

AAI and Me – Yoshihisa Zaitu <Part-1>

Encounter with AAI

I left AAI (Appropriate Agriculture International Co., Ltd.) in June 2016, after some 27 years working with AAI members and taking part in international cooperation activities in the field of agriculture. I am currently working to contribute to the local community in my hometown in Miyazaki and taking advantage of this retirement opportunity I am ready to deliver several articles looking back on my activities at AAI.

My first encounter with AAI began in 1978 when I met the current president, Hiroyasu Onuma, in the UAE. After graduating from university, I had been dispatched as a laboratory technician to the Agricultural Research Station in Abu Dhabi after an introduction by my professor, the late Dr. Keiichiro Matsuda of Shizuoka University. The station was operated by the Desert Development Institute Japan (DDIJ) which was the related organization of Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) and was established in the desert between Abu Dhabi and Al Ain. Onuma was working in the station as an expert at that time. Since this was my first overseas assignment and I was not good at English, Onuma educated me through on-site activities. By watching Onuma who had an uncompromising attitude to field experiment protocol while always trying to work with fun and good humour with Pakistani laborers and Palestinian technical staff, I was drawn into that attitude when I carried out my daily work. I found out that there was such a profession as an international development consultant providing overseas agricultural support, and this led to the definition of my future occupation.

I resumed college life after returning to Japan. After completing my master's course, I was looking for a job as an international development consultant. I finally got a job at CKC (Chuo Kaihatsu Corporation) and I was always blessed in terms of work. Overseas assignments came in without interruption for me even though I was a newcomer. I was able to gain knowledge and experience in various fields from competent seniors. I also participated in academic conferences and training almost at will. My knowledge and practice accumulated not only in the fields of soil and land use that I specialized in, but also on agriculture in general, including crops, irrigation, farm economy, and satellite image analysis. This greatly contributed to my consulting work in the agricultural field.

I was well satisfied with the professional work in this way, but I was hoping to work as a long-term expert in the way I had experienced in Abu Dhabi and the idea gradually became stronger. However, it was not possible to find long-term dispatch opportunities in my specialization field at that time in CKC.

At this time, Onuma who had returned from Dubai requested me to join in resuming activities at the dormant AAI. The decision to shift my job to AAI came quite easily, despite being quite a gamble for me just after getting married. However, I remember that it took about two years to actually make a move. There were long negotiations between CKC and AAI. I wanted to move to AAI, but CKC was expanding its scale and tried to incorporate AAI. Despite these twists and turns, Onuma and I started AAI activities in the year 1989.

We borrowed and shared a desk in the office of FAI (Fisheries and Aquaculture International Co., Ltd.), a company with which we had a close relationship. Since it was not convenient, we soon rented an office on Hiranuma shopping street in Yokohama and tried to make our activities full-scale. AAI did not have the appearance of a company and there was only one long desk in the office. My first work after joining the company involved attending to the actual practical details of joining a company; organizing AAI's pension participation procedure, sending letters of thanks for starting activities to affiliated companies and so on.

However, performing various tasks at the startup period of the company was a time that generated a strong awareness of, and passion for, running our company. Everything had to be decided and executed by just the two of us. Taking all the responsibility on ourselves gave me a full sense and awareness of "running AAI". The launch of AAI, which specializes in dryland agriculture, was challenging but relatively easy. It was due to personal connections made through CKC and Onuma and many of these are still solid AAI supporters.



Yield Survey at the Experimental Station in Abu Dhabi