

AAINews

APPROPRIATE AGRICULTURE INTERNATIONAL
CO., LTD

1-2-3-403 Haramachida, Machida, Tokyo, 194-0013 JAPAN.
TEL/FAX: 042-725-6250 Email: aai@sk9.so-net.ne.jp

Incentives and Sustainability: a reflection in Syria

While training agricultural extension workers in Syria, I discovered that here it is a common practice to give some daily allowance to the participants in training courses as an "incentive". They explain the logic behind this practice that by offering money more people could be expected to attend and therefore the training would be more effective. However, it can also be said that by giving such incentives they are actually mobilizing participants. With such a low salary level for civil servants, it can be understood why this sort of incentive scheme works pretty well in Syria, but it seems that the practice of offering incentives is contributing to reducing the training to a meaningless formality. After all, trainees are expected to come mainly because of the offered allowance, and the course contents may merely be a secondary consideration for them. These days the concept of "participatory or community-based development" is gaining popularity, and sometimes similar problems to the incentive scheme are seen in the practice of such development activities. In order for participatory / community-based development to be successful, it is necessary to ensure the participation of the local community. However, in reality there are some cases where local communities are motivated and mobilized by financial incentives, rather than participating on a voluntary basis.

When seen positively, incentives may be taken as a necessary tool for achieving some results within a limited time period, and in many cases they are given to the participants to compensate for their labor and time, making the exercise a form of "employment". However, we should consider not only the short-term effect but also some long-term impacts of such incentives. Isn't it only for the project executor's convenience to use the rationale that incentives are necessary to achieve some results within a limited time period? While the project is on going there must be a certain budget attached to it, and thus it can keep providing financial incentives for local people. However, isn't there the possibility of establishing a no money/no participation relationship by the end of the project term? If that were to be the case, incentives for some visible short-term results may be counter-effective for the long-term sustainability of the project. It is understandable that it is necessary for the donor to be able to "assess" the result of each and every project achieved within a limited time period, as it is the donor who invests the manpower, funds and equipment for the project. However, it is highly questionable whether the sustainability of a project can be sacrificed for the sake of the project executor's "achievement".

Apart from the impact on the project's sustainability, there is another form of damage that so-called incentives can cause. Let me explain this by referring to one project focusing on tree plantation in Syria. The country is promoting tree plantation in order to increase the acreage of forested land (currently about 3% of the total territory), and for the plantation work local people are employed as labourers to perform participatory plantation activities. This also creates employment. This may appear ideal at first sight, but a problem has emerged in connection with this plantation work, namely forest fires. The fires can start due to somebody's carelessness, for example a person failing to put out a cigarette, but there seem to be some deliberate cases of arson. At the end of the plantation operation people lose their jobs, but if a fire then finishes the forest off, it leads to new employment. This makes the entire plantation activity meaningless.

What, then, can be done about such a situation? Finding a panacea may be rather difficult, but it would be an important factor for changing the situation to try to improve the contents of participatory projects of training courses and make them fit the needs of local communities and trainees. Besides, it is necessary on the project executors' part to work with a long-term perspective rather than just towards a short-term outcome.
(By KOTO in Syria, April 2000.)



Interview with local farmers



Lecture at a training center



Training course on drip irrigation system