

Comparative analysis of agricultural extension situation in individual countries <Part 2>

Technical capabilities of Agricultural extension officers

This series was created to reflect discussions and experience sharing among AAI members. Today we focus on “the technical capabilities” of agricultural extension officers (AEOs). We first compared and discussed the circumstances of each country from the perspectives of AEO’s knowledge, practical skills, planning capacity, training opportunities, and so on. After the discussion, we found that many of the AEOs in the countries we worked with had the academic knowledge but lacked the practical knowledge and skills that were required in the field. Therefore, we have been trying to provide them with practical knowledge and skills in the projects and the technical training courses with which we were involved in. As a result, we often hear voices from the AEOs who received our training saying that they can now go to farmers’ fields with confidence. According to these facts, “technically capable AEOs ” can generally be thought of as “AEOs with sufficient knowledge and skills to instruct farmers”. However, AEOs face various problems in the farmers’ fields. In crop production alone, they have to take care of grains, vegetables, fruit trees and so on, and, additionally, each product involves water management, fertilization application, pests and disease control, post-harvest handling, and marketing. AEOs sometimes even have to consult on livestock management, too. However, it is not easy to acquire “sufficient knowledge and skills ” in all these fields. Therefore, we went on to talk about “high performance AEOs” with whom we have worked and discuss what goes to make up the ideal model of an AEO based on our own experiences.

We have exchanged histories of a number of interesting cases and stories about AEOs in different counties and today we would like to introduce two particularly interesting examples. The first case is the “ Capacity Development Project for Irrigation Scheme Management in River Nile State ” carried out in Sudan. Although the project promoted farming guidance with irrigation facilities, it was difficult to visit farmers frequently due to the insufficient numbers of AEOs and the wide areas that each individual had to cover. To address this challenge, he projects decided to train irrigation inspectors who were involved in the operation of the irrigation facilities, and have them take on the role of assisting the AEOs. At this

time, what they were tasked with was not to provide technical advice to the farmers, but to pick up the problems from the farmers’ fields and inform the extension department of their



Water management inspector discussing with farmers (Sudan)

findings. Even though they were initially uncertain, as they accumulated experience on the ground, they became aware of the problems facing farmers and by collaborating with the extension department, they could work just like AEOs who support farmers. In the case of another project, this time in Uganda, at the beginning, when AEOs found a problem such as poor germination, they, along with the farmers, had decided that the seed quality was poor. However, after gaining field experience with the project staff, they learned to carefully observe whether the cause of the poor germination was due to seed quality or whether looking at sowing and nursery management was more appropriate.

In view of these cases, we considered that the technical skills required of AEOs need not be just specialized knowledge and skills, but also embrace comprehensive field skills such as observation, problem analysis, and communication skills to identify problems in the field. At the same time, in order that AEOs acquire such comprehensive field skills, it is extremely important for them to gain sufficient experience in the field. As they gain experience in different farms the AEOs will face various problems, and they will learn to notice other new problems. Even if they can’t solve a problem, if they can identify and analyze the issue properly, they can ask questions to appropriate specialists and may get a solution from them.

Through the discussion, we concluded field experiences are important to develop capacities of AEOs. This being the case, how can we increase the amount of field experience of each AEO? Can an AEO with a limited amount of experience still be an outstanding AEO? We will discuss these questions in the next issues.