For the Benefit of Farmers

OPINION

The World’s Food Situation and the Future of Japanese Agriculture

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The food situation in the world is becoming increasingly tight. The global population has climbed up to nearly 7.1 billion, and is expected to reach 9.3 billion by 2050 and 10.1 billion by 2100 if the trend continues. Incidentally, Japan is the world’s largest producer of leftover food, dumping 3.4 million tons of food every year. This is far beyond the total amount food aid offered across the globe (7.4 million tons), and is equivalent to the annual food consumption of 30 million people (or even 50 million people in the case of developing countries). It seems that one in the world has a clear solution to these food problems, and the situation is becoming increasingly chaotic.

Eradicate Deserted Arable Land and Labor Shortages Challenges and Prospects of Japanese Agriculture

For the Benefit of Farmers-III

The world’s food supply and demand forecast for 2020 given by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) project that consumption of grains such as rice and wheat will rise from the 1.7 billion tons recorded in 1996 and 2.4 billion tons recorded in 2010 to reach 2.7 billion tons by 2020 on account of the population increase and economic development in China and other countries, while grain production is expected to remain steady at 2.5 billion tons. By geographic region, grain demand looks set to increase substantially in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. In particular, consumption of grains for livestock feed should increase rapidly in China, as meat consumption there is expected to grow in proportion to the rise in their income level. This will inevitably sustain the rising prices of grain, and the prices of rice, wheat, and corn are expected to jump by 31%, 24%, and 35%, respectively, by 2020 compared to 2008 levels. Given these forecasts of the world food situation, it is clear we must go about redesigning the future of Japanese agriculture. In 2012, MAFF published its report on the present state of Japanese agriculture and its forecasts for changes that may occur over the mid-term period. The report concluded that the number of farmers in Japan would drop to 60,000 by 2040, 80,000 farmers would have retired, and the local labor shortage will be severe in the future. It is the middle-sized farms that are being left to farm alone in a growing number of cases. It is thus expected that more farmers will simply quit their jobs in the future.

Finding Solutions through a “Global Reach” and “Technological Innovation”

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Hopes for a “Global Reach” and “Technological Innovation” Revitalization of Japanese Farming to Boost World Food Production.

I have a few ideas that I believe will help to revitalize Japanese farming. The first is to secure farmland overseas, use local labor to grow farm products, and import them to Japan. This scheme is attracting much attention throughout the world, and foodimporting nations such as China, India, and Middle Eastern countries have started to make huge investments in farming in central Asia and Africa. Behind this is a growing concern over the global food crisis, which is promised on the horizon. That is, the world population will reach 9 billion by 2050. Investment in farming in developing countries is in and of itself one of the key elements underpinning the development of national economies, taking the form of foreign investment in agriculture, technology, and higher productivity. Furthermore, increasing food production by expanding farmland can serve as a breakthrough in resolving the food crisis faced by the world’s poor population.

However, anything that has to do with land risks the danger of triggering nationalism. As such, the kind of farming investment that would be most desirable is one that benefits not only investing countries, but also helps recipient countries to achieve sustainable development of agriculture. In other words, we should achieve a “win-win” relationship where both parties benefit from investments; investing countries can expect good returns on their investments and a stable food supply and recipient countries can expect to develop the social infrastructures and industrial technology.

Having advocated the “promotion of responsible agricultural investment” from early on, Japan won support from the international community when it announced its belief that transparency and accountability, as well as proper consideration of communities, residents, and the environment, be included in the principles of action for international agricultural investment. As the world is coming on Japan’s leadership in this regard, I believe that opportunity is knocking for Japan to set an example for the world in its farming technology, using agricultural investment as a vehicle.

Another idea concerns matters that need to be dealt with domestically; that is, enhancing productivity through technological innovation, in addition to optimizing the scale of farming. The highest expectations in this regard are for hydroponic culture, in which Japan leads the rest of the world. More specifically, this is referring to the “Plant Factory,” which is a technique used to cultivate crops inside buildings where the amount of light and nutrition are carefully controlled. Three years ago, the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) certified an universit in Japan as research centers to improve the control system for the cultivation environment. METI’s plan is to lower production costs by 30% and commercially distribute the vegetables cultivated in the Plant Factory. In light of growing concerns over the safety and stable supply of food, this initiative perfectly meets the needs of the times and offers the potential of becoming the next growth field for Japanese businesses, which have strong assets in manufacturing technology.

Kobata is highly regarded as a farm machinery manufacturer, and has built close relationships with farmers in Japan. If they were to take new action for Japanese agriculture and farmers, it would be possible for them to support a program to seek farmland overseas next to Japan jointly with like-minded farmers who possess the necessary techniques, in addition to developing sales channels for rice, which they are diligently working on even now. In order to increase the world’s food production, the mechanism of agriculture is an inevitable global trend. I have high expectations for Kobata’s ambitious and innovative efforts in this regard, which start with collaboration with Japanese farmers and lure the farmers and agriculture business of the world in mind.