Although Peru continues to achieve stable economic growth, wealth disparities remain significant with 20% of the population said to be living in poverty. The poverty rate is particularly high in mountainous regions of the country, where the benefits of economic growth have not reached the people yet.

For more than 10 years from 1997 Japan has cooperated on alleviating poverty and preserving the natural environment in mountainous regions in Peru. The cooperation projects, including assistance for farm management, afforestation efforts and agricultural infrastructure development such as small-scale irrigation projects, were implemented to improve agricultural productivity and to preserve soil and forests. Based upon these cooperative projects in Peru, from July 2011 to July 2016, a Project for Improving the Livelihood of Small-scale Farmers was implemented in the province of Cajamarca, which has the highest poverty ratio among all mountainous regions in the country.

Almost all residents of Cajamarca Province make their living in agriculture. However, the crop yields were very poor because of the adverse production environment, such as numerous inclined terrain areas, coupled with a low level of cultivation techniques, including insufficient weed removal. For example, the yield per unit area for green peas, one of the staple crops in the region, was only approximately one-fifth of that of Japan. In response to this situation, this project engaged in efforts to improve production techniques for selected crops: green peas and purple corn, the latter being selected as a new crop that could assist in improving the livelihoods of farmers.

There is a high demand for purple corn in Peru. The whole corn is boiled to create the beverage known as “chicha morada,” and also eaten in the form of jelly and cookies. The corn cob is also used as a dye material.

Mr. Michinori Yoshino was dispatched to Peru as a JICA expert in January 2012. After graduating the university he joined the Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCV) and engaged in activities to spread vegetable cultivation techniques in Panama. Upon returning to Japan he joined Nippon Koei Co., Ltd., and to date he has been involved in a series of agricultural development projects in the field, including efforts to improve agricultural techniques and develop agricultural infrastructure in Indonesia, Myanmar, and the Philippines.

Mr. Yoshino’s first job in Peru was to provide guidance on basic cultivation techniques. As the level of cultivation techniques in mountainous regions was very low, Mr. Yoshino started by providing guidance on weed removal, the formation of furrows and ridges, and methods of planting seeds at regular intervals. This guidance was initially met with skepticism by some farmers, who questioned why such efforts were necessary. Nonetheless, Mr. Yoshino persisted in his efforts. The result was a significant increase in crop yield, which gained him the trust of the local farmers. By the time the project concluded, the per unit area crop yields of the participating farmers had increased by an average of 2.5 and 3.9 times respectively for purple corn and green peas, and by 7.3 times and 9.3 times in the best cases.

There are various factors behind the success of this project. One that Mr. Yoshino points to is the fact that farmers were required to bear part of the cost themselves. This is because Cajamarca Province farmers are generally perceived as being socially vulnerable rather than as participants in economic activity, and the cash and other benefits they receive in assistance further conspires to decrease their desire to engage in production.

In addition to improving cultivation techniques, the project also sought to engage in joint purchasing of agricultural materials, joint sales, and strengthen cooperation with distributors and wholesalers. Doing so helped construct a food value chain by bringing together production, processing, distribution, and sales. As local government officials perceived buyers, distributors, and processors to be “exploiters of farmers,” they initially reacted negatively to the support for the construction of a food value chain. However, their understanding was gradually gained through patient explanation of how they need to correctly perceive the food value chain holistically, maximize the advantages of individual stakeholders and also build trust in working relationships in order to not only produce crops but also to expand profit through questionning the conventional form of selling.

Another point that Mr. Yoshino focused on during the project was not simply to provide instruction on techniques in a one-way flow, but rather to respect the experiences of local technicians and farmers. The local participants were at first passive in their involvement. However, through a process of thinking and working together, they gradually began engaging more positively in discussions on how to improve cultivation techniques. For example, they would ask questions such as “What would be the best way to harvest only the cob of purple corn?” or “Is there any way to extract dye material from the husks too?”

Looking back on the project, Mr. Yoshino emphasizes the following point. “Although local people have a strong desire to acquire Japan’s advanced technologies, without the basics in place, advanced techniques and technologies will simply not function. Even without introducing anything new, in agricultural assistance, it is important to enable people to use basic techniques efficiently without fail. I believe that this is another of Japan’s strengths.”

Following the conclusion of the project, efforts have been continued by the National Institute of Agrarian Innovation (INIA) and provincial, district, and municipal governments, utilizing both standard budget allocation and also special funds. The Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation is also planning to launch a successor project using its own budget, which will expand activities to three provinces, including Cajamarca. As a result of Mr. Yoshino’s efforts, initiatives to eliminate poverty by developing agriculture and forming a food value chain are gradually coming to fruition.