

Journal of Hokkaido's agriculture discovery trip: a study trip on Hokkaido's agriculture with Sudanese counterparts

In mid-September, I visited Hokkaido as part of the JICA's training course, accompanying the five counterparts from JICA's Capacity Development Project for Provision of Services for Basic Human Needs in Kassala, Sudan. When we arrived from Haneda in the New Chitose Airport, there was already a pleasant autumn wind. During the one-week stay, it became quite chilly in the morning and evening. Furthermore, it was just after a typhoon that brought heavy rain and there were news reports of some damage in the Sapporo and Obihiro areas. However, fortunately, we could complete the visit as planned without any problems and without anybody getting sick. In the eastern part of Hokkaido, it was potato harvesting time, and large harvesters were at work.

The program of this visit was organized in a way that directly supports activities of the JICA project in Sudan, and included visits to a number of vegetable and upland crop. Hokkaido's agriculture is highly diverse – ranging from paddy rice and fruit to upland crop and livestock husbandry elsewhere on the island. In addition, forms of farming vary from horticultural crop production around large cities, to large scale upland crop production in eastern Hokkaido. Given this, it was very educational that we had a chance to visit the Hokkaido provincial government office on the first day of our trip to hear an

overview of Hokkaido's agricultural policy and plan formulation.

Japan's overall food self sufficiency rate is around 40% in terms of calories but in Hokkaido the food self sufficiency rate is about 200%. In the case of Obihiro, it is over 1,100%! This clearly shows the unique role Hokkaido's farming has as a Japanese food production base. One of the core farming measures which has been advocated in Hokkaido is "clean farming". Training has been provided for farmers on farming with reduced pesticide and fertilizer input. On the other hand, organic farming has not been taken up widely. Efforts on J-GAP (Japan Good Agriculture Practice) standards and certification system have finally been launched. However, there has been more emphasis on the certification system to compete with imported products from overseas rather than producing competitive products for exports from Japan. It is noteworthy though that there have been some progressive efforts on the private sector side to promote export of Hokkaido's farm products and processed products that are produced in an eco-friendly manner with reduced pesticides and fertilizers to destinations such as Taiwan and Shanghai.

In eastern Hokkaido, we met a lively farmer in his 40s. He has two sons who will succeed his large-scale full-time farming. It looks like a different world, contrasting with the situations in farming villages in mainland Japan which are experiencing serious depopulation. However, in general, even Hokkaido farming is facing the problem of an aging society and shares the fundamental problem Japan's agricultural sector has to tackle. After the decline of the coal industry, Hokkaido has been placing emphasis on nurturing the tourism and agriculture sectors. Sudan has been trying to revitalize its agricultural industry, departing from the oil-dependent economy after the separation of South Sudan. Thus Sudan and Hokkaido have some issues in common. For me, as I went around Hokkaido with the Sudanese participants, it was refreshing to see farmers and people working in the agricultural sector with great vigor and innovation, rather than only encountering the negative aspects of Japan's agricultural situation.

(By Koga, November 9, 2011)



Sorting operation of Japanese radish (daikon) on the harvesting machine in Taisho, Obihiro



Visiting a Chinese yam (nagai mo) farmer in Obihiro



At the "Gallery Nohmado (Window for agriculture)" – a non-governmental forum for information and knowledge exchange among producers, consumers and processors in Sapporo