

Japan's agriculture and AAI

Final part: AAI's Involvement – Epilogue as a New Beginning

In this series we visited and heard from people AAI has been associated with, who are working on the ground in the agricultural production sector. We interviewed them on the topics of serious problems and challenges Japan's agriculture faces, for instance abandoned farm lands, decrease in national self sufficiency rate and shortage of successors to farms following retirement of older farmers, in order to explore future directions Japan should take and the future work and potential of AAI's contribution to Japan's agriculture. As this is the last part of the series, we have summarized in a table our thoughts on four cases we covered in the series, and operational principles that emerged through further actions and discussions.

Case	Operational Principle Stated in the Series	Additional Support and Cooperation that were mobilized through further actions and discussions
Satomi (Ibaraki)	Regular purchase of organic vegetables; turning up at monthly meetings; information exchange via group mailing lists; organization of events such as exchange events; promotion of eco-friendly (with material cycling systems) agriculture through farmers' networking	Participation and cooperation in research activities on sustainable and eco-friendly agricultural system focusing on Satomi's organic farming, in collaboration with research organizations such as universities
Ushimado (Okayama)	Implementation of agricultural training targeting young farmers; support for provision of accommodation and an exchange meeting facility for those who are interested in becoming a farmer; facilitation for receiving trainees from abroad and supplementary trainees	Contribution to sales promotion for Ushimado group, utilizing information exchange platform on the AAI website; organization of exchange events with other organic farmers' groups
Kanra (Gunma)	Contribution to promoting information sharing and exchange between Kanra, Ushimado and Satomi, aiming for future cooperation in their activities	Direct involvement in training courses for village field workers which are held in the Terakoya Nature School, utilizing AAI's own village survey methods and experiences in the field.
Hamamatsu (Shizuoka)	Direct contribution to the agricultural business management human resource development program, and indirect contribution to improve productivities, utilization of abandoned farmlands and conservation of agricultural lands	Contribution through organization of events to share information related to marketing which is an important element of agricultural business management and for organic farmers' groups

This series started with a discussion on abandoned farmlands. Some of the major problems Japan's agriculture is currently facing are an aging farming population, low price of agricultural products, shortage of successors and farmers in general, as well as resulting dull and inactive agricultural villages. Considering this and our interviews in villages, there emerged some important key phrases for our future work. One is "every man to his trade" based on our story from Hamamatsu in AAI Volume 65. In other words, the production part of the agriculture sector should be left to those who are already practicing farming, and AAI should not directly get involved in farming activities. One niche could be to explore what we can do to connect producers and buyers (also discussed in AAI 65). Since the end of World War II until recently, this was the role of agricultural cooperatives, however as given the reality of diversifying business and changing distribution modes, new organizational support is becoming increasingly necessary to play the role expected by agricultural cooperatives. In Hamamatsu and Ushimado, there is a movement towards establishing Non Profit Organizations (NPOs) to fill this gap. Considering how AAI could be involved in these recent trends is an important mission.

Related to this, another important key phrase is "Human resource (successor) development." The successor training program in Ushimado (AAI Vol. 63), human resource development program in Hamamatsu (AAI Vol. 65) as well as Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCV) supplementary technical training at the Nature School in Kanra are all efforts to nurture and support future farmers. "Technical Training" is also one of the methods for human resource (successor) development. With all these in mind, we need to explore possible ways for AAI to become involved in human resource development.

In this series, we also introduced NPOs aiming to organize farmers and develop farming business, playing the role which was previously expected to be filled by agricultural cooperatives. AAI has been collaborating with local NGOs to support agriculture and village development, through projects such as small scale dam construction and home vegetable garden projects outside Japan. In addition, for the last 10 years, we have been involved in implementation of vegetable cultivation, and rice and crop cultivation training courses at Tsukuba. Through the training activities, we have come to realize the importance of building networks with trainees and conducting follow up activities. "Linking" and "Networking" are crucial to successful agricultural and village development in Japan, too. Furthermore, from AAI's experience in training and extension work in and outside Japan, we have experienced the importance of "face-to-face" interactions. We would like to continue to work in Japan's agriculture scene, making the full use of our comprehensive and unique experiences.