

First travel to Islamabad after the COVID-19 pandemic

After evacuating Islamabad in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the activities of the “Project for Capacity Development of Agriculture Extension Services in Balochistan Province” were operated remotely from Japan. After a long period of absence we finally returned to Islamabad in early March, 2021 for the first time in a year.

There seemed to be fewer people at the Narita airport departure terminal and the transit airport of Doha was also less crowded than before, but the flight from Doha to Islamabad was almost full. I thought that the rush of passengers was spurred by the decrease in flights due to the pandemic. When I saw the city of Islamabad the number of people remained the same, and traffic congestion did not seem to have decreased. Familiar street vendors were lined up in the market, and items on the shelves at the supermarkets and bakeries I used to go hadn't changed either. Of course, COVID-19 infection prevention measures were being taken in the city and these had changed things. Many people wore masks and we had to have our temperatures checked when we entered the hotel. However, the largely unchanging streets of Islamabad struck an emotional chord with me that resonated given the radical alterations that were happening all over the world.

At the National Agricultural Research Center, where the project office is located, we were able to reunite with our counterparts and national staff who had supported the project in the field over the past year in difficult circumstances. In Pakistan it is normal to exchange hugs and pat each other on the shoulder when celebrating a reunion, but this time we exchanged greetings while maintaining social distance. Everyone was wearing masks, so I couldn't see their smiles, and it felt unnatural, but they seemed to have become used to their new custom.

According to the counterparts and local staff, while the “new normal” for infection prevention had taken hold in

Pakistan, people had become accustomed to the COVID-19 pandemic and had become less wary of infection. In particular, in rural areas where extension officers work, there were few people wearing masks. This said, there was also a counterpart who was infected with COVID-19 last year in August and who had had such a hard time that he had been unable to stand and walk. I felt that there was definitely still a risk of infection.

In March 2021, when we traveled to Pakistan, the number of new COVID-19 domestic cases was declining and the atmosphere in the city was definitely a little more relaxed. In order to prevent infections, eating indoors was prohibited in restaurants, so at night many people gathered at the tables outside the restaurants, and it seemed rather lively. It appeared that more and more people were holding wedding ceremonies that they had been refraining from until that time, and there were occasions when the lively music could be heard even in my room in the hotel. I thought that people, while accepting ‘the new normal’, were striving to recreate something approaching their original lifestyle that values the bond with family and friends.

Over the past year, the remote project management was supported by the relationship of trust with the counterparts and project staff with whom we had worked together in physical proximity until the pandemic started. There are many things that come together when we share time and place, and it was a valuable opportunity to meet directly with the people involved in the project during this short trip. It also struck me how necessary it is to cherish the bonds we share especially when we cannot meet.



Progress report meeting of the project with counterpart organization

Comparative analysis of agricultural extension situation in individual countries <Part 5>

Cooperation between extension department and external organizations

(1) Cooperation with the research center

In this series we have focused on Agricultural extension officers (AEOs) and Extension Departments (EDs), but agricultural development is not realized only through the work of AEOs and EDs. Therefore, in this issue, we would like to focus on external organizations that the EDs cooperate with. When we consider the cases of cooperation between the EDs and external organizations that we have seen in developing countries, they could be broadly divided into research centers such as research institutes and universities, the private sector, for example, buyers and suppliers, and donors such as governments, international organizations and NGOs. As a first step in addressing this topic, this issue will look at cooperation with Research Centers (RCs).

It is generally agreed that the ideal structure of agricultural technology dissemination is as follows; the AEOs identify problems in the farmers' field, the research sector develop techniques to solve the problems, and the AEOs disseminate the techniques for farmers. In this regard, a relationship between EDs and the RCs is close in Japan, but this is not the case in many developing countries. In those countries, there is often neither interaction nor regular information exchange. In order to identify reasons for this absence of communication and interaction we compared some cases in Japan and other countries.

For example, Ibaraki Prefecture in Japan has an Agricultural Center operating under the Prefectural Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries. The Agricultural Center works on extension service, research, and in the education sector comprehensively with a view to furthering agricultural development in the prefecture. In other words, EDs, RDs, and Agricultural College belong to the same organization. Additionally, because there is personnel exchange between these sections, each section understands its respective duties, and the officers of each can work closely together. However, in many developing

countries, RCs are often established only at the national or regional level, but not in the actual local government to which the AEOs belong. As a result there is no personnel exchange between the RCs and EDs, and their cooperation is, as a result, insufficient. By contrast in the case of Sudan, both the RCs and the EDs belong to the state government, so they have some cooperation. In Nepal, both the RCs and EDs used to belong to the central government (Ministry of Agriculture), so there seemed to be more coordination than in other developing countries¹. Considering these cases, it seems that the organizational structure has a noticeable effect on inter-organizational cooperation.

In Japan, AEOs and researchers share equal positions in their duties, but in many developing countries where we have worked, a large gap between them was noticeable. In some countries, researchers and AEOs were classified based on their university grades. Naturally, some AEOs felt an inferiority complex or a distance from the researchers. It seemed to be a cause of the gap between them. In addition, as most researchers have Masters or Doctoral degrees and often have a strong elitist mentality, they tend to have more interest in advanced research themes than the with problems faced by farmers in their own country. In this regard, an interesting change could be observed in the JICA project of capacity development for extension service providers in Pakistan. In the project, the lecturers of the AEO's training were researchers belonging to the National and Provincial Research Centers/Institute. After the training, many participating AEOs said "it was good to establish a connection with researchers". Simultaneously, the researchers who had been asked many questions by the AEOs said "we need to know the real situation in the farmers' fields." This is a case where AEOs and researchers, extension sites and the research field, which had been separated, were connected.

It is difficult for us, as outsiders coming from Japan, to change an organizational structure. However, it may be possible for outsiders to break through institutional barriers, bridge awareness gaps, and to promote human interaction and collaboration.

1. The structure of Agricultural Extension Services in Nepal was changed in 2015, and the extension and research sectors were separated.

Consideration on remote operation <Part 4>

A planned remote operation

In this issue, we would like to introduce a JICA project in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) Province in Pakistan as an example of remote project management which was planned from the beginning of project formation. KP Province is located in the mountainous region of northwestern Pakistan and shares a border with Afghanistan. This project aimed to improve capacity development of agricultural extension officers, known as Field Assistants or FAs in KP Province, through training to enable them to disseminate appropriate techniques and knowledge to farmers. However, KP Province was severely restricting entry for foreigners due to serious security issues after the outbreak of the Afghan conflict.

This project was unique in that field work was incorporated into the training program as shown in figure 1 below. In this program, FAs could practice in the field to utilize the knowledge and skills they acquired in the training sessions.

FAs learned basics of agricultural technology and extension methodology in 'Session 1' with group training. After the session, they conducted a farmer survey in their duty area to clarify the actual farmers' situations and to identify problems farmers faced. This was 'Field Work 1'. In "Session 2", they learned techniques and knowledge to solve the problems they had identified in "Field Work 1". In "Field Work 2", they practiced a dissemination activity to transfer the techniques and knowledge they learned to farmers. Finally, in the "Follow-up workshop", they reviewed the whole training activities, and devised an action plan regarding their own duties.

Since the FAs were provided "place" and "opportunity" to utilize what they learned in the sessions, they were able

to get experience of dissemination activities and build confidence, and to improve their relationships with farmers. The project also developed various extension materials such as posters, pamphlets, texts and videos as tools for extension officers, so that they can carry out dissemination activities effectively.

Although the training sessions were implemented in Islamabad, the capital city, where the Japanese experts were based, the operation of field activities was managed remotely due to security reasons. This remote operation was an integral part of planning from the time the project was designed. To monitor FAs' field work remotely, the project assigned staff members called Monitoring & Evaluation Officer (M&E Officers).

The M&E Officers were in charge of monitoring and reporting the activities of FAs and acting as the eyes and ears of the Japanese experts who could not reach the field. In order to obtain accurate reports, the project developed a format for the monitoring report which can accurately record necessary information. In addition, when recruiting M&E officers, rather than relying on past work experience, the project focused more on the candidates' capacity for the footwork which is needed for field work and the kind of personality which can build good relationships with FAs.

M&E officers played an effective role in obtaining field information remotely. This said, there was also a limitation that the information received had inevitably passed through an M&E Officers personal "filter.". We still need to consider how to improve the quality and quantity of information. obtained remotely in the field.

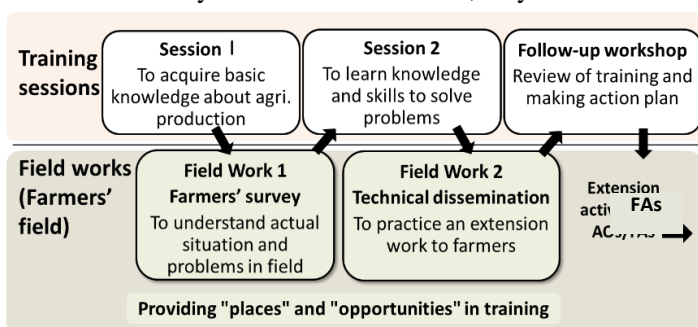


Figure1. Flow of training program for Field Assistants in the KP province project



A scene of field work by a field assistant overseen by M&E officers

Farm visiting reports <Part 1>

Visiting Minami-Ashigara Farm, International Agricultural Development Inc.

While engaged in overseas technical cooperation projects, we have often thought, "How can we get involved in Japanese regional communities and agricultural activities?". As opportunities arose, we visited farms that were taking new approaches, and learned a lot from them. In this series, we would like to introduce farms we have visited, and write about our thoughts and impressions. In this issue, we take up the case of a farm operating under the auspices of International Agricultural Development Incorporated (IADI) in Minami-Ashigara City, Kanagawa Prefecture, Japan, where we were invited to join in the mandarin orange harvesting.

IADI was established in 2016 by Mr. Kuroyanagi and his colleagues with the dream of not just making Japanese Sake from their own rice but also drinking it in their own restaurants. IADI's main activities focus on agricultural production and sales, providing farm experience, capacity development and consulting. It has 15 farms in Minami-Ashigara City, with an overall size of approximately 40,000 square meters. On this occasion, we visited two of them; one was a 1,115 square meters mandarin orange orchard and the other comprised a 1,000 square meters vegetable garden in Nuda, Minami-Ashigara City.

The farms of IADI are blessed with abundant water and a mild climate, with views of the Hakone and Tanzawa Mountains. The Sakawa River flows from Mt. Fuji and the Tanzawa Mountains and the warm sea breeze comes from Sagami Bay in the south. IADI produces and sells rice, vegetables, fruits, shiitake mushrooms, and other products in the region.

On our visit to the mandarin orange orchard, we encountered a variety called Unshu being cultivated using conventional farming methods. Mr. Kuroyanagi explained in detail that the view of Mt. Fuji, the clean water, and the thermal springs were the reasons why they selected Minami-Ashigara region as their production base. He also explained that agricultural activities are only viable if they have roots in the region. Therefore, he stressed, it is important to contribute to the local community, as well as to think beyond that, to contribute to the regional community through nationwide and international business development. After hearing his thoughts and his inspiring

visions for the future we threw ourselves into the work of helping harvest the mandarins with enthusiasm!

Although the mandarin orange harvesting was not the same as the so-called "agri-tourism program", arrangements were carefully made so that anyone could easily participate. After finishing the picking, the mandarin oranges were sorted by size, packed in wooden crates, and brought to storage for drying. These oranges will be shipped to member delivery services and regional 'marchés' (markets). During our lunch break, we could enjoy various products from each farm such as rice balls, figs, and pork miso soup with organic vegetables, cherry tomatoes, and homemade mandarin orange juice. All activities were fulfilling and we felt a sense of accomplishment at the end of the day. When we had finished, we all received bags full mandarin oranges, figs, and tomatoes, which we enjoyed tremendously!

We learned from IADI's ingenious approach to utilizing the functions of farmland to move it beyond mere production and to make it an enjoyable space. They had brought the slogan of "Enjoy Minami-Ashigara" to life. Furthermore, we felt that such utilization of farmland enhances the value of regional agriculture, leads to the conservation of agricultural land, and promotes the discovery of the attractiveness of the Minami-Ashigara region. On the way home, Mr. Kuroyanagi guided us to visit a 1,000 square meters vegetable plot. The field and its roads were established and are maintained by Mr. Kuroyanagi himself, and we were again impressed by his extraordinary efforts for the farm.

Our two farm visits offered a view of farming that successfully connects the producers working on the farms, friends, regional supporters, and the rich natural resources of Minami-Ashigara region. This visit was a great opportunity for us to learn the real joy of "food" and "agriculture." We experienced it through interaction with others, our taste buds and feeling a sense of accomplishment. A great lesson learned to help us implement our yearning for regional revitalization!



Mr. Kuroyanagi greeting his visitors in a mandarin orange field