

## Close friends from far countries <Part 1>

### AAI's training follow-up program

I visited Malawi and Zambia in southern Africa in July 2011. It was winter in these southern hemisphere countries. The main purpose of the trip was to conduct AAI's voluntary follow-up activities targeting ex-participants who had returned home. For 10 years since 2001, AAI has been commissioned to conduct seven training courses at JICA Tsukuba. These were: 1) Vegetable cultivation for the republic of Tajikistan; 2) Vegetable and upland crops cultivation techniques for southern African countries; 3) Vegetable cultivation for the republic of south Africa; 4) Vegetable cultivation technology II; 5) Vegetable cultivation technology; 6) Vegetable cultivation technology for small scale farmers; and 7) Upland rice variety selection techniques for Africa. This time, targeting the southern African region where many ex-participants live and work, we conducted a follow-up investigation on their post-training activities at their work places. In 2005, an AAI staff, who went to Zimbabwe on business, visited ex-participants in Botswana. I represented the AAI in this second follow-up visit.

In our efforts to deliver high-quality training courses, we have been constantly having internal discussions within our company on how to improve the training contents. This follow-up visit was part of our ongoing effort to improve the quality of training programs. We conducted individual interviews based on the questionnaire we sent to the ex-participants prior to our visit. Through the interviews, I could feel their effort to try to innovate and implement what they learned in the training. I could witness many techniques devised by innovative Japanese farmers that are introduced in the JICA Tsukuba training program being applied as they are on African soil. These techniques included potato production with seed potato cuttings, introduction of tomato seedling raising and management, and the demonstration and extension of compost making using materials available around villages. In the rice cultivation field a researcher passionately talked about how he was teaching variety selection experiment methods to

farmers, using NERICA which is expected to become widely cultivated, as part of the commissioned cultivation system.

In any case, what I reconfirmed through contacting the ex-participants was the close trusting relationship that exists between JICA Tsukuba participants and their instructors. During the 4-10 months training period, instructors spend time with participants from morning to evening, not only giving advice on technical aspects of the training but also discussing and advising on the private matters of the participants. The tight relationship built during the time and places of training is not something that can be developed in one morning or evening. Without exaggerating, I sometime even felt that participants and instructors can form a friendship which is even stronger than the tie between brothers. Based on this mutual trust, although I was not involved directly in the training programs, I received a hearty welcome as if I was an old friend, which made this follow-up visit go smoothly.

Nowadays, there is a skeptical view about training programs organized in Japan, far away from the participants' own countries. If one looks at the training content, it may sometimes be more effective to conduct training programs in a third country with similar environmental and social conditions rather than participants having to go all the way to Japan. However, training in Japan can provide highly valuable impacts, offering precious time for participants to immerse themselves in technical issues, both systematically and intensively in their career, on subjects related to vegetable and upland rice cultivation. In addition, the training tends to nurture Japanophiles, as the participants have the chance to meet Japanese culture and become friends with Japanese people. Through follow-up visits like this one, cultivating the network of ex-participants, it is our dream to establish small scale projects jointly with the participants in their home countries.



Ex-participants interviewing farmers (Blantyre, Malawi)



An ex-participant passionately talking about NERICA variety selection experiments (Salima, Malawi)



An ex-participant working as a lecturer on practical tomato seedling management (Lusaka, Zambia)