

Ten years in Sudan

The author's relationship with Sudan began in 2011, just before South Sudan became independent, and 10 years have passed since then. From June 2021, Phase 2 of the technical cooperation project in River Nile State will start again, and I am facing the 11th year of experience in Sudan with a fresh feeling. Our experiences in Sudan as a company have also accumulated over the past ten years, involving multiple staff in AAI and bringing the total number of projects to seven. Valuing technical cooperation in a specific country or region and continuing it over the long term may be becoming a tradition fostered by AAI.

The relationship with Sudan began in January 2011 with a detailed planning survey in Kassala State in the eastern part of the country, and it was purely by chance that the author joined this survey as a member. At that time, I had assignments for both Syria and Palestine projects, so I did not have much time to spare, and I could have declined the offer to participate. Although I accepted the offer on a short-term basis, I was deeply interested in the Syrian and Palestinian projects, so I thought that the work in Sudan would be a one-time only job for me. If I had turned it down at that moment, the next ten years would have gone in a completely different direction!

After that, however, Syria plunged into civil war following the "Arab Spring," making it difficult to continue the technical cooperation project that had been implemented. Partly because of this background, I became gradually immersed in the Sudan project. At the end of my four years at Kassala technical cooperation project, I planned to revive a local onion dry-processing plant based on discussions with the CPs. This led to develop a new project including a feasibility study under the JICA Private Sector Partnership Scheme, which continued to expand into a verification survey project. I was lucky enough to have the opportunity to participate in a technical cooperation project in River Nile State after the work at Kassala State. This was technically a shift from rain-fed to irrigated agriculture and a re-tackling in Sudan from different

angles. After the separation of South Sudan, it was also a decade of losing oil resources, which had been a major means of earning foreign currency for Sudan. Therefore, there is a strong demand for the modernization of the agricultural sector, and the relevant technical cooperation project is also trying to improve the efficiency of irrigated agriculture.

Seen in this way, it becomes clear that I have made conscious efforts to sustain and develop the relationship with Sudan although the work in Sudan started out purely by chance. Generally speaking, in the consulting industry, there is a saying, "I hit the ball that came." But our emphasis as AAI will be placed on sticking to specific countries and regions. I think I have been associated with Sudan in the true spirit of the AAI corporate culture.



From the first, I was interested in agriculture in dry areas, and I thought that the Arab region in the Middle East would be my main field of activity, so the country of Sudan was a perfect partnering for me with long term involvement. Dr. Giro Orita, a famous veterinarian whom I met in Syria when I was working for Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCV), once told me that it would take ten years of continuous work before becoming a fully-fledged technical cooperation worker in the field of agriculture. Needless to say, Dr. Orita has contributed to the development of Syria for 40 years. There was no way I could reach Dr. Orita's level, but when I reached the 10 year milestone I felt it was time to look back on my journey with Sudan.

(October 2021, Koga)

*Due to the political change that occurred on October 25, 2021, Japanese experts were temporarily evacuated to Japan. We hope we can return to Sudan as soon as possible and resume our work..

Comparative analysis of agricultural extension situation in individual countries <Part 7>

Conclusion

In this series, we have compared the extension officers and the extension situation in each country which we have been involved in our work and discussed the differences from four entry points. The four entry points were (1) Agricultural Extension Officers' "Technical Capabilities", (2) "Distance to Farmers", (3) "Capability of Extension Department" such as budget, personnel, and system, and (4) "Cooperation between Extension Department and External Organizations" such as research institutes and the private sector. Looking back on the discussion, subjects can be divided into the human resource aspect of "Agricultural Extension Officers (AEOs)" and the organizational aspect of "Extension Department (ED)".

In our discussion, we mentioned that the technical skills required for AEOs need not be just specialized knowledge and skills, but rather comprehensive field skills such as observation, problem analysis, and communication skills to identify problems in the field. In order for AEOs to acquire such comprehensive field skills, it is extremely important for them to gain sufficient experiences in the field (AAINews No.110). At the same time, we pointed out that it may also be important to acquire a little specialized knowledge and skills in order for AEOs to take the first step to visit the farmers in the field and gain the trust of the farmer (AAINews No.111).

Throughout these discussions, it was interesting that we could confirm similar episodes in all countries in which AEOs were able to visit farmers with confidence by acquiring sufficient techniques, even though the distance between the AEOs and the farmers varied from country to country. It is also interesting that it was confirmed commonly that AEOs' capacity has improved by going out into the field.

We also discussed "Capability of Extension Department" and "Cooperation between Extension Department and External Organizations", but it was difficult to make a comparative study since these are associated with Government administrative systems, thus, the situations differ greatly from country to country. However, it seems that each country shares the need to formulate an extension dissemination plan to solve issues in the field as well as the importance of cooperation with

external organizations. The idea was introduced that each project put efforts into improving the extension system and function with various suggested initiatives. It was particularly interesting that inter-organizational collaborations beyond the boundary of existing frameworks of organizations promoted by the projects were often found.

This series has introduced a number of case studies, but it was originally started with the aim of comparatively analyzing the agricultural extension situation of each country and looking for "hints for future activities". In fact, it is difficult to propose "hints for future activities" that are universally applicable to countries with different social systems and agricultural environments. However, if we were to summarize and propose it, the list would look like this:

Suggestions for Improving Extension Capacity

To improve capacity of agriculture extension officers (human resources aspect)

- In order to gain the trust of the farmers, provide AEOs with specialized knowledge and skills that they can rely on.
- Cultivate the ability to observe and analyze to investigate on-site problems and communication skill to the farmers.
- Include opportunities for AEOs to gain practical experience on the field in the project activities.

To strengthen the Extension Department (organization aspect)

- Show the importance of formulating an extension plan in line with the solution of local issues from the bottom-up perspective.
- A project to implement activities with an awareness of improving personnel exchanges and collaboration between organizations and departments.
- Maintain good relationships with private companies and aid agencies, and establish a system that enables the effective use of necessary information.

When involving in projects related to agricultural extension, we can contribute to improve the capabilities of personnel and organizations by considering these points.

Consideration on remote operation <Part 6>

Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic led us to the daily implementation of remote management in our projects. This series started with the aim of considering 'remote management' from various perspectives, including past projects, as well as implementation during the pandemic. This is the final summary of the series, and a brief review what we have covered so far.

○ **'Forced' remote management**

The remote management of the water-saving irrigation project (2005-2008, 2008-2011), which began with a break in the Syrian civil war, was described. This was our first long-term remote operation experience, but we were in the final stages of Phase 2 of the project, and the cooperation with the counterparts (CPs) was smooth. At that time, social networking and other tools were not as widely used as they are now, therefore the remote work was carried out based on e-mail, over a period of about a year. The major challenge was to bring the project to its final conclusion, and we attempted to use the Curriculum Development Based on Ability Structure (CUDBAS) method as a tool for summary and to support the CPs in becoming self-reliant.

○ **Effect of fostered ownership**

Case study of the Technical Cooperation Project in River Nile State, Sudan. The project was implemented remotely due to the sudden outbreak of a coup d'état, but as in the Syrian case above, there were no particular problems with remote communication with the local community because CP/NS training was well underway at that time. Through several meetings in Ethiopia, a third country, collaborative activities such as the development of manuals and guidelines were carried out. In an unusual space, the roles of CPs and NSs became clear, and this was an excellent opportunity for those who had been somewhat passive to become more aware and deepen their sense of ownership.

○ **A planned remote operation**

In the case of the training project in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, Pakistan, the Japanese experts' access to the field in the province was restricted due to serious security reasons. The project therefore needed to make the most of remote projects from its initiation and the M&E Officer, the eyes and ears of the Japanese experts, was the key element of the operation. The M&E Officer was assigned

the role of monitoring and reporting on the activities of the extension officers and was a good intermediary for the fieldwork and other remote work of the extension officers targeted for training. At the same time, however, the Japanese experts were only able to obtain information through the filter of the M&E Officer, which remained a challenge.

○ **Adaptation to the 'new normal' and tools for remote operation**

It seems necessary to adapt to a new operating paradigm as the combination of remote operation and on-site work has become commonplace. In this section, based on our experience of creativity and ingenuity in the unique environment of developing countries, we introduced the remote tools actually in use, such as social networking, online conferencing and video materials, and explored their usefulness and pointed out future directions. In this context, we also identified new challenges and targets, such as better communication skills, quick response, improved recordability and the level of quality required as a deliverable.

AAI has been refining its activities in developing countries based on the skills and knowledge accumulated from its fieldwork experience and the human networks that it has built in the field, but the prolonged remote operations of projects due to the Covid19 pandemic have taken us into a new dimension. The field has not disappeared, but we have to think about how we can replace what we have been doing in the field with remote based operations. In addition, we have no experience in setting up new projects or surveys through remote operations, and there are many issues to be addressed, such as how to use tools such as social networking, online meetings and video materials to deepen communication and build relationships with our new counterparts in the field. In the end, however, we can only look at this as a kind of accumulated experience and take a positive approach to the situation, despite our worries.

I am sure that you, the readers, are experiencing a lot of difficulties in your daily trials and practices with regard to remote operations of projects. We would be happy to hear your comments and opinions

The role of intermediary distributors in Balochistan Province, Pakistan <Part 2>

The role and merits and demerits of intermediary distributors

In the previous issue of this series, an overview of agricultural product distribution in Balochistan Province, Pakistan and the major intermediary distributors were introduced. In this issue, we explain conditions that could be difficult for farmers under agricultural product distribution in Balochistan and the role of intermediary distributors under these conditions.

One of the characteristics of Balochistan Province is its complex topography, poor market access, insufficient distribution facilities, limited number of public markets and market management organizations (AAINews No.114, 2021). Despite these conditions, one of the factors that has enabled Balochistan to remain a major fruit-producing province in Pakistan could be the role played by intermediary distributors. Since almost 70% of the farmers in Balochistan are small-scale farmers (Agriculture Census, 2010), it is difficult for them to obtain market information outside the province, to negotiate for prices, and to handle distribution to markets and consumers in other provinces. Therefore, many farmers are considered to rely on intermediary distributors to distribute their products to out-of-province markets. According to a 2021 study, approximately 70% of the fruit produced in Balochistan is distributed to areas outside the province by intermediary distributors (IFPRI, 2021).

As for the institutional aspect, the Balochistan Agricultural Produce Market Act, 1991, provides for fair sales transactions of agricultural products in order to protect farmers. However, this act does not provide adequate support for small-scale farmers in Balochistan, where public markets are few and transactions are often conducted outside of the province. There is also a Balochistan Marketing Information System, managed by Balochistan Province, which provides market information. But the system is written in English, which the majority of farmers cannot read, and is updated infrequently, thus it cannot be said to be a useful source of market information for farmers. Consequently, farmers tend to rely on the distributors and neighboring farmers for market information (ITC, 2020). The role of intermediary distributors is essential for farmers to fill in the gaps in distribution infrastructures and lack of market information.

Intermediary distributors are involved with farmers at the production stage as well as the distribution of products. Due to the complexity of the topography of Balochistan, farmers do not have adequate access to agricultural production materials such as pesticides and fertilizers. In addition, public agricultural extension services do not reach farmers sufficiently, so farmers are not able to make effective use of inputs. Therefore, farmers do not have enough choice and tend to rely on the pre-harvest contractors (PHC) for the input sources and farming techniques. Furthermore, due to the lack of banking services in Balochistan, farmers are forced to rely on the commission agents (CA) to finance the purchase of inputs.

As explained above, this shows the importance of the role of intermediary distributors in agriculture of Balochistan, such as the PHC and CA, who bridge the distribution gaps from production to price formation and sales to the markets outside the province. On the other hand, intermediary distributors seem to have the dominant position over farmers in commercial transactions. It is also pointed out that the agricultural advice provided by intermediary distributors tends to focus on economical benefits and is lacking in local resource management perspectives, which may have a negative impact on the sustainability of agricultural production. For instance, one of the longstanding issues in Balochistan is groundwater depletion, which is considered to be caused by market-demand-driven irrigation for agricultural production. Additionally, intermediary distributors intervene from production to distribution, resulting in little scope for marketing, reduction of production and distribution costs, and limited opportunities for self-help in agribusiness management.

There is no doubt as to the importance of the role played by intermediary distributors in Balochistan. The relationship between farmers and intermediary distributors is unlikely to change significantly under the conditions mentioned above. However, considering the medium- and long-term benefits for them, it is important to improve the quality of public agricultural extension services, to help farmers broaden their self-help efforts in agricultural management, and to provide farmers with the opportunity to learn various production technologies.