

Japan's agriculture and AAI

Part 4: Training in a farming region – Activities at Nature school Terakoya and regional cooperation (Kanra Town, Gunma Prefecture)

In the previous issue we introduced the activities of a farm producer group in Ushimado, Okayama Prefecture and its cooperation with communities. As recommendations, we suggested support activities for people who are interested in becoming farmers. We also suggested accepting trainees from other countries, as well as the possibility of getting involved in the pre-departure training for the Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCV). From the same perspective, we visited the Non-Profit Organization Nature School Terakoya (Terakoya means a temple school), which is already implementing these activities in the Tomioka Area, Kanra Town, Gunma Prefecture.

The Nature School provides supplementary technical training for the JOCVs before their assignment and accepts JICA trainees from overseas. One of the features of these training programs is cooperation with local farmers and agricultural cooperatives. Responding to the Nature School director's passionate efforts, the head of the youth division of the local agricultural cooperative, JA Kanra Tomioka, called for cooperation from local farmers to accept trainees. In the supplementary technical training for JOCVs, the volunteers spend 3 to 6 months (depending on the type of position) working at a farm as a village development extension officer. Through working and interacting with local residents, the training aims to nurture useful skills and knowledge for working as a JOCV in the countries of their assignments. A characteristic of the training is the fact it emphasizes practical work. In sessions on participatory rural appraisal (PRA) and rapid rural appraisal (RRA), volunteers experience and learn to draw stories out of farmers by weeding together and drinking tea together during breaks between the farm works. For farmers, it is not only to have additional manpower. By having another "family member," there is the advantage of receiving new stimuli and having increased opportunities to hold family discussions.

The Nature School was established in 2001 as a voluntary organization, aiming to "nurture healthy and active children". It became a non-profit organization in 2003 with three main activity areas, namely environmental education, youth training and international cooperation. One of the features of the Nature School is that its activities are supported by local communities and the circle of activities is gradually expanding throughout the communities. From these activities emerged a new initiative to strengthen local capacity and organization to receive trainees, calling for the participation of farmers who have previous experience of hosting trainees. It was even decided to establish the "Kanra Tomioka Farming Village University" in September 2008. In addition to receiving JICA trainees, there is a movement towards offering a place for training, targeting those who want to return or come to rural areas to practice farming. It is expected that these activities will further strengthen the horizontal linkage between farmers and will lead to the establishment of organizations that can form partnerships for the revitalization of the communities.

The Nature School activities are considered to be an example of regional revitalization involving international cooperation. Basically it was the key people, the staff of the Nature School and agricultural cooperatives, who were the motivating force behind the successful expansion of activities. In addition, the existence of host farmers and the links between people have been important. It is not only the links between key people that are important, but also the links between a key person and local residents, as well as between farming families hosting trainees. Moreover, it is critical to recognize that for the Nature School activities to be integrated in local communities, it has been necessary to establish daily interactions with the residents and create a trusting relationship. In future, in order to contribute to the promotion and revitalization of local agriculture, AAI could act as a go-between for various communities such as Kanra (Gunma Prefecture), Ushimado (Okayama Prefecture) and Satomi (Ibaraki Prefecture) so that they will get to know each other, share information and learn from each other, leading to joint activities. Through such activities, we should consider what role the AAI can play to contribute to society.



Outside of the Nature School - Terakoya



Field of Shimonita leek – a local specialty



Listening to the activities of the Nature School