

### **Part 5: Improvement of agricultural extension staff training in Syria**

As mentioned in the last issue, between 1994-1997 and 1995-1997 JICA experts on agricultural extension (crop cultivation and livelihood improvement) were sent on long-term missions to the Syrian Directorate of Agricultural Extension of the Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform. During this work it was felt necessary to increase the quality of the extension workers, and it was proposed to provide technical support to the extension staff training center which worked with the Training Directorate. Consequently an expert was sent to the Training Directorate for two years from 1999. His main task was to improve the training for agricultural extension staff at the training center. Specific instructions were given for review and improvement of curricula and training materials, as well as for training of trainers of extension staff.

As a result of reviewing the existing training courses, some problems were pointed out, which were also mentioned earlier in this report (Part 3). Based on the analysis of the current problems, the following suggestions were made in order to improve and make the contents of the training course more effective.

- 1) Training according to the different levels of trainees: The training course should have different contents and levels according to the ability and amount of experience of individual trainees. Also, in order to deal with varied and specific needs from the farmers' side, high-level extension staff, such as SMSs (Subject Matter Specialists), should be trained with specialized knowledge and techniques.
- 2) Organic linkage of training between the center and local areas. The role of, and linkage between, different trainings at the center (national level) and the local (prefectural / provincial level) should be clarified. For example, the TOT (Training of Trainers) can be conducted to foster high-level extension staff, who could engage themselves in training ordinary-level extension staff at the local and provincial level.
- 3) Dissemination of new research findings and information: One of the roles of agricultural extension is to disseminate new research findings at research institutions to farmers, so that they can improve the current farming techniques. To do this, the Agricultural Extension and Training Bureaus need to constantly liaise with other related organizations and maintain a smooth flow of new information. This should be reflected in their training courses as well.

Based on these suggestions some new training courses were drawn up and conducted in an effort to make them more practical and meaningful. As computers have started to be used more and more widely in Syria, there was strong demand for computer training related to agricultural extension activities. Therefore, a new training course was carried out with the counterparts, focusing on using statistical data, making promotional pamphlets and creating simple databases etc. Moreover, for a country with a vast portion of semi-arid land, sustainable agricultural development, which considers environmental conservation, is a very important theme. Therefore, a training course on environmental conservation was also conducted. Also as the first stage of the SMS training course, a new course was established with support from short-term experts focusing on cultivation of fruit trees, one of the most important agricultural products of the country.

Though the two-year mission was very short, what we tried to stress to the counterparts and training participants throughout the planning and implementation of new training courses was the importance and joy of thinking with their own heads and hands. One of the immediate future tasks may be to consider introducing some evaluation system and certification system, because at the moment the quantity (e.g. the numbers of training session conducted, of number of days they lasted and the number of participants) rather than quality (specific achievements) is more appreciated. Also, in order to encourage the staff's active participation and to increase the effect of training, it is important to create some sort of incentive. For this purpose, for instance the salary scheme may be reviewed to allow pay rises for those who received certain certificates after training. It is also necessary to assess the very needs of such training, which is linked to the basis of the training planning, asking why certain training is necessary. Therefore, workshops or training courses are also needed on conducting such needs assessment / surveys with the PRA method.



Using computer for agricultural extension activities



SMS training course by a fruit tree cultivation expert



Making a map for a better understanding of the region