EDITORIALS

Land Improvement Districts and the Present Situation of Agriculture in Japan

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(Manuscript Received November 14, 1983)

I. INTRODUCTION

Land improvement has been urgently needed to modernize the agriculture of Japan. Although many and various kinds of land improvement projects for agricultural land, particularly for the paddy fields, have been carried out in this country, more than half the farmland cannot meet the needs of recent agricultural mechanization. Without land improvement, the productivity of most uplands cannot be increased.

On the whole, in order to increase agricultural productivity, it is very important that the agricultural organizations (land improvement districts, agricultural cooperative associations, agricultural committees and so on), the local government (To, Do, Fu, Ken (Prefecture, the unit of local government using ‘To’ for Tokyo, ‘Do’ for Hokkaido, ‘Fu’ for Osaka and Kyoto and ‘Ken’ for others name of administrative regions), City, Town, Village) and the national government should fulfill their roles and should act in conjunction with each other. Therefore, all organizations mentioned above will be commented on here, but this paper will mainly deal with land improvement districts.

II. THE NECESSITY FOR LAND IMPROVEMENT DISTRICTS

In this country, it is impossible for individual farmers to improve land by their own exertions as their own land areas and capital are too small and the units of land which they manage are widely dispersed. They do not have the economic or technological resources for any kind of land improvement which would meet the standards set for recent agricultural modernization.

In any case, whether their land areas are small or large, and whether the purpose of the
land improvement is single or multiple, land improvement districts must be established as cooperative organizations whenever farmers want to improve their farmlands.

Before World War II, the arable land readjustment association, the irrigation association, the flood disaster prevention association, the Hokkaido reclamation association, etc., held the functions their names suggest. Since World War II, land improvement districts have taken these associations' places under a re-organization conforming to the Land Improvement Law.

The land improvement district is not called “an association” but “a district”, because it is a corporation based on “territorialism”. This way of thinking was suggested by the Occupation GHQ, when a draft of the Land Improvement Law was drawn.

III. CONNECTION BETWEEN LAND IMPROVEMENT AND AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTIVITY

1. Associations in the Tokugawa period (1603—1867)

In this country, the first attempt at land improvement to increase the productivity of land and labour based on associations was made by Yūgaku Ōhara (1797—1858) Leader of farmers, philosopher of Confucianism, Buddhism and Shintoism, promoting land consolidation and cooperative works of farm management intending to make farmers rich.). In 1838, he advocated and established “Senzokabu Associations” (credit union established by Yūgaku Ōhara: a prototype of credit union in Japan) at various villages, mainly in the Southern Kantō province (the district including several prefectures and greater municipal area of Tokyo). These were cooperative unions based on a joint enterprise and property in joint ownership and joint management.

This attempt is considered to be the first cooperative society in the world, too, for it was established earlier than the Consumer’s Union in England (1844) or the Bread Union in Germany (1849).

This “Senzokabu Association” not only was organized financially as a company but was directed by people who shared Yūgaku’s philosophy (see Yūgaku Ōhara).

This association carried out land improvement and rural planning in a revolutionary way, including farmland reform, improvements to agricultural canals and roads, grouping of farm holdings by exchange and consolidation, and reallocation of dwelling land by moving farmers’ houses. This work was realized by the common consent of all members organized in the association according to a democratic council system.

As a result of this improvement, many kinds of farm activity were carried out cooperatively, and farm management became very rationalized.

Yūgaku’s attempt succeeded in increasing agricultural productivity. But it could not spread far because it was contrary to the policy of the Tokugawa government.

2. Associations after the Meiji Restoration

After the Meiji Restoration in 1868, the government authorities enacted the Arable Land Readjustment Law in 1899, the Hokkaido Reclamation Association Law in 1902, the Irrigation Association Law in 1908, and so on. These laws supported the landowner system in order to accelerate the increase of agricultural productivity and expand national power.

The arable land readjustment based on these laws realized readjustment of paddy field lots in grid type in imitation of the German type. But in this country, agricultural

Irrigation Engineering and Rural Planning No. 7, 1985
productivity did not increase as a result of this measure, because petty tenant farmers were numerous and the necessity for farm mechanization was comparatively small in those times.

At a later time, the Arable Land Readjustment Law was gradually adapted mainly to aim at improvement of water-use facilities (irrigation canals, drainage canals, pipe drainage and so on). Then the Arable Land Readjustment Association became able to practice more extensive land improvement projects: water-use improvement, land reclamation, land reform, etc.

3. The irrigation association
The irrigation association was established according to the Irrigation Association Law, and it carried out mainly the management and a maintenance of water use facilities. The members of the association were limited to landowners; tenant farmers could not directly influence the management of the association.

An amendment of the Law in 1926, added clauses concerning Ordinary Irrigation Associations aimed at improving irrigation and drainage and Flood Disaster Prevention Association aimed at flood preventive projects.

4. The Hokkaido reclamation associations
The Hokkaido reclamation associations were conceived according to the Hokkaido Reclamation Association Law in 1902, and were similar to the irrigation association in Naichi (main islands of Japan except Hokkaido). A large majority of these associations had as their purposes agricultural engineering projects for irrigation and drainage, which were important in the Hokkaido region.

5. Land improvement districts
Land improvement districts have been established in conformity with the Land Improvement Law enacted in 1949 after World War II.

Land improvement districts are remarkable for attaching great importance to owner-farmers as opposed to landowners, in conformity with farmland ownership reformation (rural land reform). The land improvement district is able to become not only the promoter of all land improvement projects but also the manager of land improvement facilities. It is provided that the land improvement district has officers: President, Directors and Auditors, and that important matters shall be resolved by the General Assembly.

As mentioned above, the land improvement district shall carry out land improvement for the individual demands of farmers, and shall promote the public interest on behalf of many farmers in the district at the same time.

Thus land improvement districts are able to increase the agricultural productivity of land and labour according to the democratic system.

IV. THE PRESENT STATE AND PROBLEMS OF THE LAND IMPROVEMENT DISTRICTS

1. The area of land improvement district
The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries researched the present state of land improvement districts.

Six hundred and fifty-four districts (about 7% of the total number) were examined in August 1982, in a random sampling. As of March 31, 1982, the number of land improve-
ment districts in this country was 8996. But 49% of these are under 100 ha and are only able to maintain present facilities, not to undertake new projects. Only 8.2% of them are above 1000 ha, and are able to have their own officers and operate under stable conditions.

It is considered that these small land improvement districts cannot discharge their function of increasing agricultural productivity.

2. Land improvement districts in the paddy field regions
Land improvement districts in the paddy field regions constitute 69% of the total number, and 14% of those have an area above 1000 ha, which is conspicuously larger than in other regions. It seems easier for land improvement districts in the paddy field regions to enlarge their area than those in other regions, because it is necessary to enlarge their area to facilitate planning and regulation of water use. In future, when paddy field reform for multi-purpose use is realized and farmers want to practise rotational land use, larger areas of land improvement districts will be needed.

3. Land improvement districts in the suburbs of towns
The impact of urbanization has affected suburban land improvement districts. In consequence, although the expenditure for disposal of waste from towns has been increased in such regions, 64% of the expenditure increase has been imposed upon members of the land improvement district.

As mentioned above, land improvement districts in the suburbs of towns have not been able to discharge their duty to raise agricultural production.

It has been suggested that the land improvement district system be transferred to local government responsibility, and their duty to raise agricultural production be placed in the hands of agricultural cooperative associations. However, as there are many projects which only land improvement districts can undertake, it is important that land improvement districts make public the reasons for their existence to new citizens who have emigrated from towns.

4. Land improvement districts in villages among the hills
Land improvement districts in the hill-villages make up 36% of the total number, and the areas of many of them are under 100 ha. They have managed old canals and/or roads with difficulty as a result of having insufficient labor and funds. However, if those canals and roads in the hills are damaged, landslides, floods, and mud flows will occur, and many towns in lower regions will be victims of these sudden disasters.

Thus, land improvement districts in the hill-villages are very important not only for agricultural production of the farmers living there, but also for land conservation in the interests of inhabitants living in lower regions.

5. The management of land improvement districts
Land improvement districts have articles and a code of ethics based on "territorialism", so that all farmers with agricultural land in a given district must be members. Thus, the management can be democratically operated.

Members must pay member fees or dues added to the ordinary expenditure and the burden of carrying out the land improvement project, but 53% of the land improvement districts cannot pay member fees or dues. Persons in arrears give their reasons as follows: the dues are too heavy for them; farm management spirit is lacking; the land improvement district has too small an effect, housekeeping money is short; and other reasons. It
seemed that farmers think that the advantages (increasing farm productivity) of their entry into the land improvement district are too small in comparison with the dues to be paid.

V. PROPOSALS FOR DEALING WITH PROBLEMS IN THE FUTURE

As mentioned above, land improvement districts in Japan have performed most effectively for the increase of agricultural productivity, local environment reform, national land conservation and so on, while they have had some problems in themselves. There is a proposal that land improvement districts must perform functions which will protect the resources in each region in the future.

This argument has as its basis the belief that land improvement has come to perform more extensive and advanced functions aiding practical use and conservation of all resources (land, soil, water, etc.) in each region, because previous land improvement measures had increased agricultural land productivity permanently using civil engineering techniques.

This future course, by which the land improvement districts will come to serve both the land improvement project organizations and the resources management project organizations, will certainly be implemented, but new problems are likely to arise, as follows.

1) While the land improvement districts should enlarge their scale (operating area, number of farmers participating, financial affairs, etc.), on the other hand, democratic operation may become more and more difficult.

2) Although the land improvement district should come to use and preserve the local resources, who is going to bear the expenses of those projects, and to what extent? Members (farmers) alone cannot bear all the expenses. It would be very difficult to sort and divide the expenses between members and nonmembers. It is estimated that this problem will become more difficult, the more the land improvement district enlarges.

3) From the point of view that land exists as a firmly fixed part of the earth, and does not move about, it is taken for granted that land improvement districts have "territorialism" as the fundamental rule of organization. Water, however, can move about on or under the surface of the earth, and people also can transfer their living and working places on the earth; therefore rights and duties pertaining to land and water can be transferred according to people's will. It will be a problem to distinguish between that which is fixed on the earth and that which can be transferred, and it is questionable whether the land improvement districts have the capacity to make such a distinction.

4) All sorts of solid equipment installed on the basis of land improvement projects will last a long time, tens or hundreds of years in the future, but social conditions, especially economic conditions, will swiftly be transformed. Can the land improvement district adjust to such new conditions and changes?

5) It is believed that food supply will become insufficient and the food situation will become more serious in the near future. Therefore, the land improvement districts must more effectively fulfill their duty to increase agricultural productivity than they do today. We must beware the conflict between food production and natural resource management, that is, that the more food is produced, the more nature is destroyed.

Both these aspects must be important concerns of the land improvement districts at all
times.

VI. AFTERWORD

Agriculture in Japan has attached too much importance to paddy field cultivation (rice farming), which no other nation in the world has done, and the land improvement district is a unique kind of organization for farmers, too.

As the land improvement district has poor experience of operation since its foundation, the method of trial and error is used, even now. In addition to this, the very difficult problems mentioned above are emerging.

I hope that these problems of the land improvement districts will be overcome in the future by energetic activity on the part of the people directly concerned with land improvement and land improvement districts, as well as members of the public inside or outside of the districts.