

The Greenhouse in Oyubari

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Mr Kobayashi (second from the left) and neighbouring farmers from Oyubari in their new greenhouse, May 1977.

Background

Between 1975 and 1977, The Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA) initiated 24 Human Development Projects in different countries around the world. These were pilot projects that served as learning laboratories. Rather than doing things for people, these projects were about finding practical ways of enabling people to become agents of their own development.

One of those was the Oyubari village of the Yubari municipality in Hokkaido, Japan. The primary economy of Yubari had historically been coal mining, but the mines began to close in the mid-1970s and many people were unemployed. As a distressed community, residents of Oyubari were very enthusiastic participants in the week long planning event facilitated by the ICA. It was called a "Consult." The resulting plan focused on economic development (agriculture, industry, and commerce) and social development (health, education, and the well being of all age groups). The plan also focused on communal aspects of the village: the living environment, corporate patterns, and identity systems.

Mr Kobayashi and Yubari Melons

Mr Kobayashi was a small farmer living on the outskirts of the village. He and his family farmed a small parcel of land measuring less than five hectares. Other farmers in the area had similar

¹ This was prepared for a project in 2006 undertaken by ICA International to collect stories about the impact of ICA work.

parcels and all had been interested in expanding the production of melons. However, they had realized little success in doing this. All of these farmers participated in the agricultural team of the "Consult" during which time they visited university research stations, successful farmers in nearby municipalities, and other agricultural bodies to discuss ideas about possible actions that could be initiated in Oyubari to improve agricultural potential.

The design of the "Consult" involved a week of field work and planning sessions followed by a week of producing a report. A full week passed, therefore, before ICA staff members (I was one of them) could visit Mr Kobayashi to discuss ways that he and others farmers might move forward with the plans agreed upon during the "Consult." When we arrived at his farm, he warmly greeted us and invited us to come see the new greenhouse that he and a group of five neighbours had built. The purpose of the greenhouse was to serve as a collective nursery for melon plants during early parts of the season and for direct production of melons during the winter. All five families had shared in the construction costs and all would share in its use.

Needless to say, those of us from the ICA were greatly surprised to discover that something like this had happened so fast ... and without our knowledge or involvement. We had thought that we would need to spend time with the farmers coaxing and convincing them to try new things. This was obviously not the case.

In the next two years, melon production dramatically expanded in Oyubari. Mr Kobayashi and his neighbours also joined forces with other melon farmers in the municipality and successfully branded "Yurbari Melon" as a luxury fruit and marketed it across Japan. This fits nicely with Japanese culture where visitors are always expected to present gifts to their hosts. While the expansion of melon production in Oyubari, along with the intensification of a luxury fruit niche for the entire municipality, were a part of the "Consult" plan, things progressed much quicker than anyone had imagined.

This was in part because things had gone so slowly before the "Consult." As Mr Kobayashi told me, he and his neighbours had discussed the idea of building a common green house *for years* but they had never taken any practical action to do so. Then, after a short week of serious research and discussion during the "Consult," they organized themselves and built the greenhouse in just a few days. The "Consult" had apparently played a very important catalytic role that encouraged people to be active agents of their own development. The farmers were very proud of their greenhouse. Those of us at the ICA considered this a tremendous success.

Lessons Learned

ICA staff members in Oyubari, however, learned the hard way that such successes are powerful symbols – and that symbols always need to be treated with great respect. We inadvertently failed to do this. Six months after the completion of the "Consult," the ICA prepared a list of accomplishments that had occurred in Oyubari. On the list we included the construction of the greenhouse. When Mr Kobayashi saw this, he immediately became angry: "The greenhouse is *our* greenhouse and ICA had nothing to do with its construction. Now you are claiming it to be something ICA did. Furthermore, you are now trying to raise money for your own purposes on the basis of this false claim."

We were shocked and extremely saddened by this. We argued that we had been dramatically misunderstood. Unfortunately, our apologies and explanations were never fully accepted. Thereafter, Mr Kobayashi always maintained a degree of suspicion about the intentions of ICA.

This event took place over 30 years ago but it was a personal lesson of great importance. As outsiders who are attempting to play a catalytic role in a community, it is crucial to explicitly and repeatedly focus primary attention on the main actors of a community development project: the residents themselves. Organizations like the ICA lead by stepping back. Among other things, this means symbolizing over and over again the indispensable role of local people while maintaining a very humble profile for ourselves. In the highly competitive world of securing funding from external donors, this is no easy task. When I am tempted to forego this insight, I always try to remember Mr Kobayashi and his incredible greenhouse.