

Agriculture in Japan and the Role of Youth
Nouminren (Japan Family Farmer's Movement)
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La Via Campesina Youth Conference, Timor-Leste, March 2009

Overview of agriculture in Japan:

People think of Japan as a developed country with high technology, and many people are surprised to know that agriculture and farmers do exist in Japan. In fact, there is! Japan is a country with abundant wealth of nature including fertile soil and plenty of water. The land is suitable for farming. However, the Japanese government with strong pressure from big companies has given priority to industrial progress by the sacrifice of agriculture. Neoliberal policies taken by the government are destroying agricultural production in Japan as well as the livelihood of the rural area. Japan is now depending heavily on imported food and food sufficiency rate of Japan is only 40%. Out of 120 million populations, less than 3 million people engage in agriculture and 60% of them are age over 65 years old. Only 8.5% are age under 39 years old. As a result, only 2% of world population is buying up 10% of food in the world market. This can never be justified under the current food crisis.

The following points are some issues young farmers in Japan are facing.

Deregulation

The increased import after WTO caused the low price of farm products. As a result, many farmers cannot continue their production and this forced them to migrate from the rural area to the cities. The number of the youth in agriculture is rapidly decreasing as many youth go to cities to find jobs. Even after finding a job in the city, the youth still suffer from bad working condition under neoliberal policies. Many of them find only unstable employment and become day laborer with very low pay. There are increased number of youth becoming homeless and stay at internet café overnight, such youth are called "internet refugees."

Shift to large scale production

This requires farmers to purchase new machinery and materials in mass quantities. Cost of materials such as fertilizer and cardboard boxes are rising. Therefore many farmers are suffering from heavy debt after shifting to larger scale. In addition, the government promotes large scale production with emphasis on competitiveness and efficiency, and they neglect family farmers, which make up the most of Japanese farming population. The government is eager to take away the restriction that limits entry of corporations in agrarian sector. More farm lands are abandoned under such policies as more small farmers are pushed out from agriculture. This makes it very difficult for the youth to engage in agriculture. In fact, many parents do not wish their children or grandchildren succeed their farm.

Low market price

Large supermarkets are now controlling the market. Middle and small size retailers are going out of business as they cannot compete. The supermarkets are developing “private brand,” and this makes the low price competition more intense.

While the cost of production is rising, the market price is falling. The market price often fails to cover the cost of production. Farmers are demanding price guarantee system.

Violation of human rights

Under neoliberal policies, all the people in society are forced to live in difficult condition including the bad working environment. Many youth cannot find any hope to their future and commit suicide. While the government protects the interest of big companies, they sacrifice the rights of people. Increased number of foreigners as cheap labor is making this issue more serious as they are severely exploited in the system.

Safety of food is in danger

With high dependency on imported food and agricultural products, there are series of cases that threat safety of food and health of people. This includes beef import from the US(with risk of mad cow disease/BSE), contaminated rice, contaminated frozen dumplings from China, melamine-tainted daily products, ...(the list goes on). These incidents occurred because the government does not take adequate measure to check the safety of food, they are more concerned to protect the interest of the business sector than the health of people.

Because of the above conditions, it is extremely difficult for the youth to remain in rural area or to start faming.

As you may noticed, the issue we face is not only about agriculture. Lots of issues we face today in our society are intertwined, and many have it roots in the system of neoliberalism. Therefore, it is important for us to organize ourselves and join struggle to protect our livelihood, food, and agriculture.

Nouminren(Japan family farmers movement) is a farmers organization that struggle for the rights of small farmers to protect Japanese agriculture. It also joins a broader network of people, *Shokkenren* with members from different social sectors such as trade union, consumers, women, teachers, etc.

Role of the youth:

I would like to introduce a bit about *Nouminren* youth association. The association includes the young farmers and staffs in *Noumiren*. We work to promote the better livelihood for the rural youth through exchange and learning. Because there are not many young farmers, they are often isolated even within their own community. As the youth association, we want to reach out to these youth so that they will be able to meet many youth facing similar situation.

In the national level, the youth association is organized through a steering committee. Youth

representatives are chosen from different regions, and the committee meets regularly to discuss about action plans, strategies, national gatherings, regional events, and other issues. National youth assembly and field trip are two annual events held nationally. These events are great opportunity for the youth to meet others from different regions, exchange information, learn different approach to organize the youth, and gain inspiration and new ideas. These events also help the youth to deepen the understanding of their own issue in the wider framework.

Not all the region in Japan has its own local youth organization yet. Some regions are more active while some are not. Therefore, the youth association are organizing gathering in different regions to meet the local youth to exchange ideas and encourage them to be involved. Often times, these attempts are successful as the youth association provides a place for the youth (who are often isolated) to meet the other youth and to find their roles in the organization.

In the local level, various activities are carried out by the youth. Through local organization, youth are discussing the local issues they face in daily lives, learning, holding parties or harvest events. For example, one region held a match-making party, where they have invited many girls from the cities to meet the rural youth who are facing difficulties finding mates. In another region, some youths got together to learn and start producing compost. Sunday green market, harvest party, and there are many other unique activities organized locally. Local actions are spontaneously organized to meet specific demands in the local. The society is changing its shape as the time goes by, thus the issues we are facing today are also changing its appearance. It is the youth being flexible and creative to turn the problems into hope with new approaches.

It is also important for us to connect with youths from other sectors, and this allows us to understand the root causes of issues. Last year, G8 summit was held in Hokkaido, and together with the youth from trade union, we have organized an international youth forum. Many youths have attended this and exchanged information. This became the first step for us for the future cooperation. The issue of agriculture and food is not just for the farmers, it must be shared with the wider society.

Through the activities by the youth association, we have learned that the association is a very important place for the youth to be connected. Many youths in Japan are facing isolation and losing hope, but if these youths are connected, the greater energy and hope are generated. Gathering is a key to infinite possibility for us.