I was 1965 when the Overseas Technical Cooperation Agency, the predecessor of the Japan International Cooperation Agency, began recruiting the first generation of Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCVs). Happening across a newspaper advertisement about this one day, Masako Hoshino applied and was chosen as one of the first five JOCV members to be sent to Laos. She has been active at the front lines of international cooperation ever since, in a career spanning fifty years.

Hoshino received a higher education and married, but after ten years as a housewife got a divorce. Having just started a career as a Japanese-language teacher, she was just under the cutoff age of thirty-three at the time of her application.

“Back at that time in Japan, it was suffocating to be a woman,” Hoshino says. “Joining the JOCV was my best chance to use the skills I had at the time to escape from Japan for legitimate reasons.”

Dispatched as a Japanese-language teacher to Laos, she describes the place then as “poor in material things, but blessed with the beauty of nature and a wide variety of agricultural produce. It was a tranquil and spiritually rich country.” When she arrived at her post, there was actually no pressing need for a Japanese teacher, and for a time she was frustrated at this setback. Through her persistent and proactive efforts, however, after six months Hoshino was able to start a Japanese class.
By expanding her network of personal relationships through her highly ambitious students, and through homestays at Laotian households, where men and women support each other equally, Hoshino became captivated by Laotian culture. “Japan has a lot to learn from Laos,” she notes.

Filled with a desire to get even closer to the people of Laos, she worked hard to improve her fluency in Lao and French, and decided to stay in the country even after her JOCV posting concluded, finding work as a secretary to the Japanese ambassador to Laos. While in Laos, she married a Japanese scholar named Tatsuo Hoshino, and afterward adopted an intelligent and gentle Laotian daughter. While the political situation was unstable at the time, she resided in Laos and neighboring Thailand for a total of eighteen years.

When Hoshino served as a translator for relief activities for Southeast Asian refugees, she became strongly aware of the need to establish Japan’s first nongovernmental organization (NGO). After witnessing the activities of foreign NGOs and civilian volunteers, she began appealing to related agencies. In 1980, she helped to launch Japan’s first international cooperation NGO, the Japan Service Center, now known as the Japan International Volunteer Center (JVC). Later, as JVC Secretary General, she became active in refugee relief efforts in both Asia and Africa, and contributed greatly to the advancement of women’s issues in Japan. For her track record in serving at the forefront of civilian international cooperation as a bridge between Japan and the rest of the world, Hoshino was awarded The Order of the Rising Sun, Gold Rays with Rosette by the government of Japan in 2012.

As a leading figure in building awareness for Japanese volunteer work, Hoshino explains her philosophy that international cooperation “is not meant to force development onto a country, but to support the rising energy that occurs voluntarily at the local level.” Although she now serves as a JVC advisor, Hoshino says she “wants to remain at the front lines to feel where the world is.” As a refugee examination counselor for the Immigration Bureau of Japan at the Ministry of Justice, she continues to stay involved in refugee issues.

“I’ve had a lucky life,” Hoshino says. “If I hadn’t come across that newspaper ad for volunteers in the National Diet Library, I would have never been posted to Laos, and I would never have encountered NGO activities, and I probably wouldn’t be where I am today.” Always firmly aware of her good fortune, Hoshino has worked hard to achieve further progress. Fluent in five languages, and currently learning her sixth—German—she has faced the world directly from the day she became a first-generation JOCV member, and continues to walk that path alongside the global community.

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1 JOCV pioneer Masako Hoshino
2 The 1967 closing ceremony at Hoshino’s Japanese-language school
3 Ministry of Education staff in Laos at the time
4 Hoshino in Laos, 1966