

AAINews

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Agroforestry in Malawi

The middle basin of the Shire River in Malawi, to the north of the country's largest city Blantyre, is experiencing deforestation, soil erosion of farmlands and decreasing agricultural productivity. This is due to the increasing demand for firewood and the growing acreage of land under cultivation to meet the needs of the dense urban population. This area is also suffering from unquestionable degradation of natural resources such as groundwater, which drives the local people, whose livelihood is already fragile to start with, to further impoverishment.

In this context, agroforestry is drawing attention and raising expectations in this region. Agroforestry is expected to directly lead to increased food production, income generation through production, processing and sales of forestry products, resources management, along with firewood supply. It is also expected that agroforestry practice would improve the soil condition, recover the natural function of soil and water conservation, while revitalizing the local economy. The Government of Japan has already conducted a survey for the forest rehabilitation plan in the middle Shire basin, and drawn up a community-based natural resources management plan. It was decided that a pilot project was necessary in order to fully carry out this management plan, and in October 2002 a preparatory survey was conducted for the pilot project, in which I myself was given the chance to participate.

During this survey it was learned that research institutions around the middle Shire basin have been actively working on agroforestry. At a pilot farm run by the Ministry of Agriculture, experiments are being conducted for the introduction of non-plowing crop production technology. The International Center for Research in Agro-Forestry (ICRAF) has established practical cultivation methods by using several kinds of leguminous shrubs. These methods are already ready for putting into practice by ordinary farmers, and NGOs such as Oxfam and USAID, as well as the EU are helping in disseminating these methods in the local communities. In reality, however, such agroforestry technologies have not yet been effectively introduced and are not being practiced by local farmers.

Therefore, during this preparatory survey we are proposing a new means of agricultural technology dissemination by way of local revitalization using imaginary characters. When we were discussing the possibility of a nickname for this project, a staff member of the local Forestry Department, who was acting as a guide for our survey team, suggested "Mishirere". This comes from "Middle Shire Rehabilitation", and sounding like the name of Tanzania's famous president Nyerere, it can very well serve as a human name as well. So we have decided to create the imaginary character of "Uncle Mishirere" as a symbolic and diligent local farmer, to act as a mascot figure for our campaign of local revitalization. Uncle Mishirere would deliver and distribute crop seeds, give instructions on seedling plot construction at schools and train local ladies about food processing methods. When the community manages to establish some local speciality products, Uncle would help market the products as Mishirere brands (e.g. Mishirere Honey, Mishirere Fruit Juice). We are hoping that, with the help of this character, the sense of participation and ownership among the local people will increase and the community's collective efforts will be formed towards the same direction of local revitalization. We also hope that this campaign will help publicize and gain social recognition for the community's activities and successes more widely, too. Best wishes for the important missions of Uncle Mishirere in the middle Shire!

(By Onuma, on the bank of the Shire River)



Natural forest in the suburb of Blantyre



Discussion with local people



Agroforestry by mixed planting

Grassroots Collaboration, AAI's approach

Part 4: Social interactions with community-based organizations in Oman

AAI has formed a very strong relationship with Oman through its development activities thus far. Also currently AAI is conducting a development study on the restoration and conservation of mangrove forests there, and a long-term expert from AAI is working in the country. With its fossil energy resources, Oman is a relatively rich nation. In addition, the Government of Oman has been making great efforts to improve the livelihood and welfare of its people, by creating employment opportunities through the "Omanization policy" (a policy to give priority to the employment and technological empowerment of Omani nationals instead of employing the foreign workers who used to dominate the country's labor market) and by providing free education and medical services.

The Dhofar Governorate in the south of Oman, where many of our activities have taken place so far, has a unique natural environment. The mountainous area of this region is covered with rich vegetation thanks to the monsoon coming from the Indian Ocean. This enables this area to support a stockbreeding industry based on the available natural resources and to attract tourists from neighboring Gulf States. However, in recent years the natural vegetation here has been rapidly depleted mainly due to excessive grazing (see AAINews Vol.2, 13-18). The Omani Authority is gravely concerned about this problem, and it is planning some countermeasures such as control of livestock numbers by providing financial support and plantation activities by relevant government agencies. However, less activity involving the local community is being planned or considered. In addition, in the past there have already been some government-led projects for vegetation rehabilitation, but no noteworthy outcome has been achieved.

In this context, since last year AAI has been conducting activities for social interaction with, and information gathering from, local people, in order to facilitate the project of environmental rehabilitation and vegetation recovery in the mountain area in a way that is linked with the livelihood of the local community. As stated above, Oman as a whole has a reasonable level of life and welfare, but at the local level there are people with financial difficulties that prevent them from being socially independent. One example of such people is divorced women. The Dhofar Department of Agriculture and Fisheries is supporting honey production activities in the mountain area as part of the empowerment scheme for such ladies. *Zizyphus spina-christi* (Christ thorn, local name Sidr) which is found in this area produces high-quality honey. AAI collected information on beekeeping techniques in Japan as well as traditional techniques in Oman to introduce to the local women's groups.

Another AAI activity in this area is to help the facilitation of forest regeneration in collaboration with local organizations for physically challenged people. Plantation activities, including transplantation of seedlings, are introduced as part of the rehabilitation activities for handicapped people. Through such active interaction with the local people, this project aims to promote plantation and forest recovery activities with local participation. Dhofar Department of Agriculture and Fisheries is also trying to start up the "small-scale greening project" as part of their vegetation recovery scheme. This project is to encourage each person in the local community to plant trees in a small plot (20mx20m). These are then dispersed widely in the mountain area. AAI has become the first organization to provide financial support for this project.

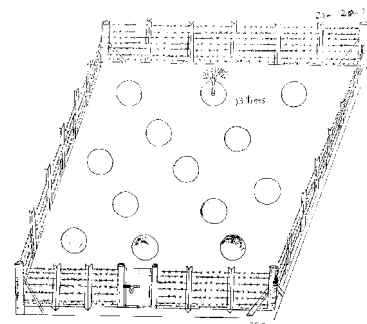
This type of interaction between AAI and the local people in Oman has just started, and due to time constraints not enough interaction has been achieved yet. However, we believe that it is important to keep trying and continue the interaction in order to understand the local people and their needs better and eventually to contribute to solving the problem of environmental conservation and vegetation rehabilitation in this area. There is a rich tradition of strong communal sense and mutual support among the people in Oman. Drawing upon such culture, we are trying to promote regional environmental conservation through collaboration with the local community in various aspects, by linking children's education, rehabilitation of the handicapped and women's empowerment with plantation and other environmental activities.



Facility for the physically challenged in Salalah



Mountain landscape in the dry season



Blueprint of the small-scale greening project

Re-examination of Development Study

Part 4: What a rural agricultural development survey should offer

In recent years more and more aid requests in the field of rural agricultural development tend to be oriented towards ‘soft’ matters, such as poverty alleviation in rural areas focusing on small-scale farmers, the establishment of marketing systems for agricultural products, and the strengthening of local farmers’ organizations. It has already been discussed at the beginning of this series that in order to meet such types of aid requests it is crucial to draw up highly considerate plans which take into account local community participation, sustainable development, local resource circulation and environmental conservation etc.

Often, participatory methods such as PRA (Participatory Rural Appraisal) and PCM (Project Cycle Management) are employed in the scheme of development study for understanding the needs and intention of the targeted local community within a limited time period. In reality, however, in many cases workshops and other activities are merely performed within the same time period. Then such studies assume nothing but a top-down approach under the name of ‘participatory method’, and the projects may not be sustainable and the sense of ownership may not be nurtured within the local community. In order to explore the real local needs and to dig more deeply into various issues discussed openly at workshops etc., it is essential to have opportunities to communicate face to face with local people and exchange honest views, preferably in a casual setting, at times even over a few glasses of drinks. Moreover, it is also very important to have lively sessions to exchange opinions among survey team members. The followings are cases in which we have tried to carry out a survey and planning without being entrapped by the restricted framework of the development study paradigms.

One of the cases of rural & agricultural development study that AAI has been involved in, is the “small-scale agricultural and rural development program along the Mekong River”, which has already been featured in AAI News Vol.29. In this case we tried to obtain as honest and straightforward opinions as possible from the targeted local people through not only PCM workshops but also through casual and frequent daily interactions, for instance over meals. In addition we staged a musical puppet show, which served to explain to a wider range of beneficiary farmers what the PDM was all about. In Brazil we took part in a survey aiming at development of the stock breeding industry in the northern part of Tocantins Province. Here also we visited many of the existing farmers’ organizations in order to get more opinions and views directly from the field rather than just relying on those obtained through PCM workshops. We also tried to facilitate exchange of opinions among experts of different disciplines/specialties such as stockbreeding, plant cultivation, marketing and environmental issues, to discuss the future course of the development project in a holistic manner.

In order to learn the real needs of the targeted local community and draw up appropriate development plans, some flexibilities should be allowed not only with regard to the means of the survey but also regarding the specialized fields of the survey team members and the time they spend in the field. Depending on the nature of the project, in some cases it may be necessary to introduce a totally unconventional means of local participation, or to have the survey team live in the targeted community for an extended period of time. In that way the chances of getting the direct views of local people will increase and their real needs will be understood more clearly. Also at times it may be necessary to cut short the number of the survey team members. By reducing the number of experts going to the same field and instead allowing fewer members to stay longer, it is expected to be possible to conduct a more down-to-earth and intimate survey. Moreover, while so far we have tended to select ‘experts’ to be included in a survey team on the basis of different technical disciplines, involvement of ‘area’ experts and collaboration between social science and natural science experts may need to be considered. In order to realize flexible surveys according to different local conditions, more flexible budget allocation/management will also be necessary. With the ‘softening’ of aid requests, more flexible management and execution of the development survey approach seem to be in greater demand today.



Puppet show as part of the survey in Laos



Visiting a farmers’ organization in Brazil

Mini-Series: Work and life in farms - Various movements in Japan

Part 1: Return to farming and Joy in farming - The younger generation in farming

The pendulum of our lifestyle, which has over-swung to the unnatural, too urban direction due to the rapid economic growth and the resulting “Bubble Economy” seems to be swinging back today at an accelerating speed. Such a trend is visible in agriculture and it looks as if this movement is a result of the human instinct to avoid or alleviate danger or dangerous circumstances. Today the primary industries of agriculture, forestry and fisheries are gradually regaining their past recognition. This new mini-series of essays will discuss some of these movements. In a way Japan climbed up to the top of a cliff only to fall off it, and it does not know how it should move on in the future. The dilemma of today’s Japan may offer an important lesson for developing countries not to walk on the same “descending” path.

Nowadays it is not difficult to find young people who have grown suspicious about the future course of Japanese society which is heavily dependent on the secondary and tertiary industries based on the monetary system. These people then move out of cities and try to start farming. They abandon the practice of earning money through labor in the complex web of human/social relationships, but instead try to engage themselves in agricultural labor to produce their own food. In many rural areas of the country today there are young people farming energetically and happily. One of them is Mr. Masaki Miyata, a 36-year-old farmer living in Kashiwa Village, Yamaguchi Prefecture. Nine years since he started farming in this little village of six house holds, today he is an established farmer with terraced fields of about 1 acre at 300m above sea level. He grows organic rice with no chemical pesticides or fertilizer, self-supplies vegetables, and keeps 450 free-range chickens to produce his naturally fertilized eggs for marketing. At the beginning of his farming career he faced many challenges; he could not cultivate rice in the way he wanted, his chicks were attacked by mice, and he had to work hard to establish and explore marketing routes for rice and broiler eggs. Even today he has to fight the wild boars coming to damage his paddy fields, worry about the water supply in summer to the terraced fields which depends on stream water, and wonder what to do about the surrounding hills deteriorating due to lack of proper management. Despite all these problems, his farm is wonderful. It is located at the far end of the village, few people pass in front of his farm, there is absolutely no artificial noise around, and the view of early morning clouds forming up is truly fascinating. His life style consists of living in a thatched old farm house, preparing hot baths with fire wood, getting water from the well and harvesting food from the surrounding hills. It is, in the real sense, a rich life with only a minimum amount of money required. He said, “I am very happy that I’ve moved here. I’d like those who come here to feel that this place is home, too.”

In Karasuyama town, Tochigi Prefecture, there is “Kinou-shijuku”, a school for young would-be-farmers to study agriculture together. It was established by Mr. Tadashi Tomatsu in 1982 for the purpose of fostering the future of Japanese agriculture. Presently headed by Mr Tomatsu’s elder son, Mitsuo, (31 years old), the school has so far sent out over 70 graduates who now practice farming in various parts of the country. The school has 8ha of farmland on which some 80 varieties of vegetables are grown organically and some 600 chickens are kept free range. The products from the farm are sold directly to 150 contracted households as well as to retailers including supermarkets. The school is full board with no tuition fees. Training lasts basically two years and it is expected and encouraged that students learn from each other. At the moment a total of ten students, both male and female, all in their early twenties, are studying here. On the farm they learn cultivation techniques through actual crop production, and off the farm they learn how to make business with the outside society through such tasks as products delivery, collection of money, publicizing their products and finding new customers. Youngsters who wish to live in harmony with soil and nature come to this school, work with other students and learn from each other, then complete the training and start farming on their own. Being relatively young, the students have various worries and sense many difficulties, but they are very energetic and all say smilingly that they enjoy learning at this school. I was very impressed by their straight and lively eyes and confident, happy expressions and words, which are absent from those of the same generation and age group living in urban environments.

Music (on-gaku: joy of sound) is the art of expressing ideas and emotions with sounds. Then maybe we can coin a new word, nou-gaku (joy of farming), the art of expressing oneself through farming. We cannot detach ourselves completely from money as long as we live in the framework of a monetary system. But apparently for those pursuing agriculture money doesn’t come as a priority, and what is most important for them in life is to enjoy farming surrounded by nature, just in the same way that people enjoy music.



Free-range chickens for production of naturally fertilized eggs



Terraced paddy fields of Mr Miyata



Planting of vegetable seedlings by Kinou-shijuku students