volunteers has increased, not only to help out in the case of disasters, but for routine daily activities.



Volunteers moving out relief goods for victims at a disaster site.

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According to the Japan National Council of Social Welfare, the number of people involved in volunteer work as of 2005 is estimated to be about 7.4 million (5.8 percent of total population), some 4.6 times more than the figure for 1980, 25 years ago. The estimated number of people who take part in volunteer activities varies from one study to another and depending on how volunteer activities are defined. Another report (*2001 Basic Research on Social Life*, compiled by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications) says 28.9 percent of the population have taken part in volunteer activities in the past year.

With the aging of the population and the lower birth rate, aggravation of environmental problems, depopulation and weakening of local communities, and the increase in the number of long-term foreign residents, Japan’s social environment has changed greatly, creating new and diverse needs that the government cannot handle alone. The roles volunteers can play, and the expectations placed in them have greatly increased.

## The Russian tanker *Nakhodka* oil spill Clean-up

In 1997, the Russian tanker *Nakhodka* spilled heavy oil over a wide area in the Sea of Japan, threatening the ecology of the sea and the coastal fishing industry. In the dead of winter, volunteers gathered from all over Japan to help local citizens remove the oil with scoops and buckets. Through the efforts of 300,000 volunteers, pollution of the sea that might have taken five years to go away was cleaned up in four months.

At the time of the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake in 1995, volunteers had flooded in to help, but coordination of their efforts was poor. Drawing from that experience, it became standard practice to set up a coordinating center immediately after a disaster in order to manage incoming volunteers. The *Nakhodka* oil spill clean-up effort successfully put to use the lessons learned in the Hanshin-Awaji earthquake rescue effort.

## What is Volunteering?



Volunteer work is a somewhat ambiguous term, as its practice differs from one country to another and from one era to another, but generally, it means “service, without compensation, offered of one’s own free will for other people and for society.”

From the distant past, Japan has had customs of mutual aid through which members of village communities would gather to help each other with agricultural and other tasks. Even in modern Japan, local communities have neighborhood associations that organize events such as festivals and town clean-up days. Such activities are volunteer work in a sense, but they are basically communal duties since the participants are doing them as members of their community, rather than voluntarily of their own accord.

In Japan, the Japanese word *hoshi*, meaning “service,” is sometimes used as an alternative for the English “volunteer,” but the Japanese word implies serving one’s country or society or one’s seniors, sometimes not necessarily of one’s own free will. For this reason, the English loan word, “volunteer,” is used most of the time.

## Volunteer Activities in Schools



With increasing interest in volunteer activities, schools began to make attempts to include them as part of school activities, and from 1998, the national guidelines for the curriculum of schools began to recommend volunteer activities. The entrance screening process of some high schools and universities count the amount of time given to volunteer activities as part of the criteria for evaluation. This practice has been criticized, however, for encouraging students to get involved in volunteer activities not out of good will but as a way of increasing their chances of gaining entrance to a school. Such motives might undermine the real purpose of volunteer activities.

## What Kind of Activities are Common?



According to the Japan National Council of Social Welfare, there were 124,000 volunteer organizations as of 2005 in Japan. These organizations engage in a variety of activities, but the most common are for “health, medicare, and welfare,” followed by “community development,” “healthy growth of children,” and “adult education.” Others include “promotion of culture, arts, and sports,” “conservation/environmental protection,” “peace and human rights,” and “international cooperation.”

Volunteers in the category of “health, medicare, and welfare” have been operating for a long time; medical-care volunteer organizations have been offering services since the early 1960s, and their numbers have grown steadily ever since. Their activities include information services in hospitals and other medical institutions and transportation of wheelchair patients. Since the 1980s, when awareness spread of the rapid aging of the population, supports for the elderly have also become more widespread, including nursing care for the

elderly and persons with disabilities, organization of social events, and preparation and delivery of meals.

Other volunteer activities include programs for improving communities, support for nature-appreciation activities for children, patrol of communities while children are walking to and from school, beautification projects such as building flower beds and street clean-up, sending relief goods overseas and other international assistance, supporting the management of large-scale events like international movie festivals, and providing tour-guide service for local sightseeing spots. Teaching of Japanese-language classes for long-term residents of Japan from other countries, a service now provided in various parts of the country, is also supported by local volunteers.

Information on volunteer activities can easily be obtained through volunteer centers and the Internet, making it easier for people today to take part in volunteer activities without joining an organization.



Local volunteers make *bento* lunches for elderly members of the community.



Chinese and Japanese volunteers teach Japanese to a junior high school student from China.

## What Kind of People Volunteer?



Volunteer activists tend to be people who have free time on weekdays; 38.1 percent of volunteers are housewives and 24.5 percent are retirees (“Report of Survey on Japan’s Volunteer Activities,” Japan National Council of Social Welfare, 2001). The number of volunteers is lowest among the late-teens and early 20s age groups. The bulk of daily volunteer activities, therefore, is supported by housewives and retirees.

Activities differ depending on the age and gender of the volunteers. For example, many teens take part in community development projects and environmental conservation, while the people in their thirties and forties tend to be involved in activities for children.



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Elementary school students and members of senior citizens groups doing cleanup at a public park.



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Members of a volunteer group patrol the streets daily during the hours children are going to and returning home from school.



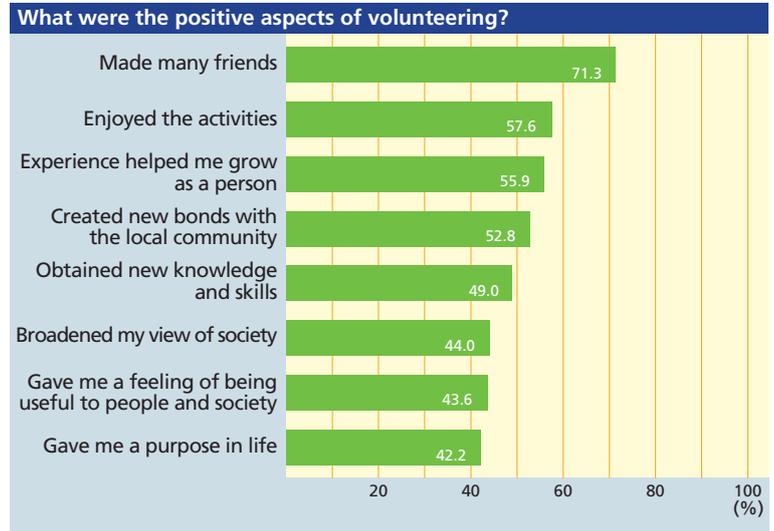
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This volunteer (left) coaches a local little league baseball team.

## The Positive Aspects of Volunteering



Many people who volunteer find they gain great gratification and reward from their activities. Some of the reasons for volunteering include “to do something in return for what the community has done for me” (40.8 percent) and “to help people in need” (34.5 percent), but participants also say that they were able to find new friends and gain valuable experiences from the activities.

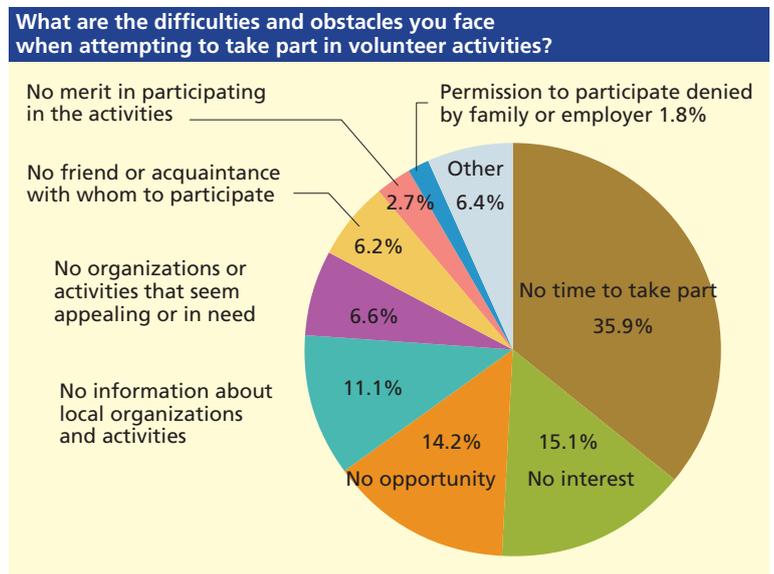


Source: “Report of Survey on Japan’s Volunteer Activists,” Japan National Council of Social Welfare, 2001

## Reasons for Not Engaging in Volunteer Work



According to the National Survey on Lifestyle Preferences, 2000, 65 percent of citizens are interested in volunteer activities, but the number of people who actually take part is much smaller. What are the reasons for inability to volunteer despite being interested? The greatest reason is lack of available time; other reasons include having no opportunities and having little access to necessary information.



Source: Cabinet Office, “National Survey on Lifestyle Preferences, 2003.”

## Volunteer Activities for High School Students



Only 4.6 percent of high school students engage in volunteer activities (“Report on High School Students’ Attitudes Toward Study and Daily Life,” Japan Youth Research Institute). This is

largely because they are too busy, but some find time to regularly take part in volunteer activities such as the following:

### “Flying Wheelchairs” Project



Students at Prefectural Tochigi Technical High School have organized the “Tochigi Technical High School Global Volunteering Network,” led by the school’s welfare equipment-making club and with support from local organizations and non-governmental organizations engaged in social welfare activities. Since 1991 they have repaired used wheelchairs from hospitals and welfare facilities inside and outside Tochigi prefecture for shipment and use overseas. The Network has so far sent 1,785 wheelchairs to 21 nations, including Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia, Nepal, China, South Korea, India, Sri Lanka, and Kenya. The “Flying Wheelchairs” project has been joined by about 50 other schools throughout Japan.\*

The Prefectural Tochigi Technical High School also has a connected project, “International Exchange Volunteer Activity in Thailand.” Every year, about 15 or so students fly to Thailand for eight days to visit the facilities to which the wheelchairs were donated, where they help with further repair of wheelchairs and engage in exchange with the people there. Performing repairs away from home can be difficult, but one student in the project commented as follows:

By the fourth day, we were all pretty tired out. But nobody said a word of complaint. We were all just working hard to fulfill our purpose. When I saw our Thai hosts waving their hands continuously as we left, I was really happy that I was able to take part in this project.

\* This story is distributed in the book *Sora Tobu Kurumaisu* (©Inoue Yuka & Kamoshita Jun, 2008. Published by SOBOKUSHA).

Prefectural Tochigi Technical High School website:  
<http://www.tochigi-edu.ed.jp/tochigikogyo/> (in Japanese only)



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### Youth International Volunteer Forum (YouFo)

YouFo is an annual event held in Kanagawa prefecture since 2004. At the forum, in addition to charity events and a keynote lecture, high school students present what they have learned about the problems of the world, such as poverty, hunger, medical treatment, and global warming or what they have done as volunteer activities for solving such problems. The aim of the forum is to encourage their peers and others to familiarize themselves with and take part in international volunteer activities.

YouFo is planned and operated by an executive committee organized by local high school students. They nominate nine officers including the chair, vice chair, secretary, and vice secretary, and divide up duties, such as planning and public relations, among themselves. See Meeting People-2.

YouFo website:  
<http://www.xn--s8jte2by2a.jp/index.html> (in Japanese only)



## Keywords of this issue!

ボランティア volunteer

ボランティア活動<sup>かつどう</sup> volunteer activities

ボランティア元年<sup>がんねん</sup> Year 1 of the Volunteer Era

保健・医療・福祉<sup>ほけん いりょう ふくし</sup> health, medicare, and welfare

まちづくり community development

国際協力<sup>こくさいきょうりょく</sup> international cooperation

# Finding Ways to Help Others

**Sean**

Second-year high school student,  
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## Volunteering for Children

In my second year of junior high school, which is part of a Christian-affiliated secondary school,\* I joined the school's volunteer activities committee. I had always thought volunteering was a good thing and I was interested in helping people. Also, a friend of mine had already decided to join the committee.

Once a month on a Sunday, committee members go to a children's welfare facility to play with children who are living away from their parents for various reasons. Our biggest event is the Christmas party in December, when we invite the kids to our school. We ask all the students to take part in this event. We spend the whole day with the kids, playing with them in the gym and out on the athletics field, listening to the brass band play music, and playing games. This event has been held at our school for over 30 years.

The children each pair up with a student, and sometimes they enjoy it so much that when the day is over they say, "I don't want to go home!" Not only is it great to see them having so much fun, we ourselves experience something very fresh when we are playing with the children.

## Learning about Hunger

During the summer last year (2007), at the encouragement of our committee advisor, I took part in what was called the "High School Student's Public Activity Leadership Workshop." It was held for three days in August and attracted about 30 high school students from the prefecture interested in welfare and international public-benefit activities. The purpose was to nurture next-generation leaders.

Specialists were invited to talk about the civil society, non-profit international activities, the current situation for people

with disabilities and children suffering from abuse, and the skills required to take part in related volunteer activities. The participants were divided into four groups of different interests, and each group planned, organized, and at the end gave presentations on their project.

The "life and medical care" group I joined chose hunger as its topic. We were shocked at what we had learned about hunger in today's world, especially when we found out that it's an issue for us right here in Japan. We learned many things, like how there are over 800 million people starving in the world and like how 20 million tons of food is thrown away every year here in Japan — it could feed 70 million of those people for one year. We also learned that Japan received food aid from UNICEF as recently as 40 years ago.

We then thought, in order to solve this problem, instead of just giving away food, we ought to make it possible for people to obtain food by themselves. We considered various solutions and arrived at the idea that, if schools could provide food for children, the children would better be able to focus on their classes, boosting the enrollment rate at those schools, which would then lead their country to take more positive actions for the future. The six of us in our group came up with a plan to hold a charity event at a local elementary school to teach the kids about hunger, and raise funds that then would be sent to developing countries to support school lunch programs.

## Learning into Action

After the workshop, our group got back together and decided that we would try to do what could be done to put our ideas into action. One-by-one we visited the shops in commercial districts near the elementary school where we would hold this event. We explained our activity and asked for donations in order to collect funds for our event. We thought that store owners might be reluctant to cooperate with a project by high school students they had never met, but we were able to raise more than twice as much as expected. It certainly was a pleasant surprise.

Many children participated in the event we held on a Sunday in December. We prepared the event carefully in order to help the children learn about hunger in the world and have fun at the same time. We created a display made of more than 20 large poster sheets of paper about the topic, held games such as soccer and quoits, and held a flea market where we sold stuffed animals and stationery goods collected at the high schools of our members. The children were surprised to see how children in some places in the world live in conditions that they never could



Participants at the Leadership Workshop exchanging ideas.

© Leadership Workshop

have imagined. I had a sense that our goal of teaching children about hunger was a success. We donated the 15,000 yen we collected to the World Food Programme.

We got together three or four times a week to prepare for this event, but it was time well spent, not only because of what we learned in the process about the problems of the world, but also because we thought about what we could do about them and how to put our ideas into action.



Flea market held at the elementary school to raise funds.

© Leadership Workshop

### Spreading Our Message

Most of the participants of the leadership workshop continued their activities afterwards as our group did. In March 2008 we got involved in the “Youth International Volunteer Forum” (YouFo. See Japanese Culture Now-4) at which we gave presentations about what we had accomplished. Thirty-four students from a total of eight schools formed the executive committee of YouFo, taking part in its planning, operation, and public relations. I myself took part as vice chair of the executive committee.

At the forum, we set up four displays that described the results of the activities of the groups from the leadership workshop. We also had a lecture, sign language lessons, and a report from a youth volunteer mission about their work in Vietnam. There were over 200 participants, mostly young people, who gave positive feedback on a survey we conducted that day. Among the comments were: “I was astonished by what was achieved,” “It made me want to take part in volunteer activities, too,” and “This was an event I would love to attend every year.”



Posters explaining what we had learned about the problems of the world to visitors at the forum.

### Thoughts and Lessons Learned

Many of my friends, who were in their first year of school when they took part in the leadership workshop and YouFo, are planning to participate in the next workshop and forum too, but I decided that I would no longer take part. I felt that I needed to focus on my studies in order to set the course of my life. Watch-

ing more and more of my friends attending cram school, I have become more conscious of the need to study for my college entrance exams.

The YouFo executive committee meets once every month or two, but on top of this the officers meet two to three times a month and need to attend other group activities of their own. Meetings would last from five o'clock to nine o'clock on weekdays, which meant that I wouldn't be able to relax at home until ten o'clock in the evening. I would also have my share of work that I would bring home. It was a tough schedule, but I continued for that school year because I had committed myself to it.

There were times when I struggled with the frustration of being unable to attend the YouFo meetings because of school club and other activities. With other members also being frequently absent, it was a challenge to share our mutual information and ideas constructively. Some of the members, including myself, became concerned that we were putting more energy into the presentations about our volunteer activities than into the volunteering itself.

Nonetheless, I am glad that I was able to take part in these activities, from which I gained a great deal. Above all, I learned many things about hunger. I also learned the importance of working together as a group, as we discussed how we should set up our displays and incorporated everyone's ideas into the project. I learned how to have a good relationship with the group members and the people we were trying to help through the activities. I experienced the gratification and the sense of accomplishment from completing our task. There are many limitations when working with students from other schools, but it was a challenge I was willing to face. You feel really satisfied when a project you have worked hard on shows concrete results.

Participants and supporters are the most essential aspects of our activities. I want to spread the message to all the high school students that many of their peers are taking part in volunteer activities with compassion and determination. To do so, we need new ways to attract more high school students. Since students tend to shy away from activities described as “volunteer work,” perhaps we should avoid putting too much emphasis on the term. Instead we can relate the volunteer activities with things they are interested in, come up with catchy slogans, or something along those lines. This is probably my ultimate long-term project. My participation with YouFo may end, but I would like to continue thinking about this issue through volunteering with the committee.

My dream is to become a doctor. This is the path I chose since I have hoped to help others. When that day comes, my hope is to get involved in medical care for local communities.

\* This school, like others in Japan, provides the six-years of secondary education (three years of junior high school and three years of senior high school) as a continuous program in one institution. Whereas most students completing nine years of compulsory education in Japan (six years for elementary school and three years for junior high school) take entrance examinations to enter high school, students entering this type of school do not have to prepare for high school entrance examinations and have more latitude in selecting what to study. Many private schools already combine junior and senior high school, but the first public school to do so was established in 1994 in Miyazaki prefecture. Other prefectures are now following suit.

❖ This article was compiled based on an interview with “Sean” (a nickname).