Comparative analysis of agricultural extension situation in individual countries <Part 3>

Distance between farmers and agricultural extension officers

In this series, we are discussing the agricultural extension work and situations of each country from four entry points. This time, we discuss "distance from farmers".

In Palestine, the number of agricultural extension officers (AEOs) was small compared to the number of farmers. By contrast, in Syria there were many extension centers but AEO's transportation was limited. In Pakistan, some AEOs said that the area they were in charge of was too far from the town they lived in and that they had never visited. In Mongolia, the vast land area was dotted with a small number of farmers, which inevitably reduced the efficiency of extension activities. There are various situations depending on the circumstance of each country, but it seems that a scenario where AEOs cannot easily go to the farmers' fields is common. This said, it is impossible for AEOs to visit all farmers in the target area frequently, no matter how the extension system is enhanced. Therefore, in the field of agricultural extension, the organization of farmers has been promoted, and various extension methods have been developed and put into practice. In recent years, the development of digital technology has been remarkable, and its benefits have reached the rural areas of developing countries. Due to the COVID-19 spread in the last two years, various dissemination methods using digital technology are being tried widely. Although these methods still have many challenges, such technology may shorten the physical distance between AEOs and farmers, and a smoother form of extension activities may be born in the future.

In addition to physical distances, we went on to consider the psychological distances that can exist between the farmers and the AEOs. Why is there such a psychological distance from the farmer in the first place? How can the gap be closed? We heard an interesting story about this issue in the activity survey of ex-participants of the JICA Tsukuba Vegetable Cultivation Technology Course conducted in Nepal in 2014. When I asked the AEOs who returned to Nepal after completing the training in Japan what they thought had changed in theirselves, the answer ran along the lines of "I am now able to visit farmers with confidence." A typical trainee would add that "Previously, I was afraid to visit a farmer." "I didn't want to go to farmers' fields because I was afraid of being asked what I didn't know. Even if I went there, I just talked one-sidedly. However, I became confident that I had acquired the skills through the training in Japan, and now I can listen to the farmers' voices closely." We often heard similar stories from other ex-participants. Another interesting case is in Syria. It was hard to say that the AEOs in the country were trusted by farmers in terms of technology because they were seen as inspectors of the planned economy rather than advisors. However, when the project trained AEOs on irrigation technologies, provided them with irrigation measuring kits, and sent them to farmers, they could carry out effective extension activities. By measuring irrigation amounts in front of farmers and showing data in comparison with required water amounts, they became trusted by the farmers. It is thought that the psychological distance was shortened when the farmers felt that the technical advice provided by AEOs would be useful, even if only a little. In this case as well, the AEOs reported that they felt they could now visit farmers with confidence.

AEOs measuring irrigation water amount in farmer's field (Syria)

In the previous issue, we mentioned that the technical skills required for AEOs are not just specialized knowledge and skills, but rather comprehensive field skills such as observation, problem analysis, and communication skills to identify problems in the field. We also observed that in order for AEOs to acquire such comprehensive field skills, it is extremely important for them to gain sufficient experience in the field. However, we thought it may also be important to acquire a little specialized knowledge and skills in order for AEOs to take the first step to go to the farmer's field and gain the trust of the farmer. And when the technology is accepted and relied on by farmers, AEOs will actually start to enjoy going to farmers' fields . The oppotunities to learn in the field will then increase naturally and this in turn will promote an increase in the technical and field capabilities of the AEOs.