

### Part 1 Introduction

“Abandonment of arable land” is defined as “privately owned agricultural land that has not been planted over the past year or longer, and for which no plan to plant for the next few years exists.” According to the agricultural census of 2005, the total cultivated acreage in Japan is 4,780,000 ha, of which 380,000 ha, or 8% of the total area, is abandoned. 380,000 ha is an area 5.7 times bigger than Lake Biwa (the biggest lake in Japan). Between 1975 and 1985, the abandoned arable land area was around 130,000 ha, and since the 1990s, the abandoned areas have been increasing as shown in the graph.

Lack of farm labour due to the aging of farmers accounts for nearly 50% of the reasons given for the increase in the abandoned arable land. This is followed by low productivity, no successor for farm land and bad land conditions. In the background there lie various problems surrounding today's Japanese agriculture, such as aging farming populations and lack of successors and competition with the low prices of imported agricultural produce. Japan's food self-sufficiency rate (based on calories) is at an extremely low level (39% in 2006). Other major developed nations have far higher sufficiency rates as the following examples show: France - 130%, USA – 119%, Germany – 91% and UK – 74%, according to the data of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF). Furthermore it should be noted that Japan's food self-sufficiency rate was the 124<sup>th</sup> lowest among the world's 173 countries (at the point of 2002).

As one can see from the increase of the abandoned arable land and decrease in food self sufficiency rate, Japan's agriculture is in an extremely difficult situation. Abandonment of arable land is a luxury in the eyes of farmers who are farming in marginal land or areas which are not suitable for cultivation. Furthermore, how long can a country stay being so dependent on other countries for much of the food needed for the population? Already increase in production of bio-ethanol in recent years has pushed grain prices up, and affected livestock fodder procurement. For instance, US farmers are converting soy bean fields for export to Japan, into corn fields to produce ethanol, leading to shortage of ingredients for Japanese traditional food items such as miso (soy bean paste), soy sauce and natto (fermented soy beans) and these commodities prices have increased.

AAI has been mainly taking up assignments in Japan and overseas that are related to agriculture and agricultural village development and human resource development. Although we have been working to support agriculture in other countries, we have not been involved in activities related to Japan's agriculture. We have always been recognising the importance of Japan's agriculture with its role as a regional industry, its relationship with environmental conservation, and with regard to food security and safety. In our work to support agriculture in developing countries, we also have experienced and accumulated knowledge, techniques and development methods which may be useful for supporting Japan's agriculture and revitalising Japanese farming villages. Furthermore, some of our ex-colleagues who were involved in international cooperation fields are active in Japan's agricultural production scene.

In this new series, we would like to discuss problems Japan's producers face on a daily basis, taking account of the voices of the producers themselves. We would also like to discuss the future of Japan's agriculture which is directly impacted by the international nature of society. In addition, we would like to explore the possibility of utilising agriculture-related experience we gained both in Japan and abroad for the benefit of both sides. For instance, we would like to bring back experiences and techniques from other countries to be used in Japan's agriculture, and we would like to unearth knowledge in Japan's agricultural sites and explore the possibility of using that knowledge in international assistance. Furthermore, we will reflect on agriculture as a business (or profession) and on challenges and issues surrounding agriculture, and explore the possibility of AAI's involvement in Japan's agriculture.

