Fish Culture in Rice Fields Improves Livelihood of Rural Community
– Small-Scale Aquaculture Extension Project in Myanmar –

Myanmar was ruled by a military regime following the collapse of the socialist government in 1988, but democratization has progressed under President Thein Sein, who was inaugurated in March 2011. One person who has continued to engage in the development of rural areas in Myanmar is JICA technical cooperation project expert Shingo Takahashi. Mr. Takahashi is a fisheries industry expert who has provided guidance on fisheries development in Cambodia and several African nations. He was assigned to Myanmar in 2005 as a JICA Advisor on Fishing Development Policy to determine what sort of cooperation was possible there. “The military regime officially maintained the stance that Myanmar had no poverty,” Mr. Takahashi recalled. “It was difficult to even get out to rural areas at the outset.”

Farmers make up 80% of Myanmar’s population. In general, they live a self-sufficient life and have little cash income. Freshwater fish are a vital source of protein, but increased demand and overfishing in recent years has caused concern over dwindling catches of natural fish. This moved JICA to launch the Small-scale Aquaculture Extension Project for Promotion of Livelihood of Rural Communities in Myanmar in five municipal zones in the southern delta region of Myanmar in June 2009.

This project aims to enhance farmers’ livelihoods with a small investment by way of raising freshwater fish in small ponds and paddies in their villages. Fish cultivated in paddies increase rice harvests by eating insects that are harmful to the rice plants, agitating the soil and providing organic fertilizer through their waste. Farmers eat the fish they produce and can sell any extra fish in the villages to generate cash income. Because of their past experience under the long rule of a military regime, people who live in rural areas of Myanmar do not believe what the government says so easily. They do, however, deeply trust Japanese people in Myanmar. Mr. Takahashi was successful in winning the villagers’ trust in this project by visiting the villages together with counterparts from the Department of Fisheries.

Unfortunately, the project faced one problem after another at the outset. A sudden change in the weather brought on a deluge that swept away all the fries that had been released into water the previous day. Paddies overflowed when dams upstream released water without warning. The project stalled because aquaculture and rice cultivation were handled by different administrative bodies. Despite the outrageous turns of events, the people of Myanmar helped Mr. Takahashi stay enthusiastic. “I think, at the heart of it, people at the Department of Fisheries want to do something to help their country,” he said. “I want to give it my best after seeing how serious and sincere they are. Also, villagers treat us like family. This country is full of such warm feelings.”

Mr. Takahashi’s hard work is beginning to pay off - villagers have begun to show initiative and come up with their own ways to work at aquaculture. He is looking forward to the day when they confidently tell him what to do. He has also heard requests from neighboring villages that they also want to try small-scale aquaculture.

“One thing in this country still value the mutual dependence that brings people together,” Mr. Takahashi said. “That value will inevitably change with development. What is important is a good balance. I do not think it is a good thing just to develop quickly. That is precisely why we need a form of development like small-scale aquaculture to raise the farmers’ standard of living little by little.” Myanmar continues to undergo rapid democratization and have an open door policy toward foreign capital and aid. Mr. Takahashi earnestly hopes that Myanmar can develop while holding onto the positive attributes of a pious, Buddhist nation.