AAI and I – KOTOU Akira <Part 2>

My Personal Reflection on AAI

Looking back, I believe AAI is quite a unique organization. It was founded by a group of people who simply wanted to do something interesting in the drylands. That pioneering spirit led us to pursue initiatives beyond the conventional JICA/ODA framework, resulting in the establishment of the “Muscat Fund” and the launch of “AAI News” as a platform for sharing ideas and exchanging information.

AAI News was first published in 1995. It has recorded the issues of the time, along with our thoughts and reflections. In 2014, the articles were compiled into a book to commemorate the company's 30th anniversary. The volume is filled with articles that reflect the spirit, philosophy, and values of AAI. The significance of AAI News lay not only in disseminating information, but also in the editorial process itself, which provided valuable opportunities to discuss and share the ideas and values that shaped AAI.

The Muscat Fund was established in 1997 to support small-scale, grassroots initiatives that addressed local needs and promoted sustainable development. One of its most memorable projects was a collaboration with the local NGO ZWP (Zvishavane Water Project) in Zimbabwe. As for how it all began, Mr. Ozeki of the Africa Japan Forum (at the time) introduced us to PELUM, an umbrella organization of NGOs. Through that connection, we eventually found our way to ZWP. However, ZWP's project site was located far from the capital, Harare, and this was before e-mail was widely available. We first made contact by letter, and our relationship began when they replied. I still vividly remember my first visit to their office, changing shared buses on the way to our initial face-to-face meeting. In retrospect, our partnership with ZWP began with a chance encounter and a journey, and I cannot help feeling that there was something almost destined about it. Cherishing such connections, I believe, is one of the most important aspects of international cooperation.

In my view, AAI was an organization ahead of its time—unique in its character and unlike any other. Creating and sustaining such an organization required continuous efforts and ingenuity to foster a shared mission and sense of purpose.

As an organization, AAI aspired to be a flat, network-based group rather than a hierarchical structure. We valued networks not only within the company but also beyond it, maintaining close ties with people from other consulting firms, universities, NGOs, and NPOs, as well as close associates who were almost like members of the company. When we relocated our office from Yokohama to Machida in 1995, we chose a location that was easily accessible to visitors from outside the company. Our year-end parties were also distinctive, with invited guests from outside the company sometimes outnumbering our own staff.

We also placed great importance on sharing knowledge and experiences within the company through returnee seminars, study sessions, and seasonal events such as cherry blossom viewing and summer fireworks. Informal gatherings after work at the office also played an important role. Through these various occasions, we cultivated and shared a common mission and sense of purpose.

I learned many things at AAI, but if I were to highlight just three key lessons, they would be the following:

1. Avoid leaving decisions pending whenever possible.
2. Always meet deadlines—and aim to complete tasks about one week ahead of schedule.
3. Thorough preparation is the key to success.



AAI office - more like a university research lab than a conventional company office