

# Harnessing Agricultural Resources

Earlier this year the Strategy Council for the Future of Food presented the prime minister with a report—“Ensuring the Future of Food”—mapping out a medium- to long-term vision for food and agriculture in Japan. **Shinichi Shogenji**, chair of the Council, offers a personal perspective on the background to the report and its significance.

**O**n August 10, 2007 the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries announced that Japan’s rate of food self-sufficiency for fiscal 2006 had slipped to 39% (on a calorie basis). Despite the media’s relative lack of interest in the country’s self-sufficiency rate in the past, newspapers and TV stations devoted a great deal of coverage to this announcement. This was due to the fact that, after holding steady at the rate of 40% for the past eight years in a row, due in part to the government’s efforts, Japan’s rate of food self-sufficiency had slipped into the 30% bracket.

As it turns out, the 1% drop need

not be taken too seriously, for in fact the country’s rate of food self-sufficiency went back up to 40% again in fiscal 2007. Nonetheless, it would be fair to say that Japan’s self-sufficiency rate dropping to 39% set off some timely alarm bells, alerting the Japanese public to the issues affecting food and agriculture in Japan in the near future. The fact is that the global food situation is undergoing a period of change the likes of which we have never seen before.

During the period from the middle of 2006 to 2008, international prices for wheat, soybeans and corn soared to almost triple their original levels. As if following in the footsteps of

these three commodities, rice prices also shot up the world over. The soaring food prices were driven up further by food export restrictions imposed by more than ten countries. As it stands, however, international food prices have hit their peak and gone into decline. The withdrawal of the huge amount of speculative money previously pumped into the agricultural produce market is set to have a significant impact.

From a short-term perspective, the agricultural market is likely to calm down over the next few years after seeing a surge in prices. The problem however stems from forecasts over the medium to long term. As a general trend, the balance between food supply and demand is expected to become increasingly tight in the future. The main reason for this is that rising levels of income thanks to economic growth in major population centers such as China and India is leading to the mass consumption of livestock products and oil, which in turn is driving up demand for commodities such as feed grain and oilseeds. Emerging competition between demand for agricultural produce for use as food and that for use as fuel is also becoming an increasingly important factor driving up demand for food.

At more or less the same time as the announcement that Japan’s food self-sufficiency rate had fallen to 39%, the government set up the Strategy Council for the Future of Food and asked it to map out a medium- to long-term vision for food and agriculture in Japan. After nearly ten months of careful consideration, the Council put its message to the people of Japan—“ensuring the future of food”—to then Prime Minister Fukuda on May 7, 2008. The rest of this article examines the key points of



“[Japanese] people have started to focus on the relationship between agriculture and their own diets, realizing that their eating habits may change the agriculture of their own country.” The traditional Japanese meal of rice, soup, fish, and vegetables (with a little bit of meat), was both healthy and helped to sustain Japanese agriculture.

and background behind this message, from my perspective as the chair of the Strategy Council, and the related issues affecting food and agriculture in Japan.

## Reclaiming “Lost” Land

The global trend toward increased demand for food is at the root of everything. Although this is potentially a positive trend in terms of lifting people in developing countries out of food poverty, mounting pressure on the international food market also causes food prices to rise, which is starting to make inroads into the amount of food that people are consuming. The international community’s efforts to improve standards of welfare are effectively tightening the noose around its own neck. Although this presents a major dilemma, the main thing that we need to do in order to navigate our way around it is to strengthen food supply capabilities. It should be recognized that one of the factors behind the surge in food prices in recent years has been a lack of sufficient investment in agriculture over the past two to three decades due to a prolonged slump in grain prices the world over.

If pressure on food supply continues to increase over the medium to long term, it will make it more and more worthwhile to fully harness Japan’s agricultural resources. In reality however, the opposite is happening in rural communities. Despite agricultural resource prices on the increase worldwide, creating a climate more conducive to investment in agriculture, Japan is seeing a gradual rise in the amount of unused agricultural land. According to a census carried out in 2005, the total extent of abandoned cultivated land in Japan came to 390,000 hectares. Given that the total area of agricultural land that same year was 4.67 million hectares, it is clear that the country is losing out on a large proportion of its available resources. Even in areas where land is still being used for farming, the rate of usage is on the decline, slipping from an average of 134% almost half a century ago in 1960 to 93% at present. The amount of agricultural land on which crops are grown less than

once a year accounts for a considerable percentage.

The Strategy Council has strongly recommended that the rate of usage of agricultural land in Japan be brought back up to levels in the past. In particular, the Council has stressed the need to work on fully harnessing Japan’s paddy fields, which are highly sustainable and enable continuous cultivation almost indefinitely, as the basis for agricultural production. There are two key points to achieving this. Firstly, it is important to help promote the use of produce other than rice itself, over production of which has been a long-standing headache. One effective strategy for instance is to use entire rice plants, including the straw, for animal feed. The other key point is to create and support farmers equipped with a solid set of skills. Without motivated farmers to manage the country’s farmland, there is no prospect of being able to fully harness Japan’s paddy fields.

## Taking a Fresh Look at Our Eating Habits

A country’s rate of food self-sufficiency is calculated by dividing the volume of food produced domestically by the volume of food consumed domestically. In other words, the level of self-sufficiency depends on the country’s eating habits. The problem lies with modern day eating habits in Japan. There are a number of areas particularly in need of improvement.

The first area in need of improvement is the nutritional balance of today’s Japanese diet. Our extravagant eating habits have gone a little bit too far. From the perspective of health and nutrition, Japan achieved the ideal diet at some point around 1980. Back then, people ate more rice and vegetables and less meat. It was around the same time that the healthy Japanese-style approach to eating started to attract attention from overseas. A subsequent decline in rice consumption however, coupled with a continual increase in the amount of animal products eaten, has resulted in a diet that makes Japanese people susceptible to health issues such as obesity or lifestyle related diseases.

Another problem is the amount of food that households throw away, which works out at more than 80 kg per person each year. Rather than being reused, almost all this food waste either ends up in landfill sites or being incinerated, resulting in a major loss of resources. There are two things that need to be done. The first of these is to reduce the volume of food needlessly thrown away. The second is to reuse leftover food for purposes such as organic fertilizer or animal feed. Using waste food to feed animals in particular would help protect the environment whilst also boosting Japan’s rate of food self-sufficiency.

Having underlined the various issues with the Japanese diet, the Strategy Council has also suggested a direction for improvements. It has no intention however of pursuing hasty measures to resolve the relevant issues. The Council is keen to emphasize the importance of people doing whatever they can to help within their own environment, over a prolonged period and on as wide a scale as possible. In recognition of the fact that eating habits are something that everyone needs to address on a day-to-day basis, the Council’s position is based on the notion that we need grassroots improvements to take hold. In the interests of ensuring that efforts are both sustained and effective, the Strategy Council believes that it is crucial to convey to children and young people the importance of food, agriculture and life as a whole at every opportunity throughout their education.

## Bringing Agriculture and the Dinner Table Closer Together

The Japanese public is steadily becoming more and more interested in food and agriculture. A food self-sufficiency rate of 40% has become common knowledge throughout the country. More importantly, people have started to focus on the relationship between agriculture and their own diets, realizing that their eating habits may change the agriculture of their own country. In light of this shift in public awareness, the Strategy Council continues to stress the fact that in-

creasing rice consumption and establishing widespread eating habits based on domestic agricultural resources will breathe life back into agriculture in Japan, thereby promoting healthy living and revitalizing rural communities.

Modern day eating habits are also characterized by an increased tendency to eat processed foods and to eat out. Of the total 80 trillion yen (808 billion dollars) spent on food and drink in Japan during the year 2000, just 19% was spent on fresh food. Processed food meanwhile accounted for 52% and eating out for 30%. The food manufacturing, food distribution and catering industries have driven a thick wedge between industries such

also undoubtedly help increase consumption of domestically produced food. In this respect, the agricultural and food industries need to fulfill mutually complementary roles. If the agricultural and food industries were both to ensure food safety to the same level, it would guarantee the safety of food on the dinner table at that level. Another way to bring agriculture and the dinner table closer together would be to provide accurate information on safety and quality. On the subject of food safety in particular, the Strategy Council has underlined the need for both the agricultural and food industries to act with a sense of compliance. This statement is based on a keen

grain, as well as effectively harnessing domestic agricultural resources. It is essential to provide information on the constantly changing global food situation quickly and accurately so as to encourage the public to remain calm and act rationally.

The Strategy Council has also expressed concerns that growing pressure on the food market is likely to result in people facing even more of an uphill struggle to secure sufficient food supplies, especially among the poorest sections of society in developing countries. It has therefore advised Japan to be more proactive in terms of international cooperation to help ensure stable food supplies the world



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as agriculture and fisheries, which produce the materials used in food products, and people's dinner tables. As a result, it will be essential to secure cooperation from these food industries in order to increase the amount of domestic agricultural produce that we eat.

For this reason alone, farmers need to cater precisely to the needs of the food industries. One of the shortcomings of Japanese agriculture in the past has been an inability to form close cooperative relationships with the food industries as a result of prioritizing the shipment of produce to market in the form of fresh food. In order to remedy this issue, the Japanese agricultural industry needs some sort of mechanism to enable it to supply the food industries with the quantities of produce they need to sustain themselves on a consistent basis.

Efforts to ensure high levels of safety and outstanding quality would

awareness that the Japanese public have witnessed a string of incidents that have made them question the safety of their food in recent years.

### Japan's Role on the International Stage

Food is one of the absolute necessities of everyday life. It is therefore every country's primary responsibility to ensure food security in case of any eventuality. Indeed, being prepared for every eventuality enables the general public to make stable decisions and act sensibly on a day-to-day basis. In that respect, food security forms part of the underlying infrastructure that maintains social stability throughout the country.

Amidst mounting pressure on food supply and demand the world over, the Strategy Council has stressed the importance of securing stable food imports and stockpiling

over. By helping to stabilize the international community as a whole, ensuring the stability of the global food situation would also alleviate the burden of food security prepared for emergency in advanced nations.

It would be fair to say that the Strategy Council is founded on an international approach rather than merely remaining passive. Whilst continuing to emphasize the need for an unwavering national strategy, the Council advocates the following message: "We firmly believe that, if we engage in sustainable, free and open economic activity and exchange with regard to agriculture and food and start to make more effective use of domestic agricultural resources once again, we will be able to lay the foundations of food safety and security for a new era." □

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