Part 5   Our Activities in Laos

As introduced in AAI News Vol. 22 and 29, we conducted a feasibility study on agricultural and rural development for the area along the Mekong River from 1997 to 2000.   This was the start of the AAI's involvement in Laos. After the feasibility study, some AAI staff members visited Laos as part of a technology exchange project and some close associates of the AAI participated in the agricultural development projects of the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) and some NGOs.   In addition, project type technical cooperation on aquaculture nurtured by staff members of the sister company FAI (Fisheries and Aquaculture International Co., Ltd.) started in Laos.   As it is, Laos is rapidly becoming a very close country to the AAI.   Compared with countries such as Zimbabwe where the AAI started its grassroots activities, Laos is much more easily accessible from Japan.   We visited Laos from May 2002 in order to find suitable grassroots activities for the AAI.   We thought through what kinds of contributions the AAI could make for the agricultural and rural development of the country.

The following four areas were identified as possible fields of intervention.

1)   Contributing to building a system of government extension services for the residents of the villages that were selected in our feasibility study,
2)   Contributing to the development of small and medium size enterprises which process excess produce and products that do not last long in order to assist farmers to increase their income,
3)   Contributing to local development, and thereby to environmental education, through technical assistance in the areas of organic farming, natural dye manufacture, tea production and food processing at the existing model organic farm, and
4)   Contributing to the promotion of environmentally friendly agricultural practices that integrate agriculture, forestry and fisheries by purchasing a plot in Laos to demonstrate organic farming involving local farmers.

The organic farm mentioned in number 3 is located in the suburb of the popular tourist town of Vangvieng that lies about 150 km north of Vientiane.   In recent years this area has been building a reputation as a scenic resort with its limestone karst mountains.   There are many outdoor activities such as kayaking, fishing, trekking and camping and many young backpackers from Europe visit the area.   No large-scale hotels have been built and many accommodations are guesthouses with a small number of rooms and bungalows.   The organic farm grows mulberries, vegetables and fruits, and produces and sells value added products such as silk, mulberry tea, jam and fruit wines.   There is also a health food restaurant that uses organic vegetables and chicken.   Accommodation there is not for tourists in search of organic produce, but for people who would like to work on the farm in exchange for food and lodging.   This system is called WWOF (Willing Workers on Organic Farms).

Last November, an AAI associate who is knowledgeable about textile designing, visited the farm to share her textile designing and plant dye techniques.   In the future we are planning to send people who can provide skills in organic cultivation, tea processing and food processing.   In this case, we do not plan to "teach" Japanese skills.   Rather, we would like to try to extract good potential by finding out what the local residents are thinking through understanding the local skills.   We believe only in this way we can identify the real needs of the people.   For this kind of work it is highly important to spend enough time; i.e. the AAI staff members who will be sent to the region need to interact with people with a common vision over a long period.   We firmly believe through this type of activity local residents can eventually take full ownership of the project.   The AAI is determined to pursue activities truly beneficial to the local residents with a clear vision for agricultural development in Laos.

Mulberry tea production   **Organic mulberry field**   **Organic lunch**