

New Start at AAI

It was already 15 years ago, when I was wondering which path to take after having returned from my Japan Oversea Cooperation Volunteers (JOCV) assignment. My mentor Dr Kakubari of the Shizuoka University (forestry) introduced me to AAI. To an unexperienced man who had only willingness, AAI staff told me the importance of developing my own specialization which is the core of my work, and take my own decisions though listening to people with on-the-ground experience. Since then, I finished a master's course, and worked as a JICA junior expert, and entered into the field of international cooperation. I started visiting the AAI office from time to time, and AAI became my target and aspiration.

As I accumulated my work experience, while I felt motivated in particular with my field-based work, I often started wondering if Japan's technical cooperation is really needed by developing countries. I had opportunities to be involved in formulation and negotiation of technical cooperation projects in Ethiopia and Malawi, it took some time before reaching an agreement as the counterpart governments prefer to receive financial support to technical support. The situation must be different depending on countries and sectors. However, amongst numerous activities carried out by development assistance agencies and NGOs, I was acutely feeling that it was becoming more and more difficult for developing countries to clearly understand the significance and results of Japan's cooperation activities.



Cultivation of tobacco, which is a main cash crop in Malawi, tends to degrade soil



Concrete irrigation facilities are often used for laundry and bathing

I also became involved as a JICA long-term expert in implementation of the project. I worked in the West Kalimantan Province, supporting forest management within a national park. I witnessed first-hand rapid deforestation and oil palm plantation development. Traditionally, local people harvested non-timber forest products such as durians and bamboo shoots. However with oil palm plantation development, many transitioned from self-sufficient farmers to a plantation employee receiving income which now formed their livelihood. Some even abandoned their own farms. Although there were some people who complained that they lost their farmland without compensation, most people welcomed benefits from investments in oil palm plantations. However, a detailed field survey revealed economic disparity in a village between villagers who received

income opportunities from oil palm and those who did not. The picture became not as rosy as it first looked. In the short run, many local people could obtain cash income which they had never had in the past. However, they lost forest resources and their own farms which bring a variety of benefit to them in the long run. They also lost opportunities for future generations to utilize them. Was it really a good choice for the local people? I became very doubtful. Technologies and knowledge are important. But through technical cooperation activities, particularly in the field of forest and environmental conservation, we need to support more holistic capacity development of people, so that they can make appropriate decisions on the way of life and future they aspire to.

As is the case in many countries, in Indonesia, worsening relationships between local people and forest administration and law enforcers trying to control illegal logging is a big challenge. We therefore provided training targeting national park staff aiming to increase facilitation skills for partnership building with community, using support of JICA short-term experts. As several national park staff visited villages patiently and continued dialogue with villagers, they were able to gradually build mutual trust, and local people started taking initiatives for livelihood improvement and environmental conservation. Local NGOs having trouble with the hard-line attitude of the national park administration expressed their gratitude to us for changing awareness and attitudes of the park staff. Local actor's perception of our project changed from "outsider" to a partner towards improving national parks, resulting in increased collaboration among everybody involved. It became clear that being able to work within the government with the government counterparts is a strength of Japan's technical cooperation.



A family temporarily staying inside the forest during the harvest season of durian which brings cash income



Oil palm planted in a wetland which is not originally suited for the crop

I am entering the new era of my life, joining AAI, which mainly focuses on the agricultural field, as a forest and nature conservation specialist. Working as part of the AAI team, it will enable me to continue to pursue effective technical cooperation that is appropriate for local situations and people's needs. I would like to express my gratitude for the 15-year relationship I have had with AAI and am determined to do my best with the support of colleagues and friends.

(By Yoshikura, October 2016)