<<No.61>> August 1, 2009

AAINews

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At the dawn of year 2008

As introduced in AAI News Vol. 60, we have been publishing this news letter for the last 12 years. Looking at the title list of articles in our newsletter, one can see quite significant changes in Japan's technical cooperation activities for developing countries. For instance, the number of JICA experts dispatched decreased over the years, while the number of senior volunteers increased. As Japan's cooperation became more "soft" in its approach to support processes, the number of development study including pilot studies and technical cooperation projects increased. In particular, in recent years, the number of technical cooperation projects assigned to the private sector companies grew. Furthermore, the same tendency has been seen in training activities, and many training programmes at Tsukuba International Center are now conducted by private companies.

Along with the above, the AAI's activities have also seen significant changes. In the 1990s, our mainstay was long-term expert dispatch, however this has decreased gradually. Our participation in development studies used to participate as a member of order initiated company, however in 2002, AAI received the first joint order with another company for a mangrove project in Oman. With regards to technical cooperation projects, in 2005, we also received an order as part of the joint team with another company for the water saving irrigation project in Syria. In 2002, we also received an order as a private company for organising and implementing the responsibility for the country-focused group training course "Vegetable cultivation course for the Republic of Tajikistan", and since then we were entrusted with organising training course for the Republic of South Africa as well as for Southern African countries. In recent years, we have been responsible for vegetable cultivation and upland rice variety selection training courses. Even though our work has changed, our enthusiasm to contribute to development in developing countries and our keen interest in arid regions has never wavered. We believe that this kind of passionate interest is one of the original foundations of international cooperation.

Through these processes, we have learnt the importance of making use of experiences abroad in Japan, as well as making use of experience in Japan abroad. We have also learnt the importance of making use of experiences in expert dispatch and development surveys in technical cooperation projects. Moreover, we strongly feel that ultimately, the most important element in our work is to build a trusting relationship with counterparts and participants. In particular, the existence of our counterparts in different countries that we worked with is vital. In building relationships with counterparts, we feel that elements such as size of projects and number of involved people are critical. This is why, from the inception of our company, we have put tremendous energy and resources into small scale activities, supporting grass-roots activities and collaborating with local NGOs.

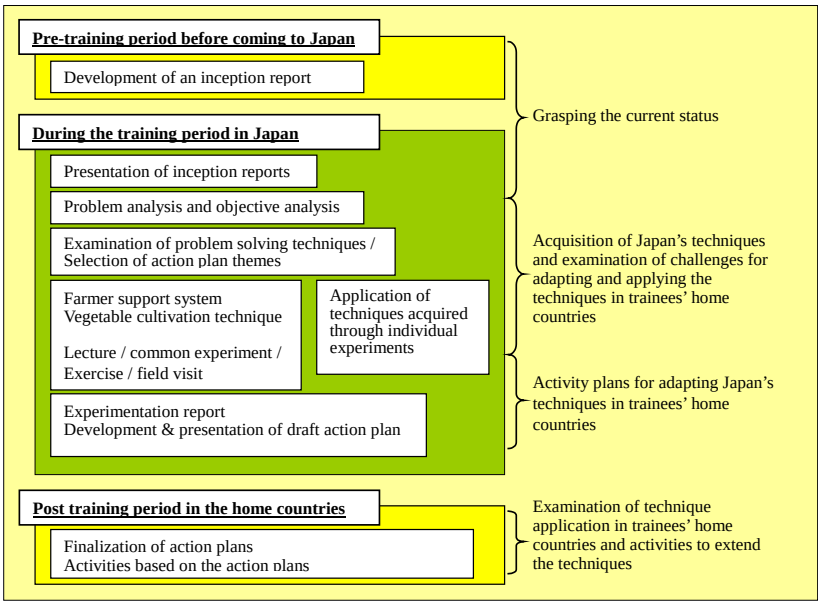
With regards to collaboration with local NGOs, we developed a relationship with an NGO in Zimbabwe. This was triggered by our involvement in externally commissioned work for Japan's grass-roots assistance scheme in 1999 to evaluate and select capable local NGOs in the country. Through our continued involvement in activating group vegetable gardening by women in farming villages and an input credit scheme, our relationship has been continuing to date. We are hoping that as a follow-up to training programmes, we would support ex-trainees' activities in southern African countries, linking such support to development of other grass-roots assistance activities. Although we still have a lot to learn, it may be time for us to pay back to people around us in return for what we gained during our work. Utilizing our experiences, the AAI staff will continue to work on activities which may be small but nonetheless shining and leading to steady progress and achievements. Your continued support for our work would be highly appreciated.

Are Japan's cultivation techniques and the wisdom of creative Japanese farmers applicable?
– Case study of training activities at Tsukuba International Center -

Part 1: Introduction

The objective of the vegetable cultivation technique training course in Tsukuba International Center (TBIC) is to develop human resources that will establish and extend vegetable cultivation techniques in their native countries, acquiring and adapting the comprehensive techniques of vegetable cultivation in Japan. The AAI, through our long years of experience in supporting farming, land use planning and agricultural extension activities in developing countries, believes that experiments and research for appropriate techniques in developing countries and improvement of practical capacity of technicians, who communicate the experiment and research results to farmers at local level, are extremely important. Therefore, we develop training curricula which present Japan's cultivation techniques systematically, including their development processes, and facilitate trainees to be able to acquire as many of the techniques as possible. We also provide many opportunities to be exposed to the techniques of creative farmers, in order for the participants to learn how individual farmers devise and incorporate various techniques in their farming practices in a different environment.

Japan's cultivation techniques, which are the core of the training curriculum, are scientific and rational techniques and skills, as they are results of rigorous research and experimentation at national and prefectural institutions. This means that even though environmental conditions differ from country to country, by appropriately applying basic scientific theories, good results can also be obtained in developing countries. On the other hand, the techniques, wisdom and knowledge of creative farmers are technological systems formed under particular environmental conditions, and they are often dependent on individual skills and capacity. However, it is still hoped that the views and thinking of experienced farmers will provide useful clues for problem solving in developing countries.



Conceptual Diagram of the Vegetable Cultivation Technique Course

If problems in developing countries are merely due to insufficient technology, they can be solved by the transfer of advanced technologies. However, in reality, problems tend to be much more complicated. Issues surrounding agriculture in trainees' home countries differ and therefore one cannot simply apply Japan's techniques and the wisdom thus acquired in the training courses in their own countries. In order to be able to utilise acquired techniques, it is necessary to select techniques that fit in local situations and circumstances and apply and adjust the selected techniques accordingly. In order to make it easier, in our training, we avoid one-way communication about Japan's techniques. Rather, we start with the compilation of an inception report by the trainees, introducing the characteristics of agriculture in their home countries and introducing the structures and activities of their host organisations. The training also includes individual experimentation to find appropriate techniques to solve problems that each trainee's organisations are facing, as well as conducting collective experimentation to enhance trainees' understanding on various cultivation techniques. Furthermore, participants develop action plans to prepare for the application of techniques they have learned in the training in their own countries. Through this series of training, trainees try to acquire techniques and theories that have application in their countries.

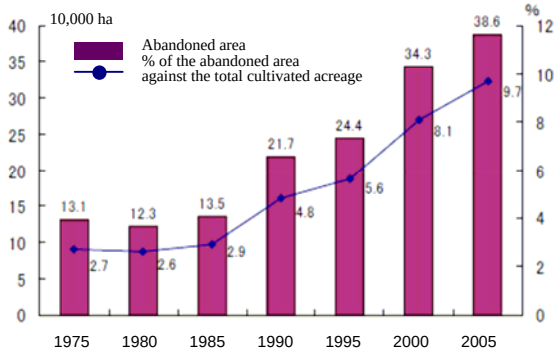
We have introduced these efforts several times in AAI News. However, we have not touched upon the details of Japan's techniques that were taught in training courses. JICA's agricultural technique training is provided not only in Japan, but also overseas in the form of development survey projects and technical cooperation projects. From this perspective, it is beneficial to share information from Japan and oversea training activities, likewise the sharing of information between different training activities. Therefore we think that introducing cases in Tsukuba could provide useful clues to various activities overseas. In this series, we will first introduce problems trainees face in their own countries and examples of Japan's techniques that can be applied to tackle and address the problems. In addition, we would also like to introduce local activities by our trainees in their home countries, and examine challenges in extending Japan's techniques overseas.

New Series – Japan's agriculture and AAI

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.

Change in Abandoned Arable Land



Source: MAFF Agriculture and Forestry Census
Note: % of the abandoned area is calculated as – Abandoned arable land ÷ (cultivated land area + abandoned arable land) x 100

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 124th 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.

Mini Series – Considering project evaluation

Part 1 Projects and their evaluation

An evaluation of some sort is always required for any jobs done, and is not unique to the field of international cooperation. Evaluation is to measure impacts of a project and the significance of the project implementation, communicate project results to a third party, and to look for indicators and guidance for the next step. In addition, when a project evaluation is done for several projects using the same evaluation items and methods, it can present objective comparisons between projects. For JICA implemented projects, five evaluation criteria – appropriateness, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability – are used. These are the evaluation criteria of development cooperation projects which were advocated by the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 1991 in its attempt to decide the basis for evaluating projects.

Moreover, the JICA's project evaluation is classified into groups depending on evaluation objects and the different stages of evaluation. For example, in the final evaluation of a project, an evaluation team is formed with several experts from different disciplines. The team investigates and analyses both the achievements of the project and the process involved in reaching these achievements. An evaluation team is required to start with an understanding of the contents of a project (which is usually implemented over many years), and understand and analyse its achievements within a very short time period.

For instance, in the case of a human capacity building project that involves training activities, the effects of training activities sometimes are evaluated with numerical data such as number of training courses and the exam results of trainees. It is also equally important to evaluate other aspects, for example how trainees changed and developed after the project. This may be difficult for an evaluation team to assess quantitatively. Furthermore, for the areas that are related to system improvement such as improvement of training or extension systems, a more accurate evaluation is possible if evaluators have a good understanding of the real issues such as the organisation and implementation structures of the project countries. Therefore, it is necessary for the project implementation side to make an effort to explain these aspects to the third party in a clear fashion. At the same time, there needs to be a system that enables evaluators to cooperate with project implementers and be kept more regularly updated with project progress so that an evaluation can take place based on sufficient understanding of the processes of the project.

People often teasingly say that the environmental impact assessment aims to justify the environmental soundness of a development project. In order to avoid project evaluation becoming merely "an evaluation for the sake of evaluation," projects must be evaluated properly and lessons must be documented for the next step and future planning. In this mini-series, we would like to consider various evaluation methods and their application, in order to determine what are the keys for sound evaluations. Moreover, we would also like to touch upon issues such as how to measure "enthusiasm and drive" and how to evaluate nurtured human resources, and what methods are appropriate for monitoring activities to understand change in behaviours and actions.

A scene from a project evaluation field visit

The "hands" of evaluation

The long road towards improving evaluation quality