

## Here Our Lives Go On

Among the Syrian refugees who were forced to leave their home country and live in Jordan are people with physical disabilities. As they confront their own hardships and start rebuilding their lives, they are also building new relationships and helping others. JICA's assistance amplifies their strength and compassion by helping them support others in need.



Obada (on the right) after a peer counseling session. Not only disabled Syrian refugees but also other patients at hospitals in Amman are starting to receive counseling. Obada states firmly, "Being self-reliant does not mean that you take care of everything all alone. It means that you take the initiative to decide what you do."

### SUDDENLY I BECAME DISABLED AND A REFUGEE OVERNIGHT

What were you doing in your home country before arriving in Jordan?

"I was a high school student in Daraa in the southern part of Syria. I loved playing sports, and my dream was to become a football trainer."

If I may ask, how did you become disabled?

"I was shot near a checkpoint and became disabled, but nothing has changed. I'm the same person now as I was in the past. I want to set up an organization that will protect the rights of people living with disabilities."

As he talks about his past and future, the young man who lost movement of his lower limbs speaks in a calm, dignified voice.

In 2012, Obada (aged 21) came to Jordan with his family after fleeing the conflict in Syria. He received surgery in Jordan for his gunshot wound, and he now spends his days in a wheelchair. Two years after his operation, he learned about JICA. "I heard there was a workshop advocating for equality for people living with disabilities, with Japanese experts as its organizers. I was not sure what being disabled would mean for my life, so I thought that I would like to join."

Disability Equality Training (DET) is a workshop-based training program where disabled people act as facilitators. The facilitators lead discussions that help a diverse group of participants uncover hidden barriers that often exist in society, and they also teach participants the skills needed to remove these barriers.

After completing JICA's DET program as a participant, Obada enrolled in a training course to become a facilitator. He also completed the curriculum of another training course to become a peer counselor to help people living with disabilities adjust mentally and become self-reliant. Now Obada works as a counselor at an Amman-based NGO that helps refugees, primarily with disabilities, who have fled to Jordan's capital city from Syria.

Similarly, Obada's friend, a victim of a shooting in Syria that left his legs paralyzed, works as a peer counselor. "Looking at Obada taking part in JICA's training," he says, "I thought to myself, 'Despite my disabilities, I can still go outside and help other people.'"

### ACKNOWLEDGING DISABILITIES IS THE FIRST STEP

JICA's support for Syrian refugees with disabilities started in 2014. At that time, JICA was already supporting Syrian refugees fleeing into Jordan and the communities that had accepted displaced people. "We decided to extend our assistance to disabled refugees because assistance to people with disabilities generally tends to be overlooked," says a Japanese staff member at JICA Jordan office, who has been working for this operation since its beginning. With her two years of experience in Syria as a member of Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCV), she speaks Arabic fluently.

On another front, Nizar, a Syrian national who had been involved in JICA's projects in Syria, works tirelessly for Syrian refugees in Jordan. Nizar spent



Mohamad of Jordan's Paralympic Committee (on the right) teaches table tennis. "Most of the women and girls who participate have congenital disabilities, but some of them were able to lift their arms after practicing for two hours every week. Together with the girls' mothers, we form a team to support one another!"

time with JICA's local staff members in Jordan, gathering information on the whereabouts of disabled people and their families who could use JICA's support. "Many of the Syrian refugees lost their ties to society as they were isolated in accommodation centers and other facilities," Nizar explains. "I wanted to give them an opportunity to rebuild connections with communities, and so I asked them to join in JICA's DET." He says that at first, most of them declined. "Even those who did come to the training focused on receiving medicine that would heal their physical wounds," he says.

JICA's assistance originally started with two activities: training people to become DET facilitators and cultivating peer counselors. These activities later broadened. The assistance evolved into analyzing and solving the problems of people living with disabilities, and it is now led mostly by eleven people, including Obada and Bashar, who have actively participated in the training sessions. The Japanese staff member, who has always stood by them and voiced their concerns based on her conversations with them in Arabic, reflects back on that time: "We came in with a blueprint of what we thought JICA should be aiming for, but instead we determined it would be most effective to focus our support on participants' initiatives, because we wanted them to develop and spread their own ideas."

### ACTIVITIES EXPAND IN THE SPIRIT OF MUTUAL ASSISTANCE

The disabled refugees submitted a proposal for two programs: sports activities and living assistance for people with disabilities. Under the sports activities program, a weekly session of table tennis is now held at a rented gymnasium of Jordan's Paralympic Committee. This activity started with a group of nine men but later expanded to include ping-pong days for women at the request of women with disabilities. Currently, sixty people participate in the sports program.

On the day of sports activities for women, mothers accompanying their daughters spend time relaxing near the ping-pong tables where they talk, exchange information, and learn from one another. One mother said: "I came here after hearing about ping-pong from my peer counselor. Before we started coming, my daughter hesitated to even go out, but now she has so much fun playing table tennis, and she has a much more positive outlook. Looking at how she has changed, I began to think that her

disability was no longer a negative factor. We all became friends here."

Among the group of mothers is the Japanese staff member from the JICA Jordan office, chatting with them about local Syrian dishes. Looking at her in the distance, Nizar says with a smile, "You can see why everyone likes her so much."

As part of the living assistance program, disabled refugees collected information about 17 organizations that provide daily-living support for people with disabilities and the information was compiled into a "Guidebook to Services for People with Disabilities," completed in May of 2016. They organized workshops, inviting various groups of people including representatives of refugee assistance organizations to disseminate the guidebook. They also made a formal proposal stressing the importance of incorporating the perspectives of disabled people into various assistance efforts.

In August of the same year, experts invited from Japan held an advanced training course for peer counselors. "I was worried about holding this course in a foreign country because I am quadriplegic," says a Japanese expert who led the training. "But I decided to join, thinking that I wanted to be of help to Syrian refugees who live with disabilities. At first, I had difficulty conveying the idea that peer counselors should listen without passing judgment or giving advice, but with practical exercises, the trainees learned how to be skilled active listeners." The expert hopes that with the continuing efforts from disabled Syrian refugees, a culture of peer counseling will take root in Jordan.

Just imagine the scene: A yellow carpet of canola flowers spread before your eyes, the fragrance of apricots, and voices chatting in a laid-back atmosphere. These are the memories that JICA staff members preserve from their days in Syria. And this is why they see their work as more than providing assistance to groups of refugees and disabled people: JICA's staff members seek to understand the needs of each individual.

Uprooted people continue to live in a new land, hand in hand, with their heads held up high.



Waed serves as a peer counselor and a DET facilitator. When Waed became friends with a Jordanian facilitator, it opened the door for two Jordanian women living with disabilities to join the women's table tennis day.

### Training Electricians to Wire Syrian Refugee Camps

At the Zaatari refugee camp, refugees with limited knowledge of electricity were installing electrical wires in the shelters without any outside help. This resulted in frequent accidents, including electric shocks, and facility malfunctions. In collaboration with Jordan's National Electric Power Company and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), JICA launched a technical training session in August 2016, targeting 200 refugees living in the camp. Trainees, who attended a three-week session at a facility run by the electric company, are expected to help some 80,000 people in the refugee camp by providing wiring services while earning a livelihood for themselves as technicians. Moreover, the experience they gain in the camp will be beneficial in future reconstruction efforts back home in Syria.



Wiring work at the Zaatari refugee camp