

AAI and I – KOTOU Akira <Part 1>

International Cooperation, AAI, and I

Nearly forty years have passed since I first became involved in AAI and in the field of international cooperation. Looking back on my relationship with AAI and the evolution of the work I have been involved in, provides an opportunity to reflect on how international cooperation has evolved over this period.

My first involvement in international cooperation was a joint research project on desert greening in the UAE, which began in 1985. However, I had met Mr. Onuma, the former president of AAI, even before that. At the time, I had left my previous company and was studying arid land agriculture at the Faculty of Agriculture, Shizuoka University. Professors Matsuda and Yokota, together with Mr. Onuma, are the mentors who greatly influenced the course of my life. I was introduced to Mr. Onuma by the professors with the words, “If you are aiming to work in arid regions, there is a senior colleague you should meet.” Mr. Onuma was then working at the Ministry of Agriculture in Dubai. Guided by him, I joined the desert greening project in the UAE. Without knowing what to expect, I stepped into the world of international cooperation.

For me, having long wished to work in arid land agriculture, the UAE project was truly like “a fish in water.” At the same time, however, it was my first experience living abroad, and I often found myself struggling to find my bearings. Looking back, the field experience in the UAE itself, together with the senior colleagues, co-workers, and counterparts (C/Ps) I worked with, were my best teachers, and each experience on site was invaluable. After returning from the UAE, I worked for Sanyu Consultants for about four years from 1989. During that time, I participated in development studies in countries such as Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Zimbabwe, where I learned the fundamentals of development consulting. In 1992, I joined AAI as its third staff members.

From the 1970s through the 1990s, development studies were actively conducted as a central component of JICA’s international cooperation, typically leading to grant aid

and yen loan projects. Within this framework, AAI was engaged in such studies as a consultant, while also dispatching its staff as long-term experts to projects, effectively playing a “dual role” in international cooperation.

Since fiscal year 2004, project-type technical cooperation has been carried out both through JICA’s direct management (“direct implementation”) and through outsourced arrangements contracted to private companies via competitive bidding. The latter, commonly referred to as “Project for Promoting Private Sector Technologies” has gradually increased its share over time and has become the main form of technical cooperation. These projects aim to develop human resources and achieve project outcomes through collaboration with C/Ps. As long-term experts, we have routinely engaged in such collaboration and capacity building efforts, and I believe that this experience has been effectively applied in the implementation of these technical cooperation projects.

In Syria, I also had the opportunity to experience both roles, as a long-term expert and as a member of a technical cooperation project, in the field of water-saving irrigation. As a long-term expert, one lives in the country for an extended period, during which you are often invited to C/Ps’ homes. These interactions frequently extend beyond work, fostering a deeper mutual understanding. In contrast, technical cooperation projects generally involve more limited, work-focused interactions. For me, having experienced both roles in the same field in Syria proved particularly valuable. The relationships and trust I developed with C/Ps as a long-term expert greatly benefited my subsequent project work.

Once formed, such bonds tend to endure. When I reunited with a former C/Ps from Syria in Lebanon in 2019, it felt as if I were meeting friends I had only parted from the day before. For me, my experience in Syria remains **In the desert of the UAE** one of the most memorable chapters of my life, alongside my very first project in the UAE.

