

The JICA-backed *Mottainai Grandma* mobile showroom at a school in India



# MOTTAINAI GRANDMA ACTIVE AROUND THE WORLD

*Mottainai Grandma* is a picture book with an elderly protagonist who communicates the importance of things. The stories are being enjoyed across the globe, with an anime dubbed into multiple languages currently being broadcast online.

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WHEN a small child leaves food unfinished or goes to throw away something that can still be used, an elderly woman appears, granting wisdom by saying, “Mottainai!” (“What a waste!”). That picture book is *Mottainai Grandma*.

Picture book author Shinju Mariko created the story to try and teach her own son about the meaning of “mottainai” and the importance of taking care of things. This caught the attention of a publishing company, and the story was published as a picture book in 2004. The grandmother character (*Mottainai Baasan* in Japanese), who at first glance seems scary but is actually kind and full of love, became popular among children, and there have been over one million copies published from among the seventeen books in the series. The picture books, which have

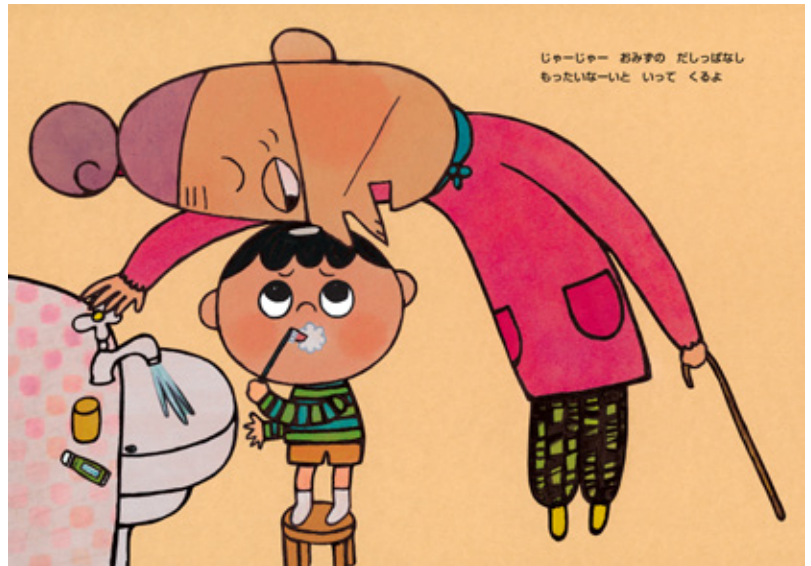
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been translated and published in multiple languages, are read by children in countries all over the world.

In 2020, this *Mottainai Grandma* was jointly produced into an anime by Kodansha and the Ministry of the Environment, Japan. The four episodes, dubbed in Japanese, English, French, Spanish, Chinese and Hindi, began streaming online on YouTube on June 5 - World Environment Day.

Doi Kentaro of the General Administration Division, Environment Regeneration and Resources Recycling Bureau, the Ministry of the Environment, Japan, says that, “The *Mottainai Grandma* picture books communicate the importance of limited resources and the grandeur of abundant nature while also featuring stories that are friendly and easy to understand. We made the books into an anime so that even more people could see them today, as environmental pollution becomes more serious all over the world.”

Impressed by the Japanese word “mottainai” when visiting Japan, the late Wangari Muta Maathai, a Kenyan ecological activist who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004, tried to spread this untranslated word across the globe. Maathai felt that “mottainai” was a word that not only expressed the 3Rs of environmental protection activities - reduce, reuse,



Images from the *Mottainai Grandma* series (Japanese version). The book has been translated into several languages.

recycle - but also a word that captured another R, respect for irreplaceable earth resources. Maathai then used the word as a slogan for the MOTTAINAI campaign that she herself advocated for.

The *Mottainai Grandma* series began in the first book by teaching about taking care of things. However, the word “mottainai” also implies an understanding of the importance of life, and the series went on to explore natural cycles and biodiversity, and has expanded to cover themes related to global problems such as climate change, the extinction of organisms, and food shortages.

In 2008, the *Mottainai Grandma’s World Report Exhibition* was held to consider the connection between our own lives and the various problems occurring across the globe, and from this series of exhibitions, “Earth’s Problems and Children of the World” and “Vanishing Organisms” were exhibited at venues such as at the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (COP10) in Nagoya or the UNICEF House in Tokyo. The exhibition introduced key messages of *Mottainai Grandma*, such as, “If we are not self-centered and share with each other, we can achieve world peace” and “All life is connected and each life is important.”

As part of a Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) project, people have been going around India in a mobile showroom and reading *Mottainai Grandma* to children as part of their environmental education since 2016. Doi says that,

“Through this project, the word ‘mottainai’ has infiltrated the children’s lives at the schools in India that we visited. I once again felt the word ‘mottainai’ has power and that the spirit of the word can be shared with the world.”

The Alliance to End Plastic Waste, a non-profit established jointly by global chemical manufacturers aiming to solve the problem of waste plastic, cooperated with the making of this anime, and seven companies within Japan became partner companies.

Environmental problems are issues on a global scale that are connected to all human activity, including corporate activities and individual lifestyles. *Mottainai Grandma* kindly asks about these problems. 7



*Mottainai Grandma* on tour in India