

Better agricultural practices for environmental sustainability

Over the last half-century, significant gains in agricultural productivity protected Asia from food shortages and the threat of starvation. This was made possible by the Green Revolution—a production package using fertilizers, high-yielding seeds, and irrigation. Today, however, inappropriate agricultural practices, such as extensive use of chemical fertilizers, intensive farming in marginal areas, and improper management of natural resources, have created environmental problems like land degradation, water pollution, and loss of biodiversity in many countries in the region. One consequence is stagnation in agricultural productivity. Recognizing the urgent need to mitigate the adverse impact of agricultural practices on the environment, the APO organized a seminar on “Better Agricultural Practices for Environmental Sustainability” in Tokyo, 6–13 August. It was hosted by the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries and implemented by the Association for International Cooperation in Agriculture and Forestry. The seminar was launched by APO Secretary-General Takashi Tajima who, in his opening address, outlined the damaging environmental consequences of inappropriate agricultural practices and called on the participants to formulate strategies to ensure environmental sustainability in agriculture.

The seminar consisted of six resource paper presentations, 17 country paper presentations, two workshop discussions, and field observations. The resource papers provided an overview of better agricultural practices at farm, village, industry, watershed, and global levels. They also helped to identify important issues and key challenges in promoting environment-friendly practices. The 17 representatives from 15 APO member countries and two from non-member countries who took part in the seminar reviewed prevailing agricultural practices and innovative production technologies adopted in their respective countries and deliberated on ways to strengthen the framework for better agricultural practices. They underlined the importance of sustainable agricultural development in areas like national food security and international competitiveness. Other key areas they discussed were integrated farming systems; soil and water conservation; inclusion of the environmental factor in agricultural planning; local cooperative institution building; appreciation of the prevailing situation at policy level; flexibility in farmers’ attitudes; affirmative policy and legal instruments; capacity building through research and training; and commitment from all the stakeholders.?

For field study, the participants were taken to Fukushima Prefecture where they visited a village office, an organic farm, and an agricultural cooperative market. The field study enabled them to observe firsthand appropriate and inappropriate agricultural practices; ways to produce rice, vegetables, and fruits with few or no chemicals; organic production standards in application;



Participants visiting a cooperative market

and the activities of a cooperative market where a strong relationship was established between producers and consumers.

Two “write-shop”-type workshops were conducted. This is an innovative brainstorming process in which each participant was asked to bring a problem for solution, the answer to which was generated through group discussions. During these workshops, the participants identified the technological, economic, social, and political barriers that stand in the way of achieving environmental sustainability. They further clarified the role of the different stakeholders, including the APO, in changing policy protocols and agricultural practices, strengthening involved institutions, and promoting environmental education. 