

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

### **Part 5 Two types of water users' associations and Japan: Traditional and future types.**

Land improvement district is a Japanese farmer's water users' association which has been established under the terms of the 1948 Land Improvement Act. Last summer, we had a chance to visit Kamedagou land improvement district in Niigata Prefecture with the Iraqi trainees from the third country training. The Iraqi participants were truly interested in the land improvement district, which is acclaimed internationally as a highly successful water users' association. They listened enthusiastically to the explanations of the guide about everything from legal framework establishment, water management, operation of organizational structures to the history of the land improvement districts. The trainees have a huge mission; re-establishing irrigation facilities using water from the Euphrates and forming water users' associations. They, therefore, expressed concrete and practical interest, trying to acquire tips from Japan's experiences, which showed that they were extremely eager to learn and had a pressing need for this training. There were also exchanges of active questions and answers during lectures. It was impressive to see that trainees tried to take in one or two new lessons and ideas even when a lecturer pointed out that it would be difficult to apply Japan's water users' association system directly in Iraq, as the water users' associations have been formed in Japan's village society that have been in continuous existence since the pre-Edo era based on paddy field rice cultivation. It is obvious that there is a considerable difference between what water means to people in dry lands and in a wet environment. However, seeing the trainees' enthusiastic attitudes, we felt that there was a possibility that they would be able to utilize the experience of Japan's land improvement districts as roles for traditional water users' associations for the benefit of people in Iraq, a nation so far from Japan.



Iraqi trainees exchanging opinions in front of water use map (Tsukuba International Center)



Syrian counterparts during their training visit in Japan (At the Farm Pond at the Miyakojima Land Improvement District)

The counterpart training course in Japan, which was conducted as an integral part of the Project on Development of Efficient Irrigation Techniques and Extension in Syria (technical cooperation project), also included a field visit to a land improvement district; i.e. the underground dam of the Miyakojima Island. Syrian counterparts are also very interested in the topic of water users' associations and this visit seemed to have made a vivid impression. In Syria, in the 1960s, there were over 350 large and small water users' associations along the Euphrates and around the country. As they did in Iraq, traditional water users' associations in Syria developed as the needs arose for public water access to rivers, springs and underground canals (Qanat) to be distributed. The counterparts were primarily interested in introducing modern irrigation to traditional water users' associations. However, what was really worth noting was that they were investigating the possibility of applying the water users' association model as an effective joint management method for underground water sources which farmers traditionally regarded as being under individual ownership. Here, a new type of water users' association is being designed, using the example of a generic and traditional water users' association which is based on shared water resource utilization. Such a new type of water users' association aims to promote the integrated and joint utilization of the groundwater which is traditionally viewed as under individual ownership.

In Syria, the depletion of fresh water resources is a seriously pressing issue, resulting in the tight supply-demand situation. Therefore, the necessity of water saving irrigation in the agricultural sector, which accounts for nearly 90% of the total water use in the country, is called for. In particular, around 60% of the water use in the agricultural sector is groundwater pumped from wells by individual farmers, and water saving measures to curb individual use are urgently required. The problem is that most of the wells are dug illegally. Over-exploitation of groundwater resulting from the rapid increase in wells since the mid 1980s has been causing serious lowering of the groundwater table. There is no way that these illegal wells can be left alone. In order to tackle this problem, Syria is attempting to reduce illegal wells by consolidating wells. The country is exploring ways to achieve effective use of fresh water resources, such as the introduction of modern irrigation system and organizing water saving farmers' groups. However, grouping of farmers and the consolidation of wells are not as easy as they may sound. The larger the farm size is and the farther the distance between wells, the more complicated and difficult it becomes. Even if a certain measure is feasible technically, whether it is workable in terms of necessary initial investment and operational costs needs to be investigated. In addition, what is the social viability of a measure? In Syria, there still is much more room for further investigation. Furthermore, in order to communalise wells and fresh water resources, a substantial mind shift from private water to communal water needs to be cultured among farmers. Evidently, the Syrian plans to create water users' associations by communalising wells requires different thinking from traditional water users' associations. It is also clear that there is no sufficient legal framework for the organizations. Under these circumstances, what should we do in our technical cooperation activities? Should we dismiss the futuristic idea of the water users' association as totally unrealistic? Or should we explore the possibilities even if their results might seem small? What is effective cooperation assistance? Whatever the answer may be, diverse discussions and analysis as well as repeated consideration of issues are important in these technical cooperation activities.