

## ***Mini Series: – Visiting a project of a Former Colleague***

### **Part 1 – Friends and colleagues who aim to make a living by organic farming**

The former colleague, who was with the AAI for four years, left our company to focus on practicing farming. After leaving the company, he learned “duck farming” in Fukuoka with a view to creating a symbiotic relationship between rice and ducks. Then he started farming in Niigata. Currently, he is seriously pursuing organic farming in Ibaraki. His work area is located in the mountains. There is an organic farmers group in his area and we had an opportunity to exchange information and opinions with this group. In order to understand the wider farming situations in the area, we also invited representatives from agricultural cooperatives and the municipality office. The participants included new farmers and active discussions and exchanges took place. There were farmers who offer training and guidance to young people who are hoping to work in international cooperation in the agricultural field. Our venue for the event was an old abandoned farm house. This house was managed by a local NPO and used for various purposes, including events aiming to promote exchange between local residents and people from cities through for instance soba (buckwheat) noodle making sessions and music concerts. Participants were having discussions in a hall with an earth floor and were seated around a hearth. It was a very friendly atmosphere. At the beginning, we introduced activities of the AAI and received people’s feedback and responded to their questions. We heard from other participants about their farming issues, and requested brief introductions on support activities for farmers by agricultural cooperatives and the municipal office, as well as on their projects. After the initial introductions, we had a free discussion session, debating a variety of issues and problems related to farming in the area.



A scene from the exchange event



Introducing AAI activities

Most of the participating farmers are aiming to become 100% organic. There were farmers who are practicing no-till farming. Their main crop is vegetables. They produce and sell various vegetables in their natural seasons. Some farmers produce 50-60 varieties in a year. Much of the fertilizer is animal dung provided by beef and dairy livestock farmers in the area. In addition they are trying to increase soil fertility through bokashi composting and using fallen leaves from the surrounding mountains. At the same time, many farmers are facing damages caused by wildlife such as wild boar, civet cats and bulbuls, which are unique to farms in mountain areas. Another common problem is small and scattered farming plots and an enormous amount of weeding work. These issues pose great challenges for the future expansion of farming areas. The organic farmers develop individual networks of customers, and products are shipped directly to individual customers, including home delivery. The sales have expanded from Ibaraki to Tokyo and Kanagawa, however there has been no joint development of clients by the organic farming group. For livestock farmers, the recent increase in animal food prices has posed great difficulties, when they were trying to expand their businesses in order to secure stable income. Dairy farmers said that they were concerned about whether they could even continue farming, given that the increase of producer prices of dairy products is strictly limited by the Government. Moreover, the disposal of animal excrement has become a major problem for all the livestock farmers whether breeding or raising cattle.

The recently increasing rate of abandonment of farming plots was mentioned as an important issue by representatives from agricultural cooperatives and local government. As farmers age, many farms are no longer worked on. There has been an attempt to inform farmers about these abandoned plots, and to support farmers, however it has not stopped the increase in abandoned plots. It was also reported that as part of a farming support program, support was provided for marketing, consolidation of outlets, and the promotion of the “chisan chisho (local production for local consumption)” movement.

Through the exchange with the farmers, we strongly felt their high consciousness for organic farming, local agriculture promotion, environmental protection and conservation, as well as cultivation through a combination of crop and livestock farming. On the other hand, this exchange made us understand the existing challenges that for realizing a fully viable organic farming business and the difficulty involved in realizing a fine balance between organic farming and making a living.