

## Learning to be a Farmer through Local Vitalization Support.

After I finished my four-year assignment in Ethiopia I started working as a local re-vitalization supporter in Mito City, Ibaraki prefecture in November 2020. My three years' work has also been a learning process. My goal is to acquire skills in fruit tree cultivation and to work in agriculture as my main livelihood. Establishing relationships and trust with local stakeholders resonated – it was very similar to the approach essential in my international cooperation activities.

In Mito City, there is a fruit tree production area which is not so large but close to the consumer residential district. I am a trainee at the Mito Orchard Association. Currently, 10 member farmers, mostly in their 80s, grow pears, grapes, and apples although there were 23 members in the past. Securing successors is an urgent task. At the beginning of my activity, I did my best to build relationships through supporting their agricultural work and talking with them about their experiences. At the same time, I prepared for life as an independent farmer by renting vacant farmland and planting fruit tree saplings. In addition, I took an internship at a blueberry picking garden outside of Mito city since I was interested in cultivating blueberries which are relatively easy to grow organically and to manage for beginners.



Blueberry farmer during my training

However, agricultural activities are proving more difficult than expected. Even though I had been involved in agriculture-related projects in international cooperation, my basic understanding of what it is to actually be a farmer was lacking. There are always things I don't know, such as how to handle bush cutters and pesticide sprayers, how to select seedlings and various materials, and where to buy them. By managing the farmland by myself, I learned that the vast majority of farming work consists of miscellaneous tasks such as weeding grass. In order to

minimize such tasks and make a profit, years of experience and investment in tools and machinery is necessary. Through my own activities, I have come to recognize the tenacity of farmers in African and Asian countries who make a living from agriculture in harsh conditions without machinery and infrastructure.

It has now been just over a year since I started, and some member farmers have begun to acknowledge my willingness and have allowed me to take over a part of their patches of blueberry, grape, and pear trees. Additionally, I have started greenhouse horticulture for grapes on some rented farmland. Even though I could succeed and rent the orchards and the farmland, it will take several years to allow the harvest of fruits and obtain any stable farm income. For new farmers from non-farming backgrounds or families, a large amount of initial investment for machinery and facilities is a tough hurdle as is acquiring the necessary agricultural techniques. In addition, environmental conditions tend to be harder and harder even in Mito City due to global warming in recent years. Open fields are often affected by pests and diseases. Measures such as rain protection facilities and introduction of new varieties which are weather/pest resistant are required to adapt to climate change.



Pruning of grape vines

I am doing my best to become an independent fruit farmer. At the same time, it is necessary to promote and sustain the area as a fruit production hub. For that purpose, a kind of system is expected to be prepared for accepting and training people who are interested in agriculture and fruit production. I would like to take steps forward to address challenging local issues in Japan by making use of what I learned in the field of international cooperation.

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