

## From assistance to business—from support to collaboration <Part 3>

### Contractors in Syria

AAI has been working in Syria since the 1990s in the field of agricultural extension and training and has established a deep relationship with the country. Since 2005 to 2012, we implemented the JICA technical cooperation project “The Project on Development of Efficient Irrigation Techniques and Extension”, supporting the introduction and extension of modern irrigation systems such as drip irrigation and sprinklers. In this report, we would like to explore the potential of our future collaboration based on the knowledge we gained through these activities.

What we have noticed in our work in Syria is the low level of skills, knowledge and work ethics of technicians who are doing the actual work on the ground. For example, they cannot really install plumbing according to the blueprints, and they cannot properly put together joints. They cannot make the pipes properly leveled, and often use blocks they find as pedestals to support pipes rather than using dedicated equipment. One can immediately see it is a rush job. As a result, in most cases, pipes leak as soon as water passes through them. As far as we know, this low standard level of work is prevalent in Syria to such an extent that farmers think that it is normal for water to leak from pipes. We cannot help thinking that this makes farmers sceptical about irrigation tools such as drips and sprinklers, thus preventing modernization of irrigation systems.

Why are most technicians like this? Thinking about it, we came to the conclusion that they have not learned proper skills and therefore they probably do not know what a very good job is like. In Syria, unless a child goes to university, it is customary in rural areas for a child to succeed the family business. We often see children helping their father’s work and hanging around at construction sites. The children pick up skills like craftsmen in the old days by helping their fathers and learning techniques by imitating what their fathers do. It is all well if we are talking about traditional crafts of Syria which have developed over hundreds of years. However, solid understanding of the basics through a structured education is essential when it comes to new technologies such as modern

irrigation systems. One cannot acquire skills to deal with industrial products only by relying on working experience and intuition. However, because our technical assistance is part of the ODA between governments, the reality is that it is usually difficult to directly support people working on the ground.

Given this, we are mulling over the possibility of establishing a system whereby young Syrian technicians are dispatched to Japan for on-the-job training at a town factory that provides plumbing services. After the training, they will form a contractor in Syria to provide high-quality services. By learning meticulous work in Japan while young, they can avoid getting soaked with Syrian custom and common practice. They can master the high quality knowledge of, and attitude to, work which is normal in Japan, constructing irrigation facilities according to the blueprint, properly attaching joints and pipes, as well as finishing work within the planned construction period. An increase in the number of technicians and builders with this kind of knowledge and attitude will be highly beneficial for Syria’s industry. The fully trained technicians’ work in Syria will influence other contractors, obliging them to raise their work standards, resulting in an enhancement of the overall quality of Syria’s plumbing industry.

Unless the standard of practice at the working level is raised, introduction of state of art technologies will not win the necessary credibility. Furthermore, to nurture technicians in practical terms, it seems that non-ODA support would be more effective than bilateral government cooperation. More immediate results can be yielded by directly communicating to the workers that “you can make a profit by offering high quality work” and “what high-quality work means” through non-governmental channels. In any countries and any fields, there seem to be always essential needs for a country’s development which are difficult to support through ODA. Paying attention to these needs, this type of support to realize social significance rather than profit-seeking only should be a part of AAI’s business.



Left: Use of a brick instead of a pedestal makes durability problematic.

Middle: The water pressure gauge is impossible to read as it is fixed directly under the valve where a pipe is to be joined.

Right: Leaking as soon as the work is completed.