

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

Part 3 – Research and Extension (Why Research tends to be far from the actual needs)

As a part of the support activities for agriculture and farmers, agricultural research activities and utilization, and the extension of their results, have played a significant role in Japan and many other countries. With agricultural extension programs, production and productivity have been increased and the agricultural economics and livelihoods of farmers have been improved. Needless to say, it is highly essential and important to ensure coordination between research and extension activities. We need to share results and achievements of research with farmers as end-users. We also need to communicate problems farmers face with research organizations in order to solve these problems and to generate new research themes.

Recent years in Japan have witnessed a trend towards formally integrating extension programs with research activities. This trend is represented by the creation of synthesized centers that integrate the functions of extension projects and research with farmer training and education. One of the reasons for this trend is that Japan has been down-sizing extension programs. Another important factor, however, is that despite a wide-spread recognition of the needs for closer coordination between research activities and extension programs, it has not necessarily been practiced in reality. Historically, extension programs in Japan focused on relatively simple extension activities that aimed to increase crop yields and promote high-quality varieties. However, in recent years, both the expectations of farmers and expectations for farming have diversified, and this necessitates extension activities to become more sophisticated and diverse. As agronomy developed, research themes also became more sophisticated and ramified. This does not necessarily equip technicians and researchers to respond to the diversified needs of farmers. With a limited research budget, it is very difficult to respond to all the requests from farmers and farming entities. In order to secure a budget, researchers sometimes need to propose themes that are attractive to people who approve budgets rather than themes that are based on farmers' needs.

In Syria, the separation between research and farmers' needs is also becoming a serious problem. For example, in the case of grape cultivation in Syria, the common irrigation method is to trail lateral tubes along shelves and to connect them with tubes called "spaghetti" which is extended to the roots. However, at irrigation experiment stations, drip lines are installed on the ground to test irrigation amount. As the irrigation methods differ, it would be difficult to expect the test results to be applied at farms as they are. It is necessary that experiment stations also use the same irrigation method as farmers and compare results from different methods. Moreover, although some experiment stations are located in areas with substantial vegetable cultivation, they do very few tests related to vegetables. Furthermore, in case fruit farms switch from basin irrigation system to water-saving irrigation systems such as the drip system, it is possible that they may see reduced productivity just after the switch due to the different soil wetting patterns of the two systems. Measures to minimize such negative effects are highly important for farmers, but there is no such testing and research in irrigation experiment stations.

The main reason for research not responding to farmers' needs is that researchers do not know the problems farmers face as they have hardly any opportunity to visit production sites. Linking research with practicing farmers is one of the most important roles of extension activities. Syria is exploring the possibility of establishing a new professional category, the Subject Matter Specialist (SMS). An SMS is expected to serve as a bridge between researchers and extension officers. As explained in the previous issue, this seems to be the sort of reform that goes completely against the trends in Japan. This may be because in Syria, the basic capacity of extension officers is considered to be low and the capacity building of the officers is regarded as a medium to long-term national objective. In addition, in the short run, the SMSs are expected to have a base in regions, and to play a role as the closest counselors for extension officers and as advisors to augment technical gaps. Furthermore, ideally, SMSs need to play an important role in communicating various problems farmers face to researchers through extension officers. Researchers at research facilities can obtain information pertaining to problems on the ground through the SMSs and they should be able to use the information for their research activities.



Grape Cultivation in Syria



An example of poor irrigation management by an ordinary farmer



The very orderly plots in an Irrigation Experiment Station