

Being a good “interface” <Part 1>

Introduction

The separation between research and extension, which we discussed in AAINews No. 57, seems to have become a major problem all around the world. Agricultural researchers nowadays, in particular young researchers, are put in the position that they are obliged to conduct research and experiments in highly sophisticated and compartmentalized fields. This makes it difficult to respond to the actual needs of farmers which are inherently diverse. It seems rather than putting efforts on field based research work whose results may be harder to obtain, they tend to opt for research topics that more easily yield visible results in order to increase the number of their published academic papers. In addition, in some developing countries, researchers are not necessarily equipped to identify issues and challenges farmers face even if they visit the farmers. This creates a situation whereby identification of farmers’ needs is not done appropriately.

Japan is no exception to this, however it is particularly apparent among researchers in developing countries whom we have dealt with. Their characteristics can be summarized as follows: (1) researchers rarely visit field sites; (2) due to an elitist mentality, they look down on what farmers say; (3) they have insufficient connection with extension organizations; (4) they tend to like state of the art technologies and machinery which are difficult to use; and (5) academic paper writing becomes something driven by self interest. (1) and (2) should be out of the question, but such attitudes and approaches actually exist. Through complications caused by (1) to (5), it is concerning that the gap between research and farmers’ needs becomes bigger and bigger.

Naturally, it is not so simple that if researchers understand farmers’ needs, they can immediately start

research focusing on the needs. It is easy to imagine that it is not so easy to fill disconnect between researchers and farmers.

There are researchers who are seriously looking at challenges farmers face, but these are still a minority and there is much room for improving and overcoming problems. Firstly, efforts from researchers themselves would be important. We at AAI, as a consultant which works in many fields in various countries, have also been making efforts to improve our ability for investigation, coordination and problem solving, in order for us to be able to play a facilitating role as an interface between farmers and researchers.

In many projects that JICA is supporting in developing countries, we have been trying to shorten the distance between research institutions and farms, which seem to have drifted far apart. We have been trying this through activities under various projects such as farmers’ field school (FFS), introduction of farmer research group, joint research activities with farmers’ participation, and collaboration between extension and research activities. In this series, by investigating an example within a project which we have been involved, we would like to examine concretely the current situation, background and effective methods for narrowing the distance.

Some key words in this series are link, network and communication. In addition, in examining “interface”, we would like to broaden our focus of the interface between farmers and researchers. We would also like to have a look at the example of the interface among staff at different organizations or departments by Japanese specialists in various countries, and "interpreters" who connect nature and people in environmental education activities.



Extension activities with farmers



Workshop with various departments



An interpreter who connects people and nature