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Participation in Water Management Transfer in Egypt

I arrived again at Cairo airport one day in August, 2014, in order to join a JICA's Technical Cooperation in Egypt aiming to promote Water Management Transfer (WMT) by strengthening irrigation water users associations. Cairo, which I had not visited for one year, was much calmer than expected. There was no chaos in the city despite the coup that happened one year ago and the people seemed to be living peacefully although tourists were rare. With great relief, I started about one-month of field activities as a short-term expert to deal with training and other tasks designed to enhance WMT.

As reported in AAINews No.82, WMT is an initiative in irrigation national policy planning, promoted in many countries to tackle the fiscal difficulties of governments. It also seeks improvement of irrigation farming suffering from the enormous burdens involved in management of large-scale irrigation systems. The flat plains area of Egypt spans several million ha along the Nile and extends to the Mediterranean Sea. Irrigation channels fed by the river form a dense network transforming a naturally arid region into fertile agricultural fields. The Nile waters succor Egypt and make this possible. Cairo has an annual precipitation of less than 30mm. However, this large-scale irrigation system not only requires an enormous amount of labor and capital for its management but necessitates mutual cooperation and pro-active participation of the system users themselves. WMT intends to 'shift the status of the water users to a responsible position for sound irrigation water utilization' and adjust the paradigm from government management to more local management, direct user/beneficiary control and responsibility.

In the context of this article, the term 'water user' denotes a water users association that is a management entity of the irrigation system. The question is how to make water users accept the WMT concept and manage the irrigation system sustainably with more autonomy? Clearly, it is necessary to develop sufficient capacity both on technical and management aspects to enable successful application of WMT. The project I was involved with had adopted a three-tier training structure. It started with training the trainers of training implementers. These in turn, then train the actual trainers of the implementation, who go on to train the actual water users. My field mission was to support and facilitate this approach and to offer technical assistance for the establishment of the training system as a whole. The field activities themselves saw satisfactory progress thanks to efforts made by other long-term experts and cooperation from Egyptian counterparts. During my stay, a method of Curriculum Development Based on Vocational Ability Structure (CUDBAS) was used and I think that it led to a clear way forward for establishing the training system and made it possible to design a logical curriculum.

Training of trainers

CUDBAS Workshop

Honestly speaking, I was initially sceptical about the effectiveness of WMT. I thought that WMT would prioritize governments' needs to overcome their fiscal difficulties and that it would be difficult for WMT to receive cooperation from water users who may think WMT brings no benefit to them. Indeed, I witnessed one occasion where a government official could not answer a question posed by a farmer. It was a simple question, namely "How does WMT help us?" However, as I learnt about the real situation of irrigation administration promoted carefully by the Egyptian Government over the years, I began to think that the government-led effort might have gone too far in the direction of management and assistance with the result that it might become impossible for the government to actually manage the system.

Humanity, is by nature sometimes self-interested and short sighted. Each farmer works hard with high motivation when they face water shortages to establish a water user association. But once the irrigation system is built and the risk of water shortages is reduced, motivation among 'danger released' farmers to manage the irrigation system in collaboration dampens, and the operations of the association become less active. The government has increased interventions and subsidies in order to avoid such a condition and normalization of this situation has resulted in 'management of the irrigation system based on over-reliance on governmental support'. The government should think carefully about what they have promoted to create such a situation but I also want to say to the farmers, 'It's about time to stop being lazy and be more self-supporting'. Getting used to public services too much tends to cause loss of initiative and a sense of dependency.

The picture on the right was taken at an elevator of the Ministry of Water Resource and Irrigation in Egypt. An 'elevator uncle' has a full-time job here. Maybe this is one of the country's employment creation measures? However, it seems to me to be an unnecessary piece of government spending. This kind of excessive burden on the government and tax payer also often prevails in the field of irrigation administration.

(By Matsushima, October 2014)