

## ***New Series: Reconsideration of Support Activities for Agriculture and Farmers – Comparison between Syria and Japan***

### **Part 1 – Introduction**

We have visited a large number of rural areas in many countries around the world through our normal company duties and through our grass roots level activities with the establishment of the Muscat Fund (see AAI News Vol 49 for example activities). During our visits, we have had ample opportunity to see farmers and farming activities, and to listen to their problems, hear about their challenges, as well as their requests for certain kinds of assistance. Farming systems in different regions have been formed and influenced by the historic contexts and social backgrounds of their particular areas. Farmers' ways of thinking and their situations also differ very much from each other. Our activities can be described as various forms of assistance, such as technical support and mechanism creation for farmers in different situations and with different farming systems, based on certain key words such as livelihood improvement, income increase, and production technology improvement. It is vital to explore and select the most effective and efficient ways to assist the farmers, taking into consideration regional and individual differences and the diversity of farming and farmers. This issue has been our challenge in providing assistance to farmers in other countries with varied traditions, however, it has also been a source of motivation in our work.

On the other hand, in Japan, support to Japan's agriculture and farmers includes policy formulation, subsidy administration, cultivation technology guidance and lifestyle improvement projects. Most agricultural support activities were implemented by the public sector such as the national and local public sector institutions, however, today there is an increasing participation from private sector companies. Projects by the national government and local public sector organizations include agricultural extension activities, research & experiment, and land improvement projects. In addition, support for agricultural cooperatives that aim at reciprocal support and collaboration is considered in a broad sense as a way of assisting agriculture and farmers, as well as supporting corporate agricultural associations that are established to increase collective profits through collaborative agricultural production. Furthermore, in recent years, new types of support activities are increasingly prominent such as various movements and support for farmers by NPOs and citizens' organizations.

This trend is also seen abroad where we mainly work. The type of assistance for the agricultural sector is shifting from the traditional agricultural development approach that aims to increase productivity, to the agricultural community development approach placing more emphasis on improving the livelihoods and environment of a particular area as a whole. Today's agricultural community development projects aim for holistic regional development, with agricultural technology still as a foundation, but also embracing a wide range of sectors such as medicine, health and education based on the community participation principle. However, in developing countries, we often experience the general lack of, or insufficient systemic and legislative aspects of, agricultural policies due to delays in the consolidation of a government administration base and due to a shortage of capable technicians. Given this situation, our challenge in cooperation activities is how to ensure that farmers and residents in farming communities, who should be the direct beneficiaries, can reap the fruits of our support.

Before this series was conceived, we had a chance to have good discussions with Japanese farmers and people working in the agricultural sector when we joined two Syrian counterparts on their study trip around Japan. The Syrian trainees said that the impression and knowledge they gained through their agricultural site visit in Japan was highly beneficial to them. The trip prompted them to look at Syria from different perspectives, having provided a chance for them to reflect on agriculture and problems of farmers in their own country from a far-away foreign country. We, who accompanied them during the field trip and shared their experience in Japan, reconfirmed that it is possible to ensure that information and experience gained in training courses in Japan can be fed back to developing countries. In this series, we would like to discuss individual types of agricultural support activities such as agricultural extension, research and experiment, agricultural cooperative and land improvement, within the framework of overseas assistance in the agricultural sector in developing countries. In our discussion, we would like to reflect on the fundamental and basic issues of different forms of assistance. We think that support activities for agriculture and farmers in Japan and their many accumulated achievements and experiences can be linked more actively to our assistance in developing countries so that lessons learned can be utilized at a practical level. In particular, we would like to compare various perspectives and examine water saving irrigation extension projects currently implemented in Syria and the existing Japanese experiences and knowledge, while reconsidering the reality and problems of Japan's support to agriculture and farmers, as well as its future challenges and potential.



**Engineers from Syria receiving a lecture on the agricultural improvement and extension system in Japan during a counterpart training program. There were active and solid exchanges between the tutor and trainees in this small group seminar.**