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Nomadic pastoral system in Mongolia - supporting a shifting livelihood system

Since April 2003, I have made several visits to the Gobi Desert in Mongolia as a member of a development study team. Our works are to review and to investigate diverse ways to improve and support the stock raising system of the area, which is currently at the mercy of social reform and natural disasters. For me it has been a good opportunity to come into contact with another pastoralists, this time in Eurasia, after my encounters with the Baqqara tribe in Syria.

In Mongolia, the socialist planned economic system collapsed in the 1990s. This led to the break up of collective farms called "Negdel" and as a result private ownership of livestock became possible. Under the new market economy system, the number of livestock showed a drastic increase, and the number of stock raising households also increased in accordance with the growth in unemployment. On the other hand, many water supply facilities, such as wells, which had earlier been maintained and managed under the negdel system, became deserted and deteriorated during the period of social confusion. Moreover, the generous support given to livestock keepers during the socialist era was no more, and their lives are going through a period of drastic change.

Apart from the changes caused by the shift in social and economic systems, a variety of "movements" can be felt in Mongolia in general. The rainfall level changes greatly between years, and therefore the growth rate of grasses changes accordingly. Also, unlike settled farming, nomadic stock raising (which is the common style of stock raising in Mongolia) is based on constant movement and does not involve any crop cultivation and does not need fixed residences. In other parts of the world, such nomadic pastoral system "based on shifting livelihood" has gradually been losing its traditional style under the settlement policy of modern nations. While it may also be true that the unique natural conditions have necessitated it, it is surprising that the traditional style of nomadic pastoral system has survived to date in Mongolia even though with some changes under the influence of Soviet socialism.

In addition to the scarce and unstable rainfalls typical of arid land, Mongolia has another difficult climatic condition for stock raising; the severe coldness in winter. Such climatic conditions lead to the low productivity and instability of plant growth. In a place like the Gobi Desert, therefore, sustainable and stable cultivation is a very difficult dream to realize if not completely impossible. Pastoralists have learned to skillfully overcome the low productivity and instability of the pasturage by moving with their livestock. In the Gobi Desert, it seems crucially important to keep moving around in order to utilize the limited pasture resources, which are unevenly distributed under varied seasonal and regional conditions. Or in other words, owing to the fact that the pastoralists became nomadic, the limited grazing resources of the desert have been conserved. Here people's faces look very much like ours, but the agricultural techniques and planning methods of Japan are not readily applicable to the mobile livelihood system. Among them I contemplate the future of the nomadic pastoral system of Mongolia, in the midst of a transition to the market economy.

(By Koga in Saynshand, Dornogovi, Mongolia, 2003 November)



Bactrian camels of the Gobi



Spring camp with last patches of snow



Herd of Asiatic wild asses on the run

"Human Resource Development"- Our Challenges in Training Activities

Part 3: Multiplying the training effects through follow-up activities

For the past four years AAI, commissioned by the JICA Tsukuba International Centre, has been undertaking training courses on vegetable cultivation for Tajikistan and southern African countries. Other than crop cultivation, trainings on farm machineries, irrigation and drainage etc. are conducted at this Centre for a number of trainees who wish to contribute to the development of the agricultural sector in their respective countries. The goal of such training is for the trainees to be able to make use of the techniques they learn in Japan and apply them to improve the livelihood of the farmers in their own countries, and in the long run to make a positive contribution to the agricultural development of the country or the region they come from.

The country focused vegetable cultivation course for Tajikistan, carried out over several years by AAI, has been completed last year. Then, in order to evaluate the activities of the ex-trainees and identify the future training needs, a follow-up survey was conducted and our staff also participated in the survey to Tajikistan as a member of the team. Most of the ex-trainees had been chosen from different sub-sectors/occupations. They were researchers, extension workers and farmers, and they were making good use of knowledge and techniques gained from the training course in Japan. For instance, by applying the techniques learned during the training in potato production, they reduced the amount of potato tuber used from 5 tons/ha to 3 tons/ha, they were removing sprouts, making pot seedlings, and creating fodder from the hay which they used to throw away. Also they were using materials and videotapes obtained in Japan to teach techniques such as grafting to the local people, and such efforts of them were rather admirable. On the other hand, however, we found various problems as well. For example equipment brought back from Japan is not being used properly. Or, because it is difficult for them to obtain appropriate equipment locally, they were being unable to practice the techniques they had learned in Japan. Also, they are not able to produce good translations and therefore they were not being able to make full use of the training hand-outs which are mostly written in English. Moreover, the problems we witnessed were not only in the vegetable cultivation sub-sector but also in fruit production and extension activities.

There is no doubt that the importance of training as part of capacity development activities in the field of international co-operation will increase from now on. Also it is very meaningful to promote good understanding about Japan among the people from many countries through the training activities to make friends for Japan. With this background it is important to continue technical assistance by providing training courses taking into account a good consideration of each country's needs and conditions. Moreover, since the trainees are selected as representatives of their respective countries, it is important to let them realize and bear in mind that they are the main actors in the agricultural development of their own countries.

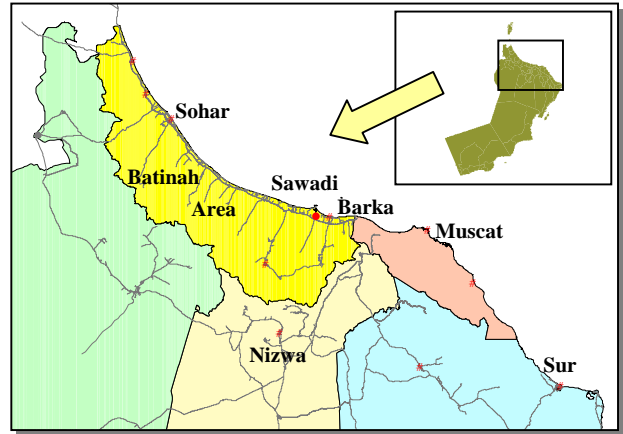
Ex-trainees are making good efforts to contribute to the agricultural development of their home region while struggling with various problems and challenges. Through the follow-up survey of this time, we strongly felt the need to provide a certain form of after care to deal with their problems. There may be a need to establish a follow-up support system which is linked with the actual training conducted in Japan, in order to maximize the effect of the training courses back in their respective countries. For instance, as a scheme to encourage trainees, a support system for the implementation of good action plans may be an idea. Also probably it should be possible to link the follow-up support activities with the grassroots technical assistance. If feedback can be obtained from the ex-trainees regarding their problems and challenges after their return and their views can be incorporated into the next training tasks, it will be a valuable input to improve the training courses to provide better information and techniques for the next set of trainees. AAI now considers follow-up support for talented trainees as part of our own grassroots co-operation activities. For that purpose we are trying to keep feeding the ex-trainees with information, exchange opinions and provide technical support upon request from them. We believe that, through such thorough follow-up activities, the effects of the training courses in Japan can be maximized.



Lessons Learned from Mangrove Ecosystems

Part 3: Expert mission to Oman

Since April 2000, AAI's expert has been working with the Ministry of Regional Municipalities, Environment and Water Resources of Oman to support mangrove plantation activities for the restoration of coastal vegetation. Prior to the involvement of our expert, the Ministry had once tried to plant mangroves (*Avicennia marina*) in the region of Barka along the Al Batinah coast in 1997, but this project failed due to a storm combined with a high tide, which washed away the planted mangroves before their roots became established. At the same time, in the country's conservation and development planning there had not been any specific scope of activities for mangrove plantation. Therefore, the first work that our expert conducted was to visit the main mangrove forests and creeks to understand the current status of the mangroves and he produced a report, based on which discussions with the Oman government were started.



The original request from the government to construct a seedbed in an appropriate place, grow seedlings and plant them in appropriate locations, turned out to be a very vague idea on their side. They simply wanted to “green” as many creeks and coastlines as possible with mangroves. While there was this overall goal, they did not have any specific proposals or suggestions as to how to achieve their aims. Nevertheless, with our involvement, a seedbed with pump irrigation system was completed in August 2000 and seedling production was started.

While mangroves have positive functions for the environment (e.g. they act as a nursery for aquatic creatures and help conserve biodiversity), they also have negative factors for human livelihood (e.g. increased mosquitoes, a foul odor from the mud, etc.), so they cannot be planted simply anywhere for the sake of greening places. Therefore, a certain basic plan or guidelines were necessary. While trying to plant mangroves the most important thing is to consider how we should answer the simple questions the neighboring local people would ask: “Why do you plant trees here?” “What good does it do?” Answering such questions properly is nothing but an act of environmental education. And educating people is a time-consuming and laborious task. This is true everywhere, be it in Japan or in Oman.

Anticipating environmental educational effects, from the first plantation activity in Sawadi Beach we mobilized labor from the surrounding local communities, hoping, that they would not destroy the forest they themselves planted! In the following year we gathered the same laborers. In the first year they did not quite understand our answers to their simple questions as to why they had to plant trees. In the second year, however, when we heard such comments as “these days, as the trees have grown, more birds and fish seem to be around” we felt that they could act not only as laborers but also as environmental monitoring staff. Earlier their temporary salary was paid from our local expenses, but from the third year the environmental ministry took on the cost. Maybe they understood that it was less costly to use local labor than commission a private company after bidding, and that the local people were capable of learning the job.

What we have learned thus far is that, if we build up a good relationship with local people, and if they can realize the benefit of plantation, whether in the form of cash income or increased fish resources, they, themselves, will take over and continue management of the mangrove forest (though of course the government should provide proper support as well). Only with such government-local citizen collaboration, can mangrove plantation in Oman be a sustainable undertaking.



Second plantation activity, Al Sawadi,
February 2003



Second production at the seedbed,
October 2002

Collaboration with universities as part of our international co-operation activities: Reflection from the lecture at Shizuoka University

Nowadays, probably partly because of the change of status of national universities into independent administrative entities collaborative activities in various fields between the public sector and academia, or public and private sectors, have been widely reported in the media. However, most of these activities are research collaborations. Universities assume two major roles: research and education. These days many companies are looking for people who can be immediately absorbed into the workforce without much on-the-job training, and universities must respond to such needs as well. As reported in AAI News Vol.39, AAI has been actively working with universities for the purpose of manpower development in the field of international cooperation, and also asking those universities to increase the opportunities for interaction. One such opportunity came from Shizuoka University, which requested us to give a special lecture on environmental restoration for students studying human environmental science at the Graduate School of Agriculture. The contents of the lecture included: characteristics of arid/semi-arid environment, the current situation of desertification, natural and social factors behind desertification, preventive measures against desertification, and the relationship between agriculture and the environment. It was a good opportunity for AAI to introduce our past experiences to students.

At the lecture, AAI staff talked about the background leading up to this special lecture, AAI's past and present activities and general issues on arid and semi-arid environment and desertification. During our talk we tried not to give mere textbook explanations, but rather we tried to give views and experiences gained during extended stays in arid areas, and also we tried to introduce problems which the students might be interested in looking at as their thesis topics. Regarding the current situation of desertification and preventive measures, while discussing the current problems and future prospects, we also tried to stress the importance of resources management thinking. In talking about agricultural development in arid areas, we mentioned the recent 'softening' trend of development assistance, as well as the importance of partnership activities with NGOs, local governments and universities. Moreover, we stressed the importance of having the 'sustainability' viewpoint, as well as of water saving especially in this "Century of Water".

In the afternoon session reports were given on some projects by those who had actually been involved in the projects, so that the real feeling of each case could be conveyed to the students. Specifically, we focused on the problem of over-grazing as a major cause of desertification, and talked about resources management in the Dhofar Region of Oman and the Abdel Aziz mountain range of Syria. Also discussed was the case of afforestation in UAE, including its technical challenges and future scope. In the presentation about the cases from Kenya and Pakistan, we discussed the importance of environmental consideration in developing irrigation systems, impacts on the environment and local livelihood, the importance of the basin-wide view and of participatory activities.

During the Q&A session the role of consultant in technical assistance was discussed, and we explained our role in development projects, our relationship with JICA, and our philosophy as consultants. We asked the students to write up their reflections about our lecture and questions, and we tried to answer them as much as possible. We would be most happy if our lecture provided a chance for students to think about international cooperation and if it helped them work on their research. Also, for us it was a good opportunity to learn what students today think about overseas cooperation and what sort of information we need to provide them with further. We would like to continue this sort of collaboration and interaction with universities in the hope that our activities will help students learn about the reality of development assistance, and help them get involved in international co-operation activities in the future.

Graduate School of Agriculture, 11 November 2003
Course on Human Environmental Science

Special Lecture on Environmental Restoration

1. Participants self-introduction (10:30-11:00)
2. Environment of arid and semi-arid areas, and the current situation of desertification (11:00-12:00)
 - Characteristics of the arid and semi-arid environment
 - Desertification: current situation, preventive measures, challenges and future scope
 - Current situation of agricultural development in arid and semi-arid areas
3. Case studies (13:30-15:30)
 - Resources management in arid land: a case from Dhofar region, Oman
 - Resources management by nomadic livestock keepers in Syria
 - Forest plantation in UAE
 - Importance of environmental consideration in irrigation development: cases from Kenya and Pakistan
4. Q&A (15:30-16:00)