

From the country of sea tribes: Mangrove and environmental education

AAI has a long relationship with Oman and we have introduced the country on various occasions in this newsletter. This time, I visited Oman as part of a human resource development project aiming to establish an environmental information center for mangrove ecosystem conservation. In recent years, the words such as “middle east”, “the Gulf” and “oil producing countries” may conjure up images of a place like Dubai with modern cities with high rise buildings. However, Muscat, the capital of Oman is without high rises and has a very calm atmosphere with buildings that are mainly white or other gentle colors.

Compared with other oil producing states in the Gulf, oil production of Oman is small and the percentage of immigrant workers is also low. This is a result of “Omanization” that tries to utilize the Omani labor force without relying on foreign labor. Omanization is particularly thoroughly implemented in government offices. At the office of our counterpart agency the Ministry of Environment and Climate Affairs, most of the staff are Omani apart from some tea boys who are Indians. When I worked in neighboring UAE, it was very difficult to find any local counterparts. It was in a way shocking to see an Omani woman at the register at the supermarket in Oman! All taxi drivers are Omani. There was a move towards restricting barbers to Omanis. But apparently there was a lot of opposition as people were not very comfortable having their hair cut by an Omani who is not commonly believed to be good barbers. There are some funny stories like this.

In my current work, the main objective of the activities is to implement and strengthen environmental education activities in order to promote sustainable mangrove ecosystem conservation. Mangroves provide habitats for a variety of fishes and animals and create a rich ecosystem. Therefore, by protecting mangroves, we can protect biodiversity and maintain ecosystems.



Left: Mangrove forests in Qurm Nature Reserve
Right: Observing mangrove forest from the board walk

Using mangroves as an entry, the Qurm (Mangrove) Environment Information Center is expected to provide a space for nurturing the children to be environmental conscious future generations with a global outlook.

Many think about “desert tribes” when hearing the words “middle-eastern oil producing states”. However, Oman could be described as a country of “sea tribes” due to its long history of sea trade. During its heyday, Oman ruled a large area from the western part of Pakistan to Zanzibar in Africa to the south. It was a vase oceanic empire that embraced a variety of cultures and religions. Ancient Oman belonged to the Arab world, yet had an element of integration with Asian culture from places such as Pakistan. It was open towards the outside world, having exchanges with Africa reaching as far as Zanzibar.

There is a special meaning for establishing the Qurm (Mangrove) Environment Information Center in Oman with such a historic background with exchanges with other countries. The Center is expected to forge links with the outside world by collecting and dispatching various types of information related to mangroves and environmental conservation. Such a role is very appropriate for a country like Oman.

(By Koto, March 2012)



Ministr of Environment and Climate Affairs



Left: Mangrove planting experiences by children
Right: Nature game to understand mangrove's ecosystem

From assistance to business—from support to collaboration <Part 5>

Is “business” conceivable for cooperation with ex-participants of JICA Tsukuba?

AAI has been conducting training courses on upland rice variety selection techniques for Africa and vegetables/upland crops cultivation techniques at JICA Tsukuba. To date, 212 participants have completed the courses and returned to their home countries. We regard them as human assets. After returning home, many of the participants went back to their original work place, and have been working as extension officers, teachers or researchers. Then they move positions and they receive promotions. We featured their post-training work in home countries in AAINews No. 70, 71 and 72 in the series called “Close friends from far countries: AAI’s training follow-up program”. In the series, we introduced a Zambian ex-participant who organizes irrigation groups, provides training for vegetable cultivation targeting the farmers who are beneficiaries of irrigation, and teaches classes on tomato cultivation at an agricultural school. We also introduced ex-participants from Malawi who work on NERICA variety selection and tomato cultivation during the rainy season. We communicated, in the series, our dream of developing small projects in their countries making use of the network of ex-participants.

Among other African ex-participants, some went for further study to obtain bachelors, masters or doctorate degrees. Some were seconded to United Nations agencies, and some resigned from the government position and moved to NGOs or a partially government owned biotechnology company. Still, the target of their work remains to be the majority of small scale farmers who live in remote farming villages without benefiting from growing industries in urban areas.

The ex-participants are working on the social issues that the farmers directly face. We can join the effort to solve the issues and also seek profits at the same time. We would like to create a win-win-win situation whereby the three parties: farmers, ex-participants and AAI – will all benefit from our joint venture. Even if the profit is small, it would be good to

establish a business whereby at least the investment can be recovered. Isn’t it an effective way of increasing farmers’ income to have small-scale business that responds to a niche in their needs, looking at business with the objective of improving farmers lives? The idea is for us to provide financial support to the ideas of ex-participants. This will further motivate their passion for their work and encourage their continued support for farmers.

For example, the ex-participants from Zambia have organized irrigation farmers and provided support on vegetable cultivation (AAINews No. 71). It is conceivable that they could establish a “seed bank” to distribute high quality seeds to support cultivation of better quality vegetables. In this case, we could utilize our experiences in southern Zimbabwe when we collaborated with the local NGO in “the Seed Bank Project”. In the seed bank project, we bought quality seeds on behalf of the farmers who did not have easy access to towns. Farmers who received the seeds would cultivate vegetables, and after the sales, they would pay the price of the seeds back to the seed bank.

Out of the 212 ex-participants, 152 receive AAINews four times a year. We hope to continue to play the role of catalyst by dispatching information and technologies from our side based on our experiences and knowledge.

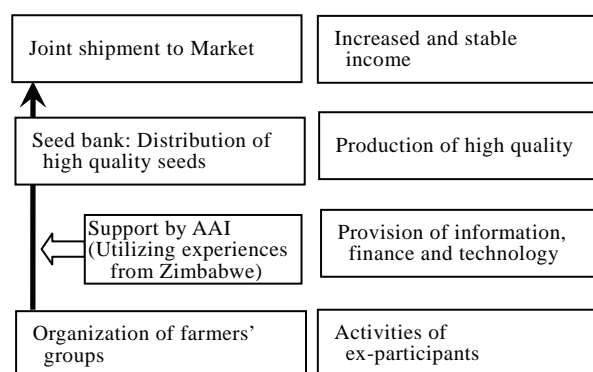


Image diagram: Support for the Zambian ex-participants



Seed Bank Project members



Farming plot jointly managed by the members



Project meeting

Agriculture and farmers in Kurdish region <Part 5>

Iraqi farmers' characters and promotion of agriculture

As discussed in AAINews No. 70, Kurdish farmers are very open and kind, and warmly welcomed us although we were sudden visitors. The Kurdish people in general seem to have warm feelings for the Japanese people.

This open and kind nature of the Kurdish people is also felt in their farming activities but in a different way. In other words, many residents who were in farming seemed to have a very weak notion of profits. They almost never had a clear answer to our questions such as "how much is your profit?" and "how much do you produce?" Although many Kurdish residents are farmers, it seems difficult for many of them to sustain livelihoods from farming income alone. A rain-fed wheat farmer told me with a smile, "The rain was too variable this year and there is no hope for much of a harvest." We also often heard about getting a job with Peshmerga when farming income is not sufficient. Peshmerga is the traditional name for the army of the Kurdistan Regional Government.

Many of the Kurdish farmers have large families. In addition to farming income, they sustain household economy with parents' pensions, non-farming incomes and income from their children brought in through various types of work. Many of the farmers supplement their income through temporary work with Peshmerga. It seems that the government is supporting farmers by offering such opportunities. Although I don't know the details, it seems that they can join the army easily.

On the other hand, in order to improve the unstable situation of agricultural production, the government is making a great effort with agricultural extension. According to extension officers, they conduct a number of extension activities, ranging from lectures targeting farmers, farm visits, and demonstration of farming methods and technologies at demonstration farms. However, the impacts of these efforts are feared to be not sufficient. I heard that extension methods are mainly through training at extension organizations and demonstration at farms. The target farmers tend to be those who are in leadership positions, and information tends not to reach small scale farmers. We also could not find any agricultural extension materials such as pamphlets and cultivation manuals in farmers' houses.

According to the discussion with the Kurdish extension organizations, it seems that the contents of lectures are totally up to the discretion of the lecturers. Lecture materials are not kept at the extension organization. Given that some farmers are illiterate, it is necessary to develop extension materials and establish a distribution system.

Under these circumstances, extension activities conducted by farming material companies seem to play an important role. We introduced in the past the cases whereby farming material companies offer some new technology to farmers when they sell materials. There seems to be a form of cooperation in part between the seller and user of the materials. We also heard that greenhouse material sales shops were planning to develop a cultivation guidance manual. In addition, they offer machinery and equipment that is necessary for new crop production to farmers who don't have financial resources to purchase them. In return, their farms work as demonstration farms to advertise the companies and their machinery.

Another example is related to vegetable cultivation extension activities supported by an NGO. The NGO provided materials and employed local farming technicians and requested the participation of local farmers. Farmers provide a certain amount of their labor for sustaining the farming plot, and divide profits from the harvests. According to the NGO staff, the biggest difficulty they had was to persuade the elders to participate. Young people participate in this kind of joint work relatively readily, but for the elderly, it is difficult for them to understand this kind of cooperative cultivation. However, I believe this kind of effort is a good example for future extension activity.

In recent years, research organizations that only had a limited amount of involvement in extension activities, are now actively participating in extension activities. It is important for research organizations which promote cultivation techniques to be fully involved in extension work. However, extension work and research activities have different viewpoints. Therefore it is important to support bridging of the two kinds of activities. We hope to continue to support the warm and friendly people in their quest to be self-sufficient farmers in the bread basket of the Kurdish region in Iraq.



NGO cultivation activities in a mountainous area



Hearing from fruit farmers



Farmers in traditional costume

Facts about dry land vegetation <Part 4>

In this forth part of the series, I would like to introduce one of the most common dishes in the Arab region: chick pea (*Cicer arietinum*). *Hummus* is the Arabic word for chick pea.

When I was working at the agricultural experiment station in the old capital Al Ain in the UAE in the mid 1970s, there was a restaurant which was our favorite among us. It was a clean and a little trendy Lebanese restaurant with waiters in white shirts and black pantaloons. I went there almost every day as I also became a friend with the waiters. The dishes I first learned about were *hummus*, *muttabal* and *tabbouleh*. *Hummus* is paste made with mashed boiled chick pea, garlic, *tahini* (sesame paste), olive oil and lemon juice. It is eaten with Arabian bread called *khubz*. *Hummus*, *khubz* and pickles are placed on the table before the main dish is served, and I could not help eating pieces of *khubz* dipped in hummus. It is rather delicious. We were hungry researchers and kept eating *hummus* and *khubz* so that we were often already full by the time the main dish was served. *Muttabal* is a paste made from grilled eggplant. This is also delicious. This may be more to the taste of Japanese. *Tabbouleh* is a stylish salad with finely chopped Italian parsley, mixed with onions, tomatoes and coarsely ground wheat called *bulgur*. It is easy to remember the name *tabbouleh*, if we associate the name with the Japanese phrase “tabe-lo” meaning “eat”!

Hummus



Muttabal



Tabbouleh

Hummus in Arabic simply means chick pea. If you put the peas on your palm and look at each of them carefully, you can understand why it is called a chick pea. Each pea actually looks like a chick. Living in the Middle East, there are lots of opportunities to eat beans. One particularly famous bean is *foul*: the broad

bean. When I was working for the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries in Dubai, Egyptian colleagues opened newspaper on the table in the morning and started having *foul* for breakfast. Colleagues surrounded the softly cooked *foul*, simply seasoned with olive oil and lemon, and eaten with small pieces of *khubz*. There often were breakfast parties like this. And the best soup is *shuraba adas*. *Shuraba* is soup and *adas* means lentil. Especially during hot summer, *shuraba adas* with lemon juice will help you overcome the summer heat! Living in the Middle East, we encounter a variety of beans. However, I never saw a *hummus* field in the Gulf.



Harvested chick pea



In the mid-1990s, I took a small boat from Tartus on the Mediterranean coast of Syria to a small island called Arwad. It is a historic island where Phoenicians started living and it was also once a base for the Crusaders. On the boat, children had small plants with small round fruit like things. They were eating green beans in the pods. Asked what there were eating, surprisingly they replied that it was *hummus*. I had only seen *hummus* in paste form, and it was an astonishing encounter with green chick pea! After that, when I visited the field with local extension officers, I sometimes ate green *hummus* pinched from the farmers' fields as I engaged in local surveys. Eating green chick pea seems to be something people like doing in spring. It is probably like the Japanese people eating *Edamame* (green/young soybean) in summer with some drinks.



Green/young chick pea

