

Reconsideration of Support Activities for Agriculture and Farmers – Comparison between Syria and Japan

Part 2 – Trend of the Public Extension System

In this part, we would like to compare trends of the public extension system in Syria and Japan, as the system can be regarded as the core of support activities for agriculture and farmers. This part is an introductory phase and in the next issue we plan to discuss the relationship between research and extension activities in Syria, as well as challenges they face.

Japan's case

Japan's extension system was established through the post-war democratization process of the country. The system evolved around the cooperative agriculture extension projects of the national and local governments. Japan's cooperative agricultural extension projects have developed a multi-layered extension system such as teaching about farming by agricultural cooperatives, work by private companies and by farmers themselves. At the same time, compared with other industrialized nations where privatization is the trend for public extension systems, it is a characteristic of the Japanese system that the national government has been the main arm of the country's extension activities. The pillar of the public extension systems has been to nurture "thinking farmers", and agricultural improvement and extension workers are expected to teach farmers as both advisors and servants. The qualification exam for agricultural improvement and extension workers is conducted by local governments. To become a specialist technician who teaches agricultural improvement and extension workers, one has to pass a national qualification exam. The specialist technicians have been expected to bridge between researchers at experimental centers and agriculture improvement and extension workers. However, in 2004, when the Agricultural Improvement Assistance Act was amended to abolish mandatory establishment of regional agricultural improvement and extension centers by the national government, the extension organizations came entirely under the jurisdiction of local governments. This change meant that the specialist technician qualification was also abolished. The specialist technician qualification was amalgamated with the agricultural improvement and extension worker qualification creating a new national qualification of agricultural extension advisor. The agricultural extension advisors are expected to possess higher expertise and skills that can respond to increasingly varied issues and the sophisticated needs of farmers. The amendment was a reflection of many phenomena of that time, including decentralization trends of government administration, decrease of farming households, merger of municipalities, villages and agricultural cooperatives, marked reduction of agricultural extension project budgets, and promotion of government administration reform.

Syria's case

As in the case in Japan, in Syria, extension activities are also led by public institutions. The extension department of the central government and the regional department of agriculture at a prefecture level conduct extension activities in a cooperative manner. However, Syria has a centralized government, much more so than Japan. Extension projects tend to follow a top-down approach, with policies and technologies being communicated from the central to the local governments. Therefore extension workers often control farmers, and are expected to act like the police, taking action against illegal planting quotas. This is similar to pre-war extension programs in Japan. In those days, extension workers were sometimes seen more as the police with state power, rather than as advisors for farmers. In Syria, extension workers are considered as convenient communicators to spread central policies to farmers, as they are positioned at the end of the top-down administration. However, most of the extension workers are from villages and most still live in farming villages. Most of them farm along with their formal jobs. Unlike Japan's case whereby new graduates without actual experience get jobs as extension workers, it is Syria's biggest strength that extension workers themselves are farmers. The drawback is that their technical levels are generally low. Therefore, the Syrian government is exploring in its on-going reform effort to build a system to position specialist technicians with high level knowledge and skills who would support the activities of extension workers.



An extension worker (right) and counterparts (left) interviewing farmer at an apple farm in Kafr Hour Village, Rural Damascus