

## 'Towards the 21st Century' Revisited <Part 5>

### Sakae Furusato Vegetable Garden

In the fifth article of this series, we report on AAI's recent efforts to foster regional revitalization in Japan.

Tsukuba City, Ibaraki Prefecture, famous for the Tsukuba Science City, was formed when six towns and villages were merged between 1987 and 2002. The city has been developed mainly in the science city area and along the newly built railway line, and the population here is still increasing. On the other hand, the city's eight "peripheral urban areas" (also known as Region 8 or R8), which were the centers of the towns and villages before the merger, are experiencing a decline in population and an increase in the elderly population rate. In response to this situation, the city supported the establishment of "community revitalization councils" in each of the R8 communities to encourage residents to take the initiative in revitalizing their communities. In addition, the city also held the Tsukuba R8 Regional Revitalization Plan Competition as an attempt to attract private-sector vitality.

Based on our extensive experience gained over 20 years of JICA agricultural training in the city and our expertise in rural development overseas, we prepared a proposal and submitted it to the competition in 2020. Our proposal, entitled the "Tsukuba Furusato ('hometown') Vegetable Garden Project," focused on the characteristics of the R8 district, which is close to the city center and surrounded by farmland, and provided an opportunity for "new residents" in the city center and "cooperating farmers" in the R8 district to interact through agricultural experiences. Fortunately, the proposal was adopted after the screening process.

After the plan was adopted, the target was narrowed down to the Sakae area from the R8 areas, and preparations were made through discussions with local residents, including the board members of the Sakae community revitalization council. Many of the board members were retired residents in their late 60s. We initially thought that we would find local "cooperative farmers" among this generation. However, most of this generation in the Sakae area had not continued the area's farming heritage and were working for companies, and the shift away from farming in the area was surprisingly

advanced. At one point we believed that the concept was no longer viable. Further discussions revealed that not a few people of this generation had the experience of living in a farming village and the sense of being a farmer, having watched and helped their parents with farm work when they were children. Therefore, we decided to ask such people to participate in the activities as "local supporters" to convey the culture and lifestyle of the rural community to participants from the city center, and AAI took the lead in providing them with vegetable cultivation techniques. In this way, the "Sakae Area Furusato Vegetable Garden" project was launched.

The "Garden" is a program in which AAI conducts a vegetable gardening class and participants from the city center can experience growing vegetables in a garden located in a beautiful rural landscape with a view of Mt. Tsukuba. The program also reflects the cosmopolitan nature of the science city by accepting foreign residents, taking advantage of AAI's overseas experience.

The "garden" is now in its fourth year. We have about 50 participants each year and find many repeat participants. Local supporters also enjoy the activities. Through this project, a small but continuous interaction within and outside the community has been created. While it may be paradoxical to use agriculture to revitalize an "urban" area, we believe that this activity has demonstrated its effectiveness as an initiative that takes advantage of the unique characteristics of the R8 area. In order for the "garden" to continue as a community activity for a long time, it is necessary to strengthen the supporters in the community and to spread the activity across generations. Recently, the council has held a "morning market" at the site of the "garden", and a system has been established whereby the council serves as the main body for administering the "garden". Although there are many issues to be addressed, the project is making progress as a community-wide activity.



A local supporter (left) gives advice to participants.