

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

Part 4 – Shipment of agricultural products and agricultural co-operatives

In previous issues, we discussed agricultural extension and research in Japan and Syria. In part 4 of this series, we would like to look at the future of agricultural co-operative activities in Syria, using agricultural co-operatives in Japan as parallels to enrich the discussion. Japanese Co-operatives are known as the JA group which is organized under the auspices of the Central Union of Agricultural Co-operatives (JA-Zenchu). The basic organizational unit of the JA is its members. Membership consists of full members, and associate members who are not farmers. When compared with the standards of agricultural co-operatives elsewhere in the world the JA has a system and structure that is unique. The distinctive agricultural co-operative system in Japan developed because of the post-war government's policy of total and direct control of rice distribution as stipulated by the Staple Food Control Act. Almost all Japanese farming households are full members of the JA. They are organized in regional units. There are also different levels of organizational units at the area, prefectural and national levels, forming the JA's highly unique organizational system. Another characteristic of the JA is its wide range of enterprises. These range from agricultural production-related businesses including collection and shipment of agricultural products, stock management, transport and sales, procurement of production materials and coaching in agricultural business administration, to more diversified businesses. Other JA economic activities include an advisory service for improving living conditions, provision of wedding and funeral services, garage and petrol station businesses, insurance and financing enterprises, as well as trading enterprises. This is why the JA is often referred to as a multi-purpose comprehensive co-operative.

In Syria, generally, compared to the situation in Japan, farmers seem to have a more independent spirit and try to develop their business on their own. There is also a tendency to stick to the individual family business paradigm, and one can observe a disposition not to prefer co-operation with neighboring farmers. We have little knowledge of cases where farmers voluntarily get together and organize a co-operative to collect, ship, transport and sell their products collectively. In traditional society, at the tribal unit level, people organize themselves to collect and ship milk products in a mutually supportive manner. In some agricultural villages, however, at the present time, there are cases where wealthy farmers with a vehicle collect and ship produce from neighboring farmers acting as a representative of a particular area. In these instances, though, it is more of a case of a one-to-one "contract" and therefore individualistic and businesslike. Although, farmers' organizational operations are largely inactive in Syria, agricultural co-operatives do exist. Historically, Syrian agricultural co-operatives emerged in parallel with farm land reform implemented several times after WWII. Agricultural co-operatives have been very much national government-led initiatives, spurred by land reform and the abolition of the feudal system and functioning as a means of collectivising small scale farmers. The main activity is purchase of fertilizer, seeds and production materials. Although farmers' main interests and the first principle of agricultural co-operatives are market related, businesses such as collection, shipment, distribution and sales of products have been lacking in agricultural co-operatives since their inception. In Syria, there are often top-down restrictions on planting of crops. When statesmen want to unilaterally control small scale farmers as village-level units, co-operatives are used very effectively. This point is similar to the JA's role as an agent acting between the national government and local farmers when the government's rice production control is implemented.

We have realized, through our investigation into both JA and Syrian agricultural co-operatives, that they are the products of history. Each has developed to a background of unique circumstances. It goes without saying that we cannot expect to easily draw lessons by comparing co-operatives in different countries, as the differences between countries are extremely large. However, there is one point we can make. Looking at the issue from a Syrian farmer's perspective, it seems that it is necessary to explore the possibility of organizing a production, collection and shipment system as part of the co-operative's activities. The two counterparts who studied agricultural co-operatives in Japan as part of their counterpart training program had the same idea. In Syria, there are many middlemen and farmers tend to have to sell their products at a very low price. Given this situation, it is important for farmers to collectively defend themselves and it is necessary to consider what agricultural co-operatives can do for farmers in this regard. We believe that what is needed are organized activities to achieve advantageous deals for farmers under conditions of unstable market prices. However, what should we start with? A desirable model for agricultural co-operatives is not the gigantic JA of Japan. There is also no need to explore the possibility of a desirable model based on Syria's existing government led agricultural co-operatives. The basic principle of agricultural co-operatives is mutual support among farmers. Perhaps we need to go back to the drawing board and start by organizing small-scale activities. Syrian farmers may easily accept a small group of activities or suggestions from Japanese nationals who are outsiders. With these considerations in mind, we continue our support activities for Syrian farmers.

Friday Market in Syria

