

New Series: Grassroots Collaboration, AAI's approach

Part 1: Why grassroots today? – The significance of grassroots collaboration

Recently it has been pointed out that ‘participatory development’ and ‘development projects based on the real needs of local community’ are said to be necessary and to play a significant role in placing the local community at the centre of the development project and make sure they are the ones who benefit directly from the project. In this new series we would like to discuss one such participatory development method, grassroots collaboration, and report on how AAI is involved in this field.

What is often associated with the word ‘grassroots’ are NGOs, but we do not consider simply that ‘all NGOs equal grassroots’ or vice versa. Rather, we adopt a more ‘functional’ way of thinking. We take the ‘grassroots’ or ‘NGOs’ approaches as they are necessary, or if their ‘function’ is necessary, in order to achieve what we aim at. That is, both ‘grassroots’ and ‘NGOs’ are nothing but ‘means’ to achieve an end. If the objective of a project is clearly laid out, the necessary means will become self-evident without sticking to certain methods or forms of activities. We hope the current series of reports will provide some guidance and hints as to how to create new cases of grassroots development activity.

Needless to say, the goal of ‘participatory development’ is not simply to get local people involved in the project. The real meaning of ‘participatory development’ is to find a way for the local people to be independent from outside help and to be able to solve problems with their own ideas, resources and manpower. Therefore, what is needed for the project to be successful and sustainable is more than mere ‘involvement’. It is necessary that the local people actively lead the project while it is the outsiders who get involved in it under the local people’s initiatives.

What about the reality, though? In more or less all the developing countries the predominant attitude of the host country/community is to see money and hard equipment as the panacea to their current problems. In other words, however much we wanted to hear the local people’s opinions with the ‘grassroots’ ‘participatory’ approach, what ends up being presented to us are the sort of opinions, demands and suggested solutions which would necessitate hard aid from outside donors (i.e., “we need more funds, and more equipment...”). Host developing countries would seldom propose low-cost and realistic ideas that would be implemented within their own current capacity.

If the aim of ‘grassroots’ ‘participatory’ projects is ‘independent’, ‘self-supporting’ development (eventually) without reliance on any outside help, then this kind of (wishful) thinking on the part of developing countries needs to be reformed. After all, do the local people in developing countries have the independent thinking needed for this kind of development approach? That is the significant starting point. It is necessary for them to realize the significance of having their own ideas, and the joy of having their ideas being realized and embodied. However, such a process is hardly possible in a top-down system. Here at this point, an effective means to facilitate the bottom-up initiative from the development field would be to have foreign development assistants from the outside serving as catalysts, that is working with the ‘grassroots’ approach. Therefore, this can be considered as a ‘challenge to the top-down system.’

In the coming issues we will report on several cases of AAI’s grassroots collaboration in various developing countries, that took place in the past and are still on-going today. Then we hope to reflect upon the significance, tasks and future prospects of grassroots collaboration.

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Part 2: Collaboration with a local NGO in Zimbabwe

We have reported about our collaboration with local NGOs in Zimbabwe in the past issues of AAINews (Vols. 28, 29 and 36). AAI's work with ZWP (Zvishavane Water Project) can be summarised as follows:

1. Manpower contribution (ZWP's activity survey and collaboration feasibility survey by AAI staff)
2. Financial support (for maintenance of small-scale dams and opening a new office of ZWP)
3. Technical advice (on vegetable cultivation in 'group gardens')
4. Proposal writing for joint projects to be submitted to various funding opportunities such as the Grant Aid for Grassroots Projects of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the JICA Community Empowerment Programme.

Here, we would like to think about the NGO approach once again. Working in the field of development aid in developing countries, often we encounter the question, "development for whom?" This question leads us to adopt an approach that enables us to deal with the beneficiaries more directly, and there is a need for projects with such an approach. At the level of international 'trends' in development co-operation, nowadays there are a lot of ODA projects supporting NGOs and collaborative activities with NGOs. Today there are various schemes to support such NGO activities, including NGO project subsidies such as NGO Grant Assistance, Grant Assistance For Grassroots Projects and other support funds. Moreover, JICA has recently established such schemes as the Community Empowerment Programme and the JICA Partnership Programme, which are meant to give direct support to domestic and international groups or to work in partnership with NGOs in aid projects. However, 'grassroots collaboration' is not an end but only a means, and what is important is to ensure the sustainability of the project, project ownership and independence of the local community. Having the project started from somewhere physically close to the beneficiaries, and/or with the bottom-up approach, does not automatically ensure that the project's sustainability and ownership will be assumed by the local community.

The sense of ownership on the side of the local community should be nurtured at a slow pace – the pace that the local community functions at, and never at a fast pace dictated by the donor group's timetable of convenience. This is a very important point in collaboration with local NGOs. In the case of our collaboration with ZWP, at the beginning of a new project in a new place we make sure to spend enough time on preliminary surveys to discuss the project with the target community and to understand the current situation thoroughly. By doing so we try to encourage the local community to actively get involved. Our group garden projects in particular, which are ongoing in more than 20 places, have been initiated in areas where we found strong motivation and demand from the local communities themselves. In addition, we try to make sure that the relationship between ZWP and local communities is mutual and equal, rather than having one party dependent on the other in every way. For instance, in the case of small dam construction, raw materials (cement) and equipment (wheel barrows, shovels etc.) are provided by ZWP, but the construction work is done by the local people themselves.

From the NGO point of view, 'power as a system/organization' is important to ensure the 'sustainability' of a project. That is, what is needed is not only the idealism and enthusiasm, but also reliable technologies, lasting resources (funds, organisational structure, human resources etc.) and appropriate strategies. At the moment ZWP does not have any self-generating income sources, but all the activity expenses come from financial aid from its donors. The funds needed for the currently on-going projects are already secured, and the staff members are all tied up with the implementation of those projects. Therefore, in future collaboration with ZWP we would need to hire more staff in order to start new projects. In looking at the vegetable cultivation projects at group gardens, ZWP does not have any human resources capable of instructing about cultivation techniques. As the current donors also do not give technical instruction, there is a need for support to upgrade the technical aspect of ZWP activities. Therefore, for the future collaboration of AAI with ZWP, it is probably more realistic and effective to give support to improving techniques and technologies employed in the on-going projects, such as vegetable cultivation techniques at group gardens, rather than starting up new projects.



Small-scale dam maintenance work



Discussion with a target community



A well for a group garden

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Part 3: Collaboration between experts and JOCV – experiences from Syria

Since 1965, some 2,000 young Japanese volunteers have been sent every year to developing countries through the Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCV), aiming to contribute to development through working at the grassroots level with local people. There are over 140 categories of activities, including agriculture, forestry, fisheries, civil engineering, health and welfare, education, culture, sports etc. While working in their respective fields, young volunteers live under the same living conditions as the local community. Another main purpose of the JOCV scheme, apart from the technical aid, is to provide young Japanese with opportunities to expand their worldview, experience and understand the reality of developing countries.

While staying in Syria as a long-term expert from JICA, I had opportunities to discuss various issues regarding international cooperation with other experts and volunteers. These discussions included the concerns and complaints we had, and suggestions for improvements in the future, etc. A voluntary “ODA Study Group” was started from such informal discussions, in order to discuss and take some actions on such issues as ‘self-support and aid’ and ‘collaboration between experts and volunteers’. Since its establishment in July 2000, the group held meetings once or twice a month. The group decided to take up some specific actions, and started to try ‘horticultural therapy’ at a nursing institute (see Vol.32) in Kodseiya. Since then, several other activity groups were set up by the member in the same activity fields, or by those who can work in the common field with different expertises. These groups included, for example, horticulture group, UNRWA group, music group, sports group, etc.

One main topic of discussion at the ODA Study Group was the old and new problem of the ‘disparity between aid requests and the reality’. What is behind this problem is not unrelated to the way the JOCV scheme operates. No generalisation can be made as the situations vary depending on specialized fields and host countries. However, it seems that at the bottom of the JOCV scheme there is a notion that it is one way of educating Japanese young generations, and that their ‘growth’ (as a human and as an upright citizen) itself is the expected major outcome as opposed to the actual contribution the volunteers can make with their activities in the field. When JOCV was first started, it was considered good enough as long as the volunteers returned home alive, irrespective of their actual activities. This was probably due to the more difficult conditions in recipient countries and to the nature of activity fields, most of which were primary industrial activities (agriculture, forestry and fisheries). However as the years passed by, the types of activity fields have become diversified and an increasing number of volunteers are working in urban areas, and the situation surrounding JOCV volunteers is today very different from that in earlier days. There might be a need to diversify the volunteer scheme according to recent diversified needs and conditions, rather than grouping all the volunteers under the umbrella of JOCV.

At the same time, from the viewpoint of ‘grassroots development aid’ or ‘visible cooperation’, both of which are often stressed these days in the field of international cooperation, the JOCV scheme has a very significant importance. Under these circumstances, maybe there is a way to make use of the JOCV scheme in a more strategically viable manner. For instance, collaboration between experts and volunteers as seen in the case of the above Study Group seems very effective. In general, volunteers work at the field level and whatever problems they encounter are often not conveyed to the upper level, but experts can provide direct or lateral support in such cases. On the other hand, for the experts it would be useful to have such interaction with the field volunteers in terms of information gathering and other field activities at the grassroots level. Moreover, from the viewpoint of their ‘education’, collaboration with experts who have much experience and skills in the field of international cooperation would be quite beneficial for the volunteers. It may be necessary to think of some strategy to make full use of the grassroots potential of JOCV, while retaining its positive objectives pursued thus far.



After the preparation of a crop field



Flowers blooming in the garden



Musical gift for children

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Part 4: Social interactions with community-based organizations in Oman

AAI has formed a very strong relationship with Oman through its development activities thus far. Also currently AAI is conducting a development study on the restoration and conservation of mangrove forests there, and a long-term expert from AAI is working in the country. With its fossil energy resources, Oman is a relatively rich nation. In addition, the Government of Oman has been making great efforts to improve the livelihood and welfare of its people, by creating employment opportunities through the "Omanization policy" (a policy to give priority to the employment and technological empowerment of Omani nationals instead of employing the foreign workers who used to dominate the country's labor market) and by providing free education and medical services.

The Dhofar Governorate in the south of Oman, where many of our activities have taken place so far, has a unique natural environment. The mountainous area of this region is covered with rich vegetation thanks to the monsoon coming from the Indian Ocean. This enables this area to support a stockbreeding industry based on the available natural resources and to attract tourists from neighboring Gulf States. However, in recent years the natural vegetation here has been rapidly depleted mainly due to excessive grazing (see AAINews Vol.2, 13-18). The Omani Authority is gravely concerned about this problem, and it is planning some countermeasures such as control of livestock numbers by providing financial support and plantation activities by relevant government agencies. However, less activity involving the local community is being planned or considered. In addition, in the past there have already been some government-led projects for vegetation rehabilitation, but no noteworthy outcome has been achieved.

In this context, since last year AAI has been conducting activities for social interaction with, and information gathering from, local people, in order to facilitate the project of environmental rehabilitation and vegetation recovery in the mountain area in a way that is linked with the livelihood of the local community. As stated above, Oman as a whole has a reasonable level of life and welfare, but at the local level there are people with financial difficulties that prevent them from being socially independent. One example of such people is divorced women. The Dhofar Department of Agriculture and Fisheries is supporting honey production activities in the mountain area as part of the empowerment scheme for such ladies. *Zizyphus spina-christi* (Christ thorn, local name Sidr) which is found in this area produces high-quality honey. AAI collected information on beekeeping techniques in Japan as well as traditional techniques in Oman to introduce to the local women's groups.

Another AAI activity in this area is to help the facilitation of forest regeneration in collaboration with local organizations for physically challenged people. Plantation activities, including transplantation of seedlings, are introduced as part of the rehabilitation activities for handicapped people. Through such active interaction with the local people, this project aims to promote plantation and forest recovery activities with local participation. Dhofar Department of Agriculture and Fisheries is also trying to start up the "small-scale greening project" as part of their vegetation recovery scheme. This project is to encourage each person in the local community to plant trees in a small plot (20mx20m). These are then dispersed widely in the mountain area. AAI has become the first organization to provide financial support for this project.

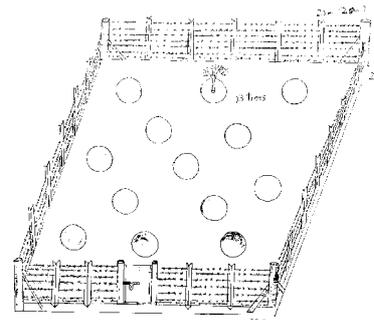
This type of interaction between AAI and the local people in Oman has just started, and due to time constraints not enough interaction has been achieved yet. However, we believe that it is important to keep trying and continue the interaction in order to understand the local people and their needs better and eventually to contribute to solving the problem of environmental conservation and vegetation rehabilitation in this area. There is a rich tradition of strong communal sense and mutual support among the people in Oman. Drawing upon such culture, we are trying to promote regional environmental conservation through collaboration with the local community in various aspects, by linking children's education, rehabilitation of the handicapped and women's empowerment with plantation and other environmental activities.



Facility for the physically challenged in Salalah



Mountain landscape in the dry season



Blueprint of the small-scale greening project

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Part 5 Our Activities in Laos

As introduced in AAI News Vol. 22 and 29, we conducted a feasibility study on agricultural and rural development for the area along the Mekong River from 1997 to 2000. This was the start of the AAI's involvement in Laos. After the feasibility study, some AAI staff members visited Laos as part of a technology exchange project and some close associates of the AAI participated in the agricultural development projects of the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) and some NGOs. In addition, project type technical cooperation on aquaculture nurtured by staff members of the sister company FAI (Fisheries and Aquaculture International Co., Ltd.) started in Laos. As it is, Laos is rapidly becoming a very close country to the AAI. Compared with countries such as Zimbabwe where the AAI started its grassroots activities, Laos is much more easily accessible from Japan. We visited Laos from May 2002 in order to find suitable grassroots activities for the AAI. We thought through what kinds of contributions the AAI could make for the agricultural and rural development of the country.

The following four areas were identified as possible fields of intervention.

- 1) Contributing to building a system of government extension services for the residents of the villages that were selected in our feasibility study,
- 2) Contributing to the development of small and medium size enterprises which process excess produce and products that do not last long in order to assist farmers to increase their income,
- 3) Contributing to local development, and thereby to environmental education, through technical assistance in the areas of organic farming, natural dye manufacture, tea production and food processing at the existing model organic farm, and
- 4) Contributing to the promotion of environmentally friendly agricultural practices that integrate agriculture, forestry and fisheries by purchasing a plot in Laos to demonstrate organic farming involving local farmers.

The organic farm mentioned in number 3 is located in the suburb of the popular tourist town of Vangvieng that lies about 150 km north of Vientiane. In recent years this area has been building a reputation as a scenic resort with its limestone karst mountains. There are many outdoor activities such as kayaking, fishing, trekking and camping and many young backpackers from Europe visit the area. No large-scale hotels have been built and many accommodations are guesthouses with a small number of rooms and bungalows. The organic farm grows mulberries, vegetables and fruits, and produces and sells value added products such as silk, mulberry tea, jam and fruit wines. There is also a health food restaurant that uses organic vegetables and chicken. Accommodation there is not for tourists in search of organic produce, but for people who would like to work on the farm in exchange for food and lodging. This system is called WWOF (Willing Workers on Organic Farms).

Last November, an AAI associate who is knowledgeable about textile designing, visited the farm to share her textile designing and plant dye techniques. In the future we are planning to send people who can provide skills in organic cultivation, tea processing and food processing. In this case, we do not plan to "teach" Japanese skills. Rather, we would like to try to extract good potential by finding out what the local residents are thinking through understanding the local skills. We believe only in this way we can identify the real needs of the people. For this kind of work it is highly important to spend enough time; i.e. the AAI staff members who will be sent to the region need to interact with people with a common vision over a long period. We firmly believe through this type of activity local residents can eventually take full ownership of the project. The AAI is determined to pursue activities truly beneficial to the local residents with a clear vision for agricultural development in Laos.



Mulberry tea production



Organic mulberry field



Organic lunch

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Part 6 The Goals of Grassroots Cooperation

In the current series so far we have reported on some cases of so-called “grassroots cooperation” undertaken by AAI as its original activity (Muscat Fund activity), in order to consider the meaning, challenges and the future direction of grassroots cooperation. These cases can be summarized as follows:

Type of Cooperation	Activity Summary	Key Words
Collaboration with local NGOs (Zimbabwe)	Various projects for rural community support in collaboration with local community-based organizations (NGOs)	- Community-based organization - Ownership of local people
Collaboration between experts and Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCV) (Syria)	Interaction and collaboration between experts and JOVC volunteers with different expertise and affiliations	- Strategic use of JOCV volunteers - Face-to-face assistance
Interaction with local community organizations (Oman)	Support for introduction of beekeeping techniques and small-scale greening projects through interaction with local women's groups and organizations for the physically disabled	- Environmental conservation activities by local people - Mutual support by local cooperatives
Preliminary study for agricultural rural development (Laos)	Preliminary study of the potentials of agricultural rural development in Laos to serve the local communities in a true sense	- Unhurried interaction - Team-building and understanding of the real needs - Activities initiated and conducted by the local people themselves

The important points which are common in these activities are that they stress the importance of locally based work and “ownership” of these activities by the local community (the local community's initiative), and that these activities are started from the point of understanding the real needs. For so-called participatory projects carried out in developing countries, the consent and active (as opposed to passive) participation of local people is one of the key factors which determines the success and failure of the projects. However, in reality there are often such cases where local people are passively mobilized under the name of participatory development. In other words, the top-down approach under the guise of bottom-up is prevalent.

Incidentally, one of the recent trends of grassroots cooperation (or participatory development) is the prioritization of poverty alleviation as a main goal. As a popular solution for this goal, income generating activities and use of micro-credit is encouraged. True, there is the reality of acute poverty in developing countries, and that is a big problem which should not be overlooked. However, is it the right way to proceed to resort to the approach based on the market economy system, in which everybody has to compete with each other to gain more and more “wealth”? Does that really lead to the reduction of poverty and improvement of livelihood of the poor as a whole? Doesn't that actually lead to the creation and widening of the gap between the rich and the poor? Also, is there a good enough remedy for the “losers” who are bound to be created in the “competition” promoted by the developers, and do they ensure some form of “safety net” measures in case the “investment” in the micro credit scheme fails?

Considering the potential danger of such a market economy approach, it seems necessary to rethink the role and meaning of traditional locally based systems of mutual support, such as “yui” and “kou” practiced in Japan in the past. Introduction of a modern version of such traditional systems, for instance local currency, may be considered, along with other forms of participatory and grassroots cooperation to build up local mutual support systems. “From competition to co-existence” should be the key concept when we think of the goal of participatory development and grassroots cooperation (i.e. when we try to answer the question “What is participatory development for?”).