JAPANESE VOLUNTEERS SUPPORT VILLAGE LEVEL PRODUCERS

On completion of their two year assignments, three JICA volunteers who worked in support of village level producers made presentations on their activities at the Samurdhi Authority of Sri Lanka (SASL) Head Office in Colombo yesterday (2012/01/03). The meeting which was attended by both SASL and JICA officials was chaired by Mr Sena Medawalagamage, Director Human Resources of the SASL.

The volunteers who made presentations were those assigned to SASL under JICA's volunteer dispatch programme. These volunteers worked in support of rural producers in several locations including Udunuwara, Yatinuwara, Pathadumbara, Pathahewaheta and Weligama.

The activities of the volunteers included identifying new products that could be made by village level producers, facilitating training (in some instances utilizing the skills of volunteers specialized in leather craft, product design etc.), providing advice on maintaining product quality, packaging and linking producers with buyers (some of them being lucrative business enterprises in Colombo). The products carried the brand name “Api” (meaning “we” in Sinhala) and included leather key tags, wooden handicrafts, cloth bags and ladies purses, spices in bamboo packaging, scented candles, silver jewelry and food products. For instance, Ms Fumika Kikuchi who worked as a designer was able to identify product designs that could be sold in retail outlets in Colombo, and provided guidance on developing products that appealed to a high-end clientele including foreign tourist. This enabled producers to earn higher profit margins compared with profits made through products with traditional designs. Mr Toshiharu Sato, who worked in Weligama specialized in the field of food processing, and helped producers develop new food products including king coconut (thembili) jelly which became popular amongst tourist. Mr Kentaro Takeda, who worked in Pathadumbara introduced a new design of cloth bag to some producers who were able to earn an additional income through the sale of these bags. The activities of JICA volunteers have helped rural producers develop new products, broaden their client base and increase their incomes.

When the contributions made by volunteers are taken as a whole, the greatest benefit local producers received is a new mind set that said “we can”, and which replaced the old mind set that said “we cannot”. This change did not happen overnight. Volunteers went through much hardship in convincing people that the new designs/products could be sold in places they could never imagine. This was largely due to their lack of exposure to urban or commercial environments that existed in places like Colombo or Kandy. Volunteers also had to work hard in inculcating the discipline of managing cash flows, sticking to delivery schedules and maintaining product quality amongst producers. All this helped them in developing their self confidence, and belief in their own abilities, which would have a strong impact in the way they do business in future.

The contribution by JICA’s volunteers towards development activities at grass-root level is greatly valued by those organizations that have benefited from their services. The strengths of these volunteers are their practical approach to problem solving, and grasp of local languages, which enables them to interactively communicate with local people. These volunteers use extremely creative means of communication, which is essential in order to conduct activities effectively. JICA’s volunteers are able to positively influence those whom they work with due to their attitudes, strong sense of discipline, and high emphasis on team work. They not only transfer technical skills, but also share knowledge on cultural aspects, and most importantly, build strong and long lasting friendships with local people that outlast their stay in Sri Lanka. There are altogether 46
volunteers who are currently working in various parts of the country. Since the inception of JICA's Volunteer Dispatch Programme to Sri Lanka in 1981, a total of 855 volunteers have worked in the country.

For more information: http://www.jica.go.jp/english/operations/schemes/citizen/volunteers.html

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Smiling with Famous Weligama 'Thembiri Jelly'