

Japan's agriculture and AAI

Part 3: Report from producers – Local producers' group activities and coordination among communities in Ushimado, Okayama Prefecture

As introduced in AAIN Vol. 48, a former AAI colleague is practicing vegetable production using neither pesticides nor chemical fertilizers in Ushimado area in Setouchi City, Okayama Prefecture, as part of the local community. In order to find a point of contact between the AAI's activities and agriculture in Japan, we revisited the area and had bilateral and multilateral meetings with local farmers, new farmers including our former colleague, producers' groups and Okayama University. (Please refer to the next page for more details.) In this survey, we took stock of their activities and the challenges the local farming communities face, and investigated what the AAI could contribute.



A scene of Ushimado, Setouchi City

Setouchi City in Okayama Prefecture is bordered by the Seto Inland Sea. The climate is warm and agricultural production activities can take place throughout the year. There are large cities such as Okayama and Kurashiki in the vicinity, providing large markets for producers in Setouchi City. The young farmers in our meetings, who started farming quite recently, manage to sell their produce directly to consumers in Setouchi City and even in Okayama City, as well as ship them to the vegetable wholesale markets. However, even with this favorable production and natural environment, Setouchi has not been spared from the phenomena of rapidly increasing abandoned farmlands and aging farming population – the same problems other regions are facing. During our interview with young farmers, it was strongly felt that many of them are having a feeling of crisis for the future standing of agriculture in the area 10 or 20 years in the future. One of the issues the young farmers cited as a reason for the sense of crisis was the loss of knowledge of elderly and experienced farmers. For instance, they can understand and evaluate the situation of diseases and changes of the hydrological environment, simply by quickly surveying their farms. The young farmers called on the necessity of establishing a forum for transfer knowledge from elderly farmers who have an in-depth knowledge and understanding of the local agricultural environment, in order to improve the skills and knowledge of young and upcoming farmers.

Although we did not have an opportunity to talk to elderly farmers, knowing that a producer group rents plots from 30 local farmers, and our former colleague also receives requests to farm on local farmers' plots, there is a growing expectation in the community that young people will bring new energy to the area. A Setouchi farmers' club, which was established by a group of young farmers, formed the "Team 60%", a project team aiming for a 60% food self sufficiency rate, and has been providing support to people who are interested in becoming farmers. Prospective farmers can experience farming work with the club members and can also stay at club members' homes and listen to farming related stories. Slackening profits is another challenge. In order to add value to their produce, they partner with supermarkets and restaurants using organic vegetables so that the outlets buy directly from the farmers. Despite these efforts to increase profits, it is difficult to expand the cultivation scale with only family members working on the farms. In particular, farming without chemical fertilizers and pesticides is more labor intensive than ordinary farming, therefore it is not easy to increase profits through expanding cultivation scale.

As mentioned earlier, we have come to understand a lot of the issues by listening to farmers and producer groups in Setouchi City. Some of the issues are: (i) They desire to learn various farming skills and knowledge, however there is no forum and no opportunities for training and learning, (ii) Additional labor is necessary to expand the farming scale and increase income, however, young farmers do not have the capital to finance it, (iii) Although they are eager to receive cultivation trainees, in order to secure additional labor and to transfer skills, it is difficult to offer adequate accommodation for the trainee and (iv) They know that there are financing schemes that can be utilized and it is effective to form an organization to access such financing, however, they do not seem to have been able to utilize the existing schemes very well.

The important elements for supporting the future of Japan's agriculture are securing farmers, enabling the succession of skills and knowledge, and the conservation of farm land. Among these elements, AAI could provide our skills to young farmers, making use of our experience in providing vegetable cultivation technique courses, in order to nurture and secure future farmers. It is also conceivable to support the establishment of accommodation and places for exchange by renting abandoned houses, as a support for the effort to encourage prospective farmers by Team 60%. Furthermore, AAI could also link the farmers with trainees from abroad or personnel from JOCV's pre-departure training programs.