

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