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Recollecting Syria in Uzbekistan – The Importance of Regional Co-operation

I had a chance to travel to Uzbekistan in central Asia. My visit had two purposes; to attend the FAO organized workshop and to conduct a survey on the country's agricultural situation. The workshop was held in the capital, Tashkent, and lasted for 5 days from July 7 to 11. The workshop proceedings were focused on a presentation about the on-going FAO project and its achievements so far, presentations by participating countries on their country reports, and field trips and group work to develop recommendations for the project. The second week of my trip was used to collect information from related organizations in order to investigate potential areas of future agricultural co-operation.

To sum up the characteristics and problems of agriculture in Uzbekistan, the main crops are cotton and wheat grown under irrigation and the country is facing problems such as soil salinization and deterioration of irrigation facilities. Ninety five percent of farming land is irrigated and there would be no agriculture without irrigation in Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan's climate is arid with scarce rainfall and people are dependent on water resources from the Amu Dar'ya and Syr Dar'ya Rivers. During the time of Soviet administration, irrigation canals were established and they remain in use today despite being beset by many problems.

Given this situation, some of the most urgent issues are implementation of anti-salinization measures, rehabilitation of old irrigation systems and mobilizing of financial resources from donor countries for these critical activities. At the same time, the wish list includes the introduction of advanced technologies and provision of equipment. However, obviously financial assistance and introduction of latest equipment alone cannot solve all the problems. These "hard" forms of assistance need to be accompanied by "soft" elements such as human resources development and the introduction/transfer of skills. There are many ways of utilizing Japan's past experience in this soft type co-operation. One example is training in cultivation techniques for vegetables, fruits and rice. Another example is the formation and running of water users association to maintain/manage irrigation facilities. In addition Japan could transfer its know-how in the field of farmer support organizations such as agricultural co-operatives and agricultural extension centers.

What I felt strongly this time was the importance and effectiveness of "regional cooperation", i.e. regional exchange between experts and C/P. There are many things in common between Uzbekistan and Syria. To take some examples, both countries have very hot dry summers, produce a large amount of fruits and vegetables, hold vast wheat and cotton fields, are negatively affected by the former Soviet planned economy, and both have a strong "top-down" system. It is extremely useful to exchange knowledge and experiences between the two countries. It may be possible to transfer experience and technologies of Syria to Uzbekistan and other central Asian countries, and vice versa. There are also many similarities between Uzbekistan and neighbouring nations such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, Egypt and Iran. Regional exchange and technology transfer between these countries will be highly beneficial in terms of problem solving and human resource development.

For millennia, since the time of the silk road, Uzbekistan has been the route of many travelers. The country has also historical relationships with Syria, having sent technicians and labourers for the construction of irrigation systems in Syria while the country was receiving support from Moscow. Exchange between experts in various fields would lead to improvement of existing technologies and would yield new ideas. This will in turn lead to more meaningful technical co-operation.

(By Koto in Uzbekistan, 2003 November)



Watermelons at a bazaar



An experimental plot at a rice research center