

## From assistance to business—from support to collaboration <Part 4>

### Japan's agriculture and cooperative work

As reported in the past issues of the AAINews, AAI has been exploring ways for supporting farming and training and nurturing of farming successors in Ushimado in Okayama Prefecture. In this issue, we would like to envisage models for regional revitalization based on the experiences in Ushimado.

Aging of farmers, a shortage of successors and an increase in abandoned farm lands have been pointed out to be the major challenges facing Japan's agriculture. It has also been long said that farming needs to incorporate a business perspective and management sense. It has almost become a cliché to suggest that marketing is important rather than farmers simply producing farming products.

The core of regional development is human capital, and this is the most important element. In order to nurture human capital, we need to employ methodologies that make the most of local resources to nurture future farmers and revitalize the communities. One such example is to establish a "Farmers' School" which aims to share technology, knowledge and wisdom inviting local farmers as lecturers, as part of training programs aiming to help upcoming farmers to establish his/her farming foundation.

The following can be considered as a training plan;

- 1) Agriculture beginners course (introductory course targeting people who have entered farming recently)
- 2) Agriculture intermediate course (intermediate course targeting new farmers and young farmers)
- 3) Agriculture trial course (targeting students and the general public)
- 4) Home gardening course (targeting people who would like to enjoy home vegetable growing)

Also, one could run a matching site on the internet to connect those who would like to start farming and those who need successors for, and helpers on, their farms.

As a measure to support agriculture business diversification, support is provided for establishing agricultural business groups to achieve diversification and multiple commercialization initiatives in order to increase their income and stabilize their business. Some concrete examples include supply of safe foodstuff to consumers, restaurant business that utilize local food items and value addition through agricultural product processing. They can also include tourism ventures that link tourism with experiencing farming and development of ecotourism products. Multiple business development is quite difficult and may entail high risk for individual farmers. Therefore by forming a group, the idea is to reduce the risks.

Through the project to nurture successors and through the process of diversifying business by group farming business management, our support aims to form regional farmers groups. There is a need for a consultant to support the group formation and their activities and manage the whole program, and this may be a potential role for AAI. Furthermore, the existence of the farmers' groups is expected to be a firm support structure for agriculture business of member farmers. This will also lead to circular utilization of local resources and help Ushimado achieve a "resource circular society" in future.

Farming is basically a means of livelihood. Although it is necessary to establish an economic foundation to be able to continue farming, there should be work which has inherent value rather than simply pursuing profits. Farming that is founded on value should be possible, rather than farming merely to grow money.

According to a survey, 75% of the respondents answered that they would like to live in cities after retirement. Aiming to create attractive communities in which one would like to live, this is what is being sought in current aging societies such as Japan.

