

'Towards the 21st Century' Revisited <Part 6>

Conclusion

In the past, we discussed "coexistence of nature and humans," "affluence," and "ways of life" in two series featured in AAINews. Twenty years have passed, and issues stemming from globalization and capitalism appear to have only intensified. In this series, we have revisited these themes through concrete examples of activities in which AAI members and former members were involved, focusing on approaches to regional development including environmental issues, and considering sustainable societies and lifestyles.

In the case of the Universal Agriculture Initiative in Fukuroi City, Shizuoka Prefecture, efforts focused on creating a feasible framework within the community. This connected elderly and disabled individuals seeking social participation and employment with the agricultural sector, which is facing challenges such as an aging population, a lack of successors, and an increase in abandoned farmland. One retired AAI member's activities in Miyazaki Prefecture focused on local revitalization through firefly breeding, which aimed to protect the environment and create new value for the region while engaging with local residents. In Mito City, Ibaraki Prefecture, a former member documented his effort to transit into fruit farming, highlighting struggles and insights gained gradual understanding gained from interactions with senior farmers. Meanwhile, the Sakae Furusato Vegetable Garden Project in Tsukuba City showed that while small in scale, the initiative fostered sustained interaction both within and outside the community.

These initiatives were not started by us alone but were based on activities initiated by local welfare facilities, NGOs, and municipal governments. Many local governments and residents share a sense of urgency about addressing issues such as environmental impacts and regional community challenges, recognizing that these are not reflected in efficiency-driven economic evaluations. Each of these actors has started working within their limited human and financial resources.

Through our involvement in these activities, we have encountered new challenges and social issues. In the case of the Sakae Furusato Vegetable Garden, it became clear that the region's disengagement from agriculture had progressed more than expected, highlighting the

challenges of finding successors to sustain agricultural activities in the region. On the other hand, the experience of a Regional Revitalization Cooperation Team member, who was expected to become a leader in local agriculture, exposed the paradoxical reality that, despite such expectations, securing farmland for agricultural inheritance is difficult. Additionally, the observation from the Miyazaki firefly case, that "relationships unique to rural areas are deeply intertwined with local economies and culture" is particularly insightful, highlighting the difficulties faced by outsiders or those who have been away for a long time when trying to engage in local activities.

In international technical cooperation, environmental conservation and community sustainability are critical themes, but Japan's challenges seem even more severe. Abandoned farmland, while no longer in use, remains classified as agricultural land. While the number of farmers is decreasing and the population is aging, there are still people with the will to continue farming. If this abandoned farmland is no longer recognized as farmland, and if there are no people left in rural areas who can call themselves farmers, it will be impossible to regain what is lost. Just thinking about it is terrifying. Now is the time to take action, and we, as AAI, want to expand our opportunities to apply the lessons from overseas to promote agriculture and rural revitalization within Japan.

In this series, we have introduced four initiatives closely related to AAI. While working on these small-scale, community-based activities is meaningful, it is also true that there are limits to what can be achieved by such efforts alone. To transform these grassroots activities into a larger force, an objective and broad perspective is needed. The necessary legal reforms and governmental-level initiatives cannot be developed only by local efforts. However, there are mechanisms and innovations that can be implemented at the local level. We, too, must always maintain a sense of discipline, ensuring that we do not become self-satisfied with our small-scale activities.

Reflecting on these activities compared to 20 years ago, I believe we have made some progress. Moving forward, it is essential to continue developing our efforts into ones that are socially significant.