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Requirement for Sustainable Farm Volunteer System in Japan

From Questionnaire Survey of Volunteers, Farmers, and Intermediary Organizations

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Although the Japanese farming population has been decreasing and aging rapidly, the number of volunteers who wish to work at farm are increasing. Still the total number of volunteers are relatively very small to farming population, however, there are several coordinating organizations already exist. Behind the popularization of farm volunteer programs in Japan, a whole picture of the farm volunteer system is not clear yet.

This paper aims to capture present situation of farm volunteer activities by focusing on major three stakeholders namely, volunteers, farmers, and intermediary organizations.

With a wide range of programs, this paper noted the difference in payment systems, which is a key factor to categorize the types of organizations. Clarifying where the difference was derived from, we used the questionnaire survey for the three stakeholders. After examining the background factors of the boom in the farm volunteer system in Japan, the results of the questionnaire were analyzed and discussed. The results showed the tendency of the payment system to be subject to the purposes of intermediary organizations on farm volunteer system. In addition, the investigation evidenced that information and rules of the system were not well shared among those three stakeholders including the method of payment and the meanings of the payments.

INTRODUCTION

A farm volunteer system is the system that people usually from urban areas visit rural areas to support agricultural work. In many cases, intermediary coordinating organizations exist to match volunteers who are willing to work in agricultural field and farmers in need of manual labor. (Fig. 1)

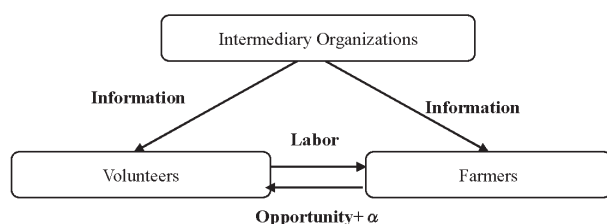


Fig. 1. The Structure of Farm Volunteer System.

Behind the economic boom, the Japanese agriculture may have been undervalued. Farming activities became difficult to sustain farmers' living condition, so many people moved out from rural areas to urban areas. As a result, population engaged in agriculture work has

diminished and aged. The farm number in Japan used to be 3.8 million in 1990 and ended up to 2.8 million in 2005. It is estimated to decrease to 2.1–2.5 million in 2015 (MAFF 2008). On the other hand, the field, which is abandonment of cultivation, is increasing. The area of farmland turned to decrease from year to year. The area of abandonment field of cultivation in Japan has accompanied to increase. 240,000 ha in 1995 turned 340,000 ha in 2000, and end up to 390,000 ha in 2005 (MAFF 2008). One of the biggest problems is aging of farmers in rural areas and the lack of new successors. Japanese agriculture has a serious depopulation in fundamental leading farmers.

Recently, however, people living in cities have finally started to appreciate agriculture again. The food self-sufficiency ratio of Japan is as low as 39% on a calorie basis according to the government survey (MAFF 2007). Now Japanese people have a sense of “food crisis.” The issues of food catch more attention of people. In urban areas, people have started to feel fascinated to the quiet life surrounded by good environment in rural areas, growing own food and enjoying its rich nature, as shown in the fact that the words such as “slow-life” and “LOHAS” became common especially among environmental conscious people. Because they have own houses and occupations in cities, it is quite difficult to settle down to countryside. Therefore, demand for temporary stay in rural areas is increasing.

Current farm volunteer system has deprived from such sense of agricultural problems. In this context, a

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farm volunteer system, if it works properly, is expected to be a solution to bridge two bodies; one with lack of labor in rural areas and one with demand for farming experiences in urban areas.

A farm volunteer system has diversity in such as the form of intermediary organizations, payment system, and place to stay. For example, intermediary organizations could be joint-stock company, non-profit organization (NPO), or public sector. Volunteers are allowed to receive cash payment, food and accommodation during the stay in some cases and get nothing in other cases. They may stay in a house of farmers with their family, or stay in a hotel nearby, or commute to work from their own home every time. These factors are usually determined by intermediary organizations' rules and regulations.

Then, what is the reason that there are different payment systems? How do they differ from each other? Are the systems functioning well? How do the both groups of people think?

The objectives of this research are to examine the requirements for sustainable farm volunteer systems and to reveal both needs of volunteer workers and farmers, as well as intermediary organizations. This paper focuses especially on payment systems that play an important role in the farm volunteer systems.

DATA AND METHODS

In order to clarify the characteristics of three different groups of people, volunteers, farmers, and intermediary organization, three types of questionnaires were prepared.

Questionnaire Survey on Intermediary Coordinating Organizations

12 organizations were found from various sources of information. The questionnaires were sent to those 12 organizations by postal mail in July 2007. Eight out of 12 organizations kindly responded and the responses were received by postal mail.

Face-to-face Depth Interviews with Three Organizations

In addition, face-to-face depth interviews were conducted in September to November 2007 to three different forms of intermediary organizations, namely joint-stock company, non-profit organization, and public sector.

Questionnaire Survey on Volunteers and Farmers

Two intermediary organizations A and B that have different systems in organizations that we conducted the interviews with were chosen (Table 1.) Questionnaires were distributed to volunteers and farmers through the organizations.

RESULT

Intermediary Organizations

Intermediary organizations

Varieties of intermediary organizations for farm volunteer program were found. Firstly, their legal forms of organizations were various. Three out of eight public sector, two were joint stock companies, and others were non-profit organization, agricultural cooperative, others as shown in Figure 2.

The number of participants; farmers and volunteers

The size of the most farm volunteer program is generally small with yearly participants of less than 500 vol-

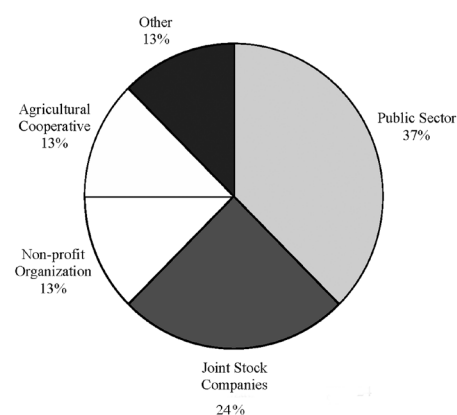


Fig. 2. Intermediary Organizations' Body.

Source: Individual Interviews of Intermediary Organizations 2007

Table 1. The brief guide of intermediary organizations, A and B

	A	B
Corporate Body	NPO	Public service sector
Payment	Farmers pay to volunteers	No payment
Services for Volunteers from Farmers	No provision of food and accommodation	With provision of food and accommodation
Stay	Go to work from their own house every time	Stay with farmers' family
Period	Continuous activities	One-time event/Single-action

Sources: Face-to-face Interviews with A and B by the Author

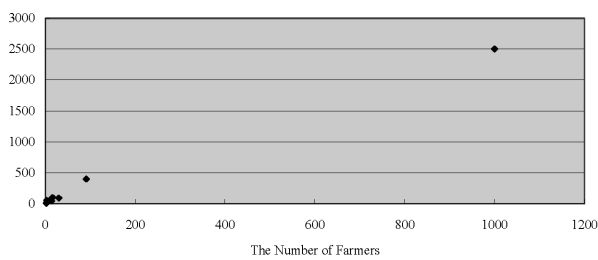


Fig. 3. Programs' Size, Measured by the Number of Participants (Yearly)
Source: Individual Interviews of Intermediary Organizations 2007

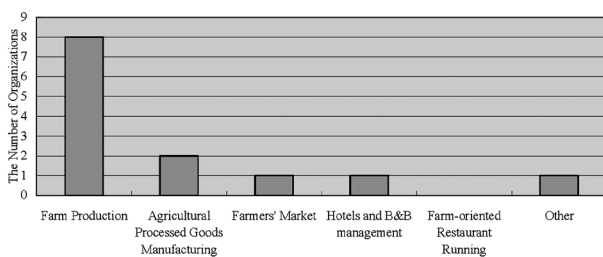


Fig. 4. Job that Volunteers Handle with.
Source: Individual Interviews of Intermediary Organizations 2007

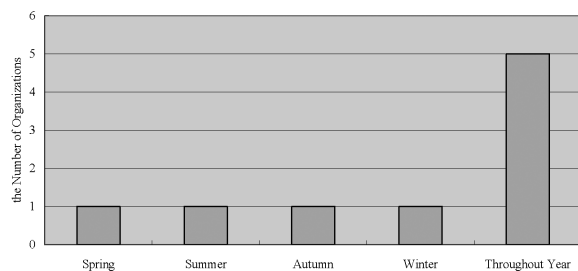


Fig. 5. Seasons that Program is Held.
Source: Individual Interviews of Intermediary Organizations 2007

unteers and 200 farmers (Fig. 3).

In an exceptional case, one program has exceptionally large number of members; 1,000 farmers and 2,500 volunteers.

Job description

Volunteers involved mainly in farm production, agricultural processed goods manufacturing, farmer's market and farm-oriented restaurant operation, and hotels and B&B operation, or combinations of above (Fig. 4).

Seasons

Season of the program is one spring, one summer, one autumn, one winter, and five throughout year (Fig. 5).

Purpose

The 50% intermediary organization answered that the purpose of their programme was to support farmers in need. One organization answered that empowerment of rural areas and experience exchange between urban residents and rural residents were the major objectives (Fig. 6).

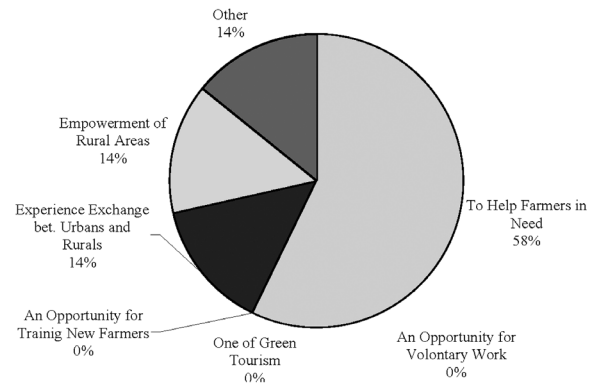


Fig. 6. The Purpose of Farm Volunteer Programs(FVP).
Source: Individual Interviews of Intermediary Organizations 2007

Payment

Each organization has their own policies and regulations on the monetary compensation of volunteer works paid by farmers to volunteers. They differ from each other in that they pay cash or not. Some provide accommodation and food only and others provide nothing to volunteers.

By classification on the compensation policies, they were roughly divided into four groups.

Type1: Farmers pay money to volunteers

Type2: Farmers provide accommodation and food for volunteers

Type3: Farmers pay money and provide accommodation and food for volunteers

Type4: Farmers do not provide anything neither money nor in-kind

Figure 7 shows the payment situation of each programme. Type 1 is the programme that farmers pay money for volunteers' labor. The payment usually includes costs for accommodation and foods during the programme, so volunteers have to pay for them from the payment by themselves. It is equal to 37%. Type 2 is the program that farmers provide volunteers with accommodation and food but no monetary salary, and it accounts for 24%. Type 3 is the ratio of the intermediary organizations, which program is designed for farmers

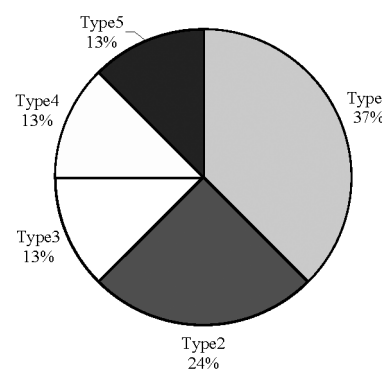


Fig. 7. Payment Regulation.
Source: Individual Interviews of Intermediary Organizations 2007

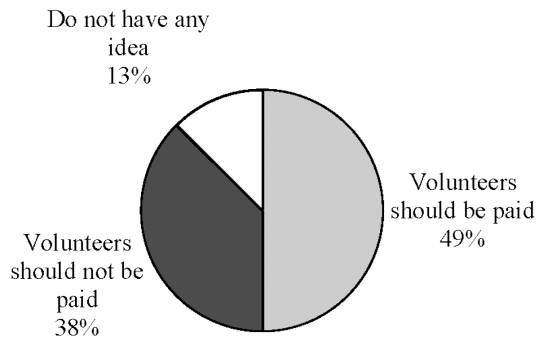


Fig. 8. Opinions on Payment of Intermediary Organizations.
Source: Individual Interviews of Intermediary Organizations 2007

to provide volunteers with salary as well as accommodation and food, and it accounts for 13%. Type 4 is the program that farmers do not provide anything. Volunteers commute there by themselves everyday or rent nearby accommodation, and it accounts for 13%. Type 5 is the program that intermediary organizations leave the decision to farmers if they pay to volunteers or not.

Figure 8 shows policy of the intermediary organizations on payment. The ratio of “Volunteers should be paid” was 49%, while its “volunteers should not be paid” was 38%. “Do not have any idea” accounted only for 13%.

The reason underlying their policy is clear for the first group. They think that volunteers should be paid for the compensation of their labor. While, intermediary organizations who answer against payment divided into three reasons as follows;

Volunteers are enjoying green tourism

Volunteers are eager to work in the status of volunteer without clear responsibility

Volunteer are taking technical lessons by master farmers

To see the details, we conduct further analysis on the payment policy under consideration of their objectives of the farm volunteer program. The result shows that intermediary organizations whose opinions are against payment to volunteers agree their purpose to help farmers. In contrast, intermediary organizations who are for payment to volunteers think their purpose different from each other. One organization thinks the purpose to exchange experience between urban resident and rural resident. One organization thinks it to empower the rural

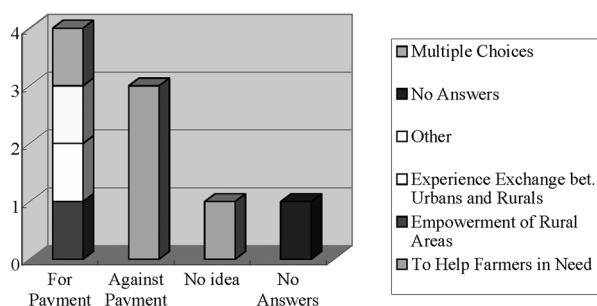


Fig. 9. Opinions on Payment and the Purpose of FVP.
Source: Individual Interviews of Intermediary Organizations 2007

area. One chose two or more purposes (Fig. 9).

They have different objectives, but they have one thing in common: intermediary organizations for payment think that the farm volunteer program is not only to help farmers but also to achieve the goals they have.

The answer for the question whether we should pay for volunteers or not became clear when we compare it with the purposes of organizations. A farm volunteer program is the program that volunteers help farmers with agricultural work. This is the basic form. Some intermediary organizations value farmers before any other things. Therefore, they esteem this basic form of farm volunteer system.

Other organizations expect collateral results from their farm volunteer program such as experience exchange with rural and urban people and empowerment of rural areas. Such results are by-products of farm volunteer program. In other words, farm volunteer program is the tools for achieve their goals.

As a result, the intermediary organizations who think the basic form is the purpose of the farm volunteer program tend to refuse the payment from farmers to volunteers. In contrast, the intermediary organizations who expect by-products over the basic form tend to provide that farmers pay for volunteers.

Volunteers

What volunteers think of payment became clear from the questionnaire survey. If volunteers had two choices, a program with payment and a program without payment, they would choose the program with payment. The payment can offset volunteers' opportunity cost.

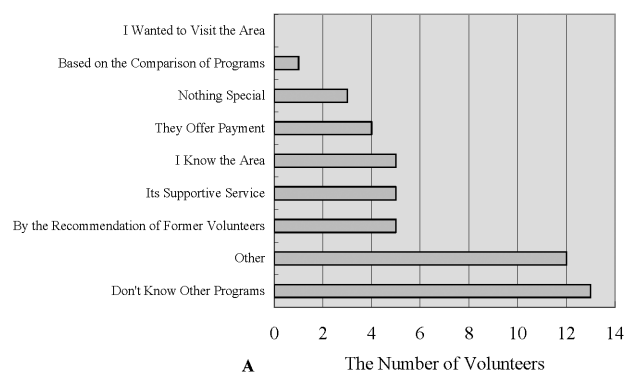


Fig. 10a. The Reason Why Volunteers Chose the Program (A).

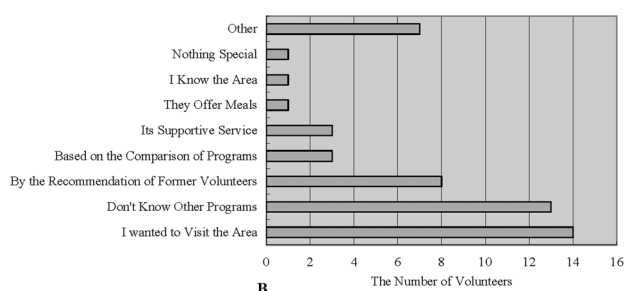


Fig. 10b. The Reason Why Volunteers Chose the Program (B).
Source: Individual Interviews of Volunteers 2007

Therefore, what we can assume is a concentration of volunteers in particular programs. The program without payment would have very hard time to attract the participants as volunteers.

However, when volunteers were asked the reason why they chose the program, the majority of people answered that they did not know any other program beside this. The only thing they decide was to participate

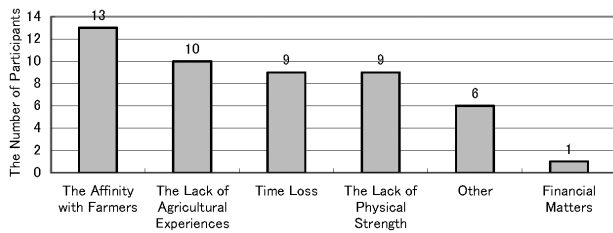


Fig. 11a. The Biggest Anxiety before Participating, If Any (A).

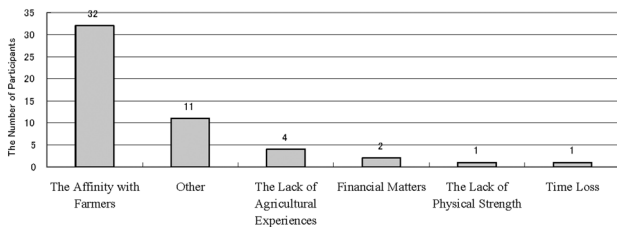


Fig. 11b. The Biggest Anxiety before Participating, If Any (B).
Source: Individual Interviews of Volunteers 2007

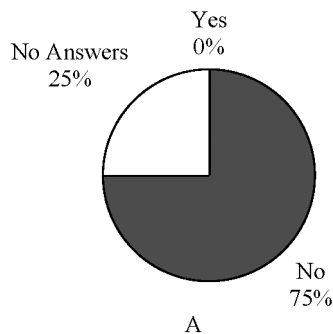


Fig. 12a. Was the Payment to Volunteers Pain? (A).

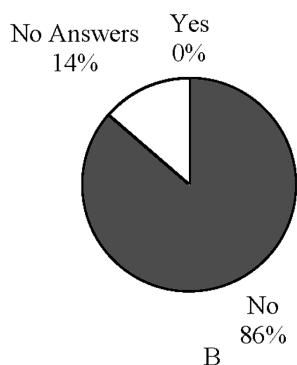


Fig. 12b. Was the Payment to Volunteers Pain? (B).
Source: Individual Interviews of Farmers 2007

or not. Volunteers seldom have much information of farm volunteer programs. In addition, with or without payment was not critical factor to volunteers to make their decision or choice of organization, according to the response from Tagayasu that conducts the program with payment. It is not big reason that volunteers get paid. (Fig. 10a and 10b)

The most frequently answered reason of anxiety before participating in the program, if any, was the affinity with farmers who become their host. This was common to the participants of two organizations. The answers of Tagayasu participants share the lack of agricultural experiences (21%) and their physical strength (19%). This was outstanding only for Tagayasu participants. The most of Iida participants did not care these factors.

Therefore, we could note the relationship between payment and such anxieties. These anxieties might originate from the conscious that they are paid. In other words, volunteers might feel pressure because they are paid for their work. (Fig. 11a and 11b)

Farmers

When farmers of Tagayasu were asked, “does the disbursement to volunteers task you a lot?” 75% of them chose “No”. Because the rest of 25% did not answer, no one chose “Yes” in fact. (Figure 12a and 12b)

DISCUSSION

Intermediary organizations tend to consider that farmers offer opportunities to volunteers that are willing to work and help in the frame of the farm volunteer system. In other words, farmers give the opportunities to volunteers who wish to work. Here, the demand of labor is even with the supply. Therefore, monetary exchange does not happen.

When intermediary organizations expect volunteers to fulfill other effects, as well as normal agricultural work, volunteers have value-added importance to intermediary organizations. In this case, intermediary organizations' expectations are more than what volunteers are willing to supply.

Strictly speaking, however, it is farmers that pay to volunteers. It is not intermediary organizations. If farmers share the same idea with their intermediary organizations, it is good enough that farmers pay. If they do not, it seems strange that farmers pay for intermediary organization's idea.

There is wide gap between what volunteers needs and what organizations expect. Volunteers think the meaning of payment quite different from intermediary organizations do. For volunteers, payment from farmers is the money for the work that volunteers have done with high quality. Volunteers feel sometimes even threat from the pressure that the payment generates. They are also concerned about the lack of their technical skills and physical strength.

On the other hand, it is farmers that finance for programs. However, farmers tend to think that the amount of payment is not that much. They do not feel any pain

from paying to volunteers.

As shown above, we could assume that the difference of the way of payment derives from the basic opinion that each intermediary organization has on farm volunteer system. At the same time, it became clear that three stakeholders, intermediary organizations, farmers, and volunteers, have different opinions on payment from each other.

An expansion and popularization of the farm volunteer system in Japan is expected for the future, being propelled by the fear of recession of agriculture and the increasing diversified needs for leisure of urban residents. What is needed for improving the system is to raise the awareness of what the payment means for the par-

ticipant farmers and volunteers.

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