

Foreign workers in the Japanese agricultural sector: Issues and challenges observed in the cases of Nagano and Shiga Prefectures

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Abstract

This paper aims to shed light on foreign laborers' situation in Japan's agricultural sector and discusses the issues of expanding foreign farmworkers' employment in Japan. This is done through literature reviews and field research in Kawakami Village in Nagano Prefecture and a few villages in Shiga Prefecture. It is clear that foreign workers in the agricultural sector are becoming a vital labor force in some regions and they will be one of the critical elements deciding the survival of Japanese agriculture in the future. The Technical Intern Training Program is necessary (1) to improve the supervising organizations themselves and the relationship between the sending agencies and the supervising organizations; (2) to ensure a community-wide welcoming atmosphere, rather than only host farmers welcoming trainees.

Keyword: Agriculture, Foreign Workers, Technical Intern Training Program, Supervising Organizations, Labour Market

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Introduction

According to the Employment Security Services Statistics published by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, from 2012 to 2019, the active job openings-to-applicants ratio increased from 1.08% to 1.57% in the agricultural sector and 1.28% to 2.83% in the livestock sector. This is higher than the average ratio in all industries, which changed from 0.74% to 1.41% in the same time period. The number of agricultural entities with regular employment, defined as those with employment contracts of seven months or more according to the Census of Agriculture and Forestry, increased by approximately 70%, from 28,355 in 2000 to 54,252 in 2015 (Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries 2015). Securing a stable agricultural labor force is fundamental for sustainable production and technological progress in the agricultural sector. However, rural areas are faced with a greater population decline and a higher aging rate than in urban areas. In this context, the hiring of so-called Technical Intern Trainees (hereinafter referred to as trainees), that is, the recruitment of labor force

from overseas to secure a stable labor force is increasing.

Such labor shortages and the recruitment of foreign workers in the agricultural sector have already raised many issues in Europe and the United States. For example, Martin (2016) pointed out, based on the case studies of Canada, New Zealand, Australia, Spain, and the United States, that while farmworkers from African and Latin American countries have acquired income and skills, the workers' rights are not protected due to a lack of consistency in the government's protection of workers. Rye and Scott (2018) pointed out that while migrant workers are playing an increasingly essential role in Europe's agricultural production, those workers often face problems in the rural communities they are situated in. That is labor shortages in the agricultural sector have become a significant issue in many developed countries, such as in countries in Europe, the United States, and Japan, leading to significant changes in labor markets and rural spaces.

There is a large volume of published studies on the management problems of recruitment agencies operating within Japan, drawing from individual case studies in various regions, such as Hokkaido prefecture (Hansen 2010), Ibaraki prefecture (Ando and Horiguchi 2013), and Kagawa prefecture (Gunji and Horiguchi 2016). Ando and Horiguchi (2013) and Gunji and Horiguchi (2016) investigated the management of the Japan Agricultural Cooperatives (JA). Moreover, Kojima (2016) conducted individual interviews and analyzed the impacts that the trainees' presence in the agriculture sector had on the farm laborer employment of farming households.

In Japan, the Technical Intern Training Program for Foreign Nationals (hereinafter referred to as TITP) reached a significant turning point in 2010. Following the amendment to the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act (hereinafter referred to as Immigration Control Act) in 2009, "Technical Intern Training" was officially introduced as a status of residence, which meant the trainees were fully covered under all labor-related laws and regulations, including minimum wage. The provision of social insurance and employment contracts was required. As a result, the cost burden of hiring trainees was no longer much different than the cost burden of hiring Japanese nationals. Therefore, employment under the TITP has been increasing. However mid this trend, human rights and unpaid wage issues, which have occurred in some areas, have been brought to the media's attention and the TITP has come under increasing criticism. Such criticism was also directed at the government's "stopgap" measure which only provided residential status under the Immigration Control Act and the Labor Standard Act, without taking into further consideration the fact that trainee employment had become a regular practice and trainees were already an indispensable labor force in certain industrial fields.

In response, the government implemented program reforms in 2017 to strengthen the protection of trainees and to ensure the efficient operation of the program. These included a licensing system and penalties, as well as the establishment of Organization for Technical Intern Training to handle the program's administrative work. Furthermore, with the revision of the Immigration Control Act in 2019, a new residential status titled "Specified Skilled Worker" was introduced, which is considered a significant step forward in expanding foreign workers' employability. This paper aims to re-examine the problems of the TITP, which is a system that enables the majority of foreign workers in Japan, and discuss the implications of these problems on the labor market in Japan. This paper is based on literature reviews and field research in Kawakami Village in Nagano Prefecture as well as a few villages in Shiga Prefecture.

1. Technical Intern Training Program for Foreign Nationals: Its basic policy and evolution

Currently, in Japan, there are 35,513 foreign workers in the agricultural sector, of which 32,419 are trainees (Figure 1). In the late 1960s, during rapid economic growth, Japan started to receive foreign workers as part of employee training of workers at Japanese companies' overseas subsidiaries. However, there were concerns that

the domestic labor market could be affected by the influx of foreigners. In response to these concerns, the government determined a basic policy in which unskilled foreign laborers were denied entry whereas highly skilled foreign laborers were welcomed. This basic policy has been maintained to date.



Figure 1. Number of Foreign Workers in the Agricultural Sector and Trainees

Source: Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, *Status of reporting on the employment of foreign workers by employers (annually)*

However, as the labor shortage became severe, making it difficult to secure sufficient workers domestically, the fundamental nature of the TITP was opened up to meet Japan's workforce needs, under the official guise of human resource development in developing countries. This was also the case with the Training Program for Foreign Nationals, the predecessor to the TITP¹⁾. The TITP, launched in 1993, allowed trainees who had completed training and met certain requirements to work and acquire practical skills through employment. In the early 1990s, the status of residence for technical intern training was "designated activities," which provided a two-year stay with a combination of training and on-the-job training. In 1997, the period was extended to three years, consisting of one-year training and two-year on-the-job training. However, the program began to receive criticism both domestically and internationally as it enabled employers to hire foreigners at low wages in the name of training expenses. This forced the government to modify the program and add the requirement for clarified employer-employee relationships. The Immigration Control Act was amended in 2009 and "technical intern in training" was introduced as an official status of residence (Miyairi 2018). This status enabled the application of labor laws to trainees, which paved the way for the current iteration of the program which includes a minimum wage equal to the minimum wage of Japanese nationals, a requirement to provide social insurance, and a requirement for employment contracts²⁾.

TITP organizations can be classified into two types; "individual enterprise" and "supervising organization." The "individual enterprise" classifies Japanese companies who directly employ staff from overseas branches, affiliated companies, and business partners and conduct technical intern training. While the "supervising organizations" are non-profit supervising organizations who recruit trainees dispatched from local sending agencies and provide them with technical intern training. As shown in Table 1, as of 2019, the agricultural sector's recruitment is conducted almost entirely by supervising organizations. This is because individual farmers and agricultural

Table1. Number of Technical Intern Training

| by nationality/ region | TOTAL | Vietnam | China | Philippines | Indonesia | Myanmar | Thailand | Cambodia | Mongolia | Other |
|--|---------|---------|--------|-------------|-----------|---------|----------|----------|----------|-------|
| TOTAL | 366,167 | 196,001 | 69,795 | 30,326 | 32,508 | 13,739 | 9,587 | 8,903 | 2,200 | 3,108 |
| Agriculture | 32,419 | 13,258 | 8,293 | 3,486 | 3,042 | 681 | 1,116 | 1,929 | 162 | 452 |
| supervising-organization-type training (i) | 15,623 | 6,266 | 4,291 | 1,541 | 1,431 | 446 | 473 | 877 | 87 | 211 |
| supervising-organization-type training (ii) | 14,758 | 6,224 | 3,666 | 1,544 | 1,435 | 195 | 526 | 894 | 73 | 201 |
| supervising-organization-type training (iii) | 2,037 | 768 | 336 | 401 | 176 | 40 | 116 | 158 | 2 | 40 |
| individual-enterprise-type training (i) | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| individual-enterprise-type training (ii) | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| individual-enterprise-type training (iii) | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

Source: *FY 2019 Statistics of the Organization for Technical Intern Training*

entities are not allowed to recruit trainees directly, they must do so through supervising organizations. Therefore, supervising organizations play an important role in hiring foreign workers in the agricultural sector.

Furthermore, since around 2010, human rights and unpaid wage issues, which have occurred in some areas, have been brought to the media's attention and TITP have come under increasing criticism. Such criticism was also directed at the government's "stopgap" measure of only providing residential status under the Immigration Control Act and the application of the Labor Standard Act, without taking into consideration that trainee employment was a regular practice and trainees were already an indispensable labor force in certain industrial fields. The government implemented program reforms in 2017 to strengthen the protection of trainees and ensure the efficient operation of the program by introducing a licensing system and penalties. It also established The Organization for Technical Intern Training to handle the administrative work of the program. Furthermore, with the revision of the Immigration Control Act in 2019, a new residential status "Specified Skilled Worker" was introduced, which allows long-term employment for up to eight years in combination with Stage II of Technical Intern Training and up to 10 years with Stage III Technical Intern Training. At present, 930 trainees with the above status are employed in the agricultural sector, including 730 in crop farming and 200 in livestock farming.

As seen above, while the government still officially refuses to allow low-skilled foreign workers to enter the country, their actual policy has shifted toward expanding the TITP program in specific fields such as agriculture. As a result, the licensing system for supervising organizations and the preparation and accreditation of technical intern training plans were introduced to make the program more appropriate and to protect workers. This increased the burden on host companies. In the next section, I analyze the case of foreign workers in Kawakami Village, Nagano Prefecture, and a few villages in Shiga Prefecture, drawing on the respective standpoints of host farmers, foreign workers, and supervising organizations.

2. Situation of foreign workers in Nagano and Shiga Prefectures

In 2003, farmers in Kawakami Village, Nagano Prefecture, began to pay attention to foreign workers as a source of hired labor. The village's total population was 3,961 in 2019, of which about one fourth, or just under 1,000, were trainees. As shown in Table 2, Nagano Prefecture has 1,290 trainees, making it the ninth-largest region in Japan employing trainees. Of these, Kawakami Village employs 936 trainees, accounting for about 70% of all trainees in Nagano Prefecture, making it the village with the largest number of trainees in Nagano Prefecture and one of the leading places in Japan in terms of hosting trainees.

Kawakami Village is located in the southeastern end of Nagano Prefecture, adjacent to the Yamanashi, Saitama, and Gunma Prefectures. The village's altitude is over 1,100 m above sea level, with an average annual

temperature as low as 8.4 ° C. Due to its climate, the cultivation of leafy vegetables such as lettuce is flourishing. Kawakami's total trading volume of vegetables in 2018 was about 20.7 billion yen per year, making it the largest lettuce producer in Japan. The village is not suitable for cultivating agricultural products in the winter due to severe weather, so the main farming period is limited, from March to October. As a result, trainees are mainly employed for a short period of eight months.

Table2. Number of Technical Intern training in the Agriculture Sector

| Ranking | | No.1 | No.2 | No.3 | No.4 | No.5 | No.6 | No.7 | No.8 | No.9 | No.40 |
|--|--------|---------|----------|---------|-------|-------|-------|---------|-----------|--------|-------|
| by Prefecture | TOTAL | Ibaragi | Kumamoto | Hokaido | Chiba | Gunma | Aichi | Fukuoka | Kagoshima | Nagano | Shiga |
| supervising-organization-type training (i) | 15,624 | 2,741 | 1,491 | 1,650 | 923 | 887 | 695 | 662 | 677 | 593 | 39 |
| supervising-organization-type training (ii) | 14,758 | 2,908 | 1,515 | 1,141 | 901 | 575 | 728 | 651 | 599 | 593 | 38 |
| supervising-organization-type training (iii) | 2,037 | 267 | 223 | 116 | 139 | 119 | 68 | 108 | 95 | 104 | 0 |
| TOTAL | 32,419 | 5,916 | 3,229 | 2,907 | 1,963 | 1,581 | 1,491 | 1,421 | 1,371 | 1,290 | 77 |

Source: *FY 2019 Statistics of the Organization for Technical Intern Training*

In Kawakami Village, where lettuce cultivation had initially flourished, short-term temporary workers, including female students, were recruited from all over the country for cultivation from around 1970. However, due to the hard farming work and increased economic activities in urban areas, it gradually became difficult to hire Japanese workers, and in 2003, they began to host trainees (Figure 2). In approximately 10 years, the village hosted more than 800 trainees, with the local government playing a central role. However, in 2014, a number of human rights violations against Chinese trainees were discovered, which made the village stop hosting trainees from China, which was the primary country of origin for trainees. Moreover, the village government had stopped playing a central role in recruitment, this was now done through private supervising organizations. Simultaneously, the monitoring system for trainees and supervising organizations had been strengthened. Kawakami is now hosting trainees not only from China but also from other countries such as Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia.

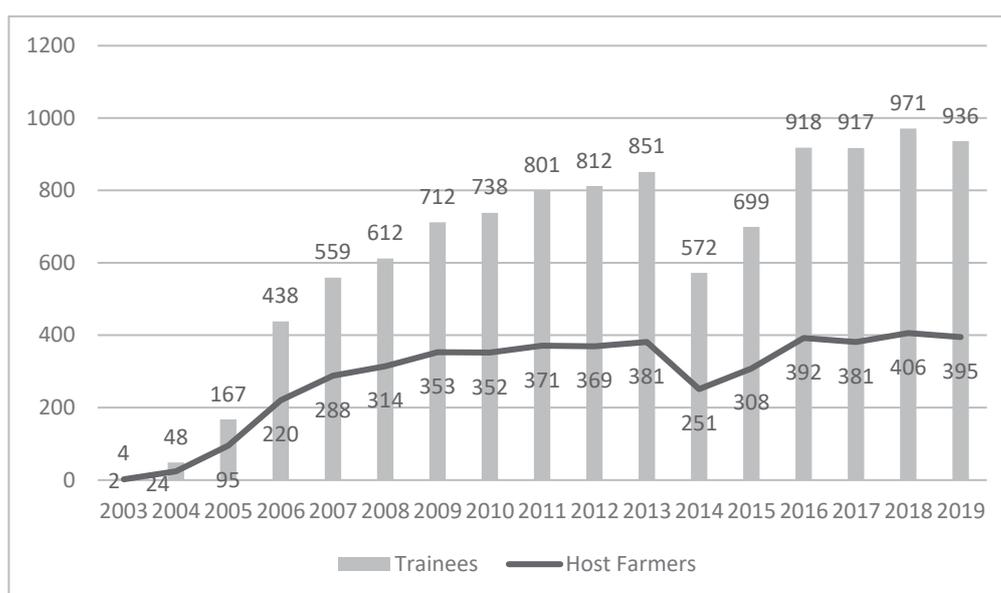


Figure2. Number of Trainees and Host Farmers in Kawakami Village

Source: *Statistics of Kawakami Village 2020*

There are two factors behind the growing trainee employment in Kawakami Village. First, in Kawakami Village, more than 60% of farmers own more than three hectares of farmland. Each farmer cultivates an average of 3.6 hectares, and many farmers have highly stable incomes with an annual average income of 25 million yen. The population engaged in agriculture is 75.7%, the second largest in the country. The average age of the population engaged in agriculture is 56.9 years, while the national average is 66.4 years, and the average age of the successors living in the same household is 29.4 years. With a stable income and the presence of young farmers, the village is able to be proactive in new initiatives. Second, since the entire village has been actively involved in recruiting trainees, the village already has a strong foundation for hosting trainees, making it easy to continue to employ them.

However, in Shiga Prefecture, they hired only 77 trainees, which implies that the region is hosting trainees at a lesser rate than the rest of Japan (Table 2). This is partly due to the characteristics of the region's agricultural production and the nature of its farms. Shiga Prefecture is one of Japan's largest rice-producing regions, with approximately 92% of its farmland being used as paddy fields. Particularly in rice production, mechanization and other measures have shortened labor hours, making it possible to run rice farming as a side business while engaged in a second occupation. In addition, Shiga Prefecture is a region where community-based farming cooperatives are active, and management efficiency is improved by sharing farming work and the shared use of machinery on a regional basis. This decreases the need for extra labor, which makes the region less active in hosting trainees in comparison. However, the farmers I interviewed in this region were engaged in horticulture or dairy farming. They had a need for a stable workforce, which is why they hosted trainees. Therefore, although the degree of employment of trainees varies considerably from region to region, it is clear that all regions, no matter if their farming methods are labor-intensive or capital-intensive, have no choice but to rely on the TITP to solve labor shortages.

3. Host farmers and technical intern trainees

Farmer A, who I interviewed in Kawakami Village, grows lettuce on four hectares of farmland (including rental land) with his mother. During the farming season, they start working at approximately 3:30 a.m. almost every morning, take a lunch break, work until 5 p.m. or 6 p.m. in the evening, and go to bed at 9 p.m. or 10 p.m. to be ready for the next day. Before hosting trainees, they were hiring domestic workers on a temporary basis, but gradually fell into a labor shortage. They started hiring Chinese trainees in 2004 and switched to Filipino trainees in 2014³⁾. They currently employ three male Filipino trainees.

Another farmer in Kawakami Village, Farmer B, grows cauliflower and ice plants on about five hectares of farmland. Although the farmer was initially a lettuce grower like other farmers, he started to grow cauliflower in 2003 due to the decline in the brand power of lettuce, concerns about the decline in soil fertility, decrease in the price of lettuce, food waste due to over-supply, and others. A few years ago, he started growing ice plants as an off-season crop to create a foundation for year-round farming. Currently, a total of eight individuals, including three family members (the farmer and his parents) and five Filipinos, consisting of two specified skilled workers and three trainees, are engaged in farm work. Farmer B tries to employ the workers and trainees for a more extended period, avoiding the shorter eight-months contracts⁴⁾. In Kawakami Village in particular, due to the off-season agricultural season from November to March, almost all trainees are employed for a short period with the status of Stage I Technical Intern Training. In this context, Farmer B is one of the most pioneering farmers, as he takes efforts to secure a stable and continuous workforce through diversification.

Company C in Shiga Prefecture is a dairy farm. In 2018, they became independent from their family dairy



business, built a new cattle barn, and became a stock company. The company is run by a couple and employ one regular Japanese employee. Due to the labor shortage, the company started to hire Indonesian trainees five years ago and currently employs four Indonesians (one male specified skilled worker and three female trainees). A typical day consists of working in the morning from 5:30 to 9:00 a.m., then going home and returning to work in the afternoon from 3:00 to 7:00 p.m. The trainees' work includes cleaning cow beds, spreading compost, feeding, and milking. In the beginning, when they started hosting trainees, they were hiring only male workers. However, since dairy farming involves working with cows and requires delicate care and attention, they switched to hiring female workers.

Another company in Shiga Prefecture, Company D, has been growing roses since the 1980s. Currently, they employ five regular Japanese employees and 60 part-time employees⁵⁾ and cultivate about 2.65 hectares of farmland (including rented land). The company has been hosting trainees regularly. They hired two Indonesians in 2015, and hire approximately two or three new trainees every year⁶⁾. Before hiring trainees, they had been hiring elderly workers through the Silver Human Resources Center for Elderly Citizens. However, as the retention rate of elderly workers was low, and there was competition among farmers to secure relatively younger elderly workers, the company started to host trainees as a new labor source⁷⁾. They currently hire eight male Indonesians, two of whom have transitioned to the specified skilled worker status. In the future, they plan to have as many workers with the 'specified skilled worker' status as possible to ensure a long-term workforce.

The host farmers were mostly large-scale, either labor or capital-intensive, crop producers willing to expand their operation scale. Many host farmers show a positive attitude toward hiring trainees to fill the labor shortage. Although the nature of work varied from crop to crop, farming work tends to require a certain skill level, and farms that needed a significant amount of skill-requiring work sought to secure a long-term workforce. However, in regions where conditions vary greatly depending on the season, it is hard even for farmers themselves to secure income-generating work during the off-farming season, if it even exists. These regions tend to favor more short-term employment as farmers are unable to employ trainees for a more extended period even if they wish to do so.

4. Current situation of technical intern trainees

In both Nagano and Shiga prefectures, the trainees live together in dormitories or apartments arranged by their host farmers, and they prepare all three meals on their own. Their primary purpose in coming to Japan was to make money, and in most cases, they pay off debts every month and send almost half of their salary back home to their parents. Their days off were mostly spent in their dormitories on their smartphones, except for grocery shopping and other daily necessities. Some of the long-term trainees, such as the specified skilled workers, were able to engage in simple daily conversations in Japanese. However, in general, they struggled to acquire Japanese-language skills and were hesitant to communicate actively. Therefore, many of the stage I trainees were uneasy despite finding life in Japan enjoyable.

Many trainees were burdened with debts of approximately 400,000 yen to come to work in Japan, although the debt varies slightly from country to country. Therefore, their first year of work in Japan mainly contributed to paying off their debts. In their later years they focused more on sending money back home to their families. Eventually, they were able to save for themselves after becoming specified skilled workers. However, many of the Kawakami Village trainees, who were on shorter contracts of eight months, were cutting down on their living expenses in Japan to pay off debts and send money back home. These conditions may cause a decline in their energy and physical strength and hamper daily work.

5. Characteristics of the supervising organization

Supervising organizations are designated to play a leading role in the smooth operation of the TITP, including auditing and supervising the program's proper operation, education of trainees, and the provision of consultation services. For instance, in Kawakami Village, Organization E, with a Japanese branch representative and two Filipino interpreters, supervises about 200 Filipino trainees and dispatches them to approximately 50 farms in Kawakami Village. Organization F in Shiga Prefecture supervises about 100 Indonesian trainees with representatives of regular and temporary employees who serve as interpreters and dispatch the trainees nationwide. The organization works only in Shiga Prefecture in the agricultural sector. They have dispatched six trainees and two specified skilled workers to Company C and three trainees and one specified skilled worker to Company D.

The first characteristic of the supervising organizations is the stable relationship between them and the sending agencies, as the sending country is limited to one region and the sending agencies are limited to one or several. Although both organizations visit the sending countries and conduct briefing sessions and interviews, all the work involved in sending the trainees to Japan falls on the sending agencies. However, Organization F is an uncommon case, as it provides a 480-hour lecture course delivered by the organization's representative via Skype on a regular basis prior to coming to Japan. The course allows the trainees to learn more about Japanese people, the characteristics of Japanese culture and customs, the significance of the technical intern training, and the details of the work at host farms.

Second, both organizations E and F conduct thorough recruitment tests intending to meet the diverse requests of host farmers. At Organization E, trainee selection is mostly left up to the organization. However, Organization F requests employers to participate in the recruitment examinations in the sending country as much as possible to see if the trainees' qualifications match the diverse needs of each management⁸⁾.

Third, the supervising organizations regularly follow up with the host farmers and trainees. However, the nature and frequency of follow-up vary depending on the host farmers and trainees. In some cases, especially when the language barrier is considerably low, follow-up is only done if there is an issue that needs to be settled. However, in some cases, for example in Kawakami Village, injuries frequently occur due to the nature of short-term employment and the use of knives. In these cases, more frequent and active follow-up is needed by supervising organizations. Thus, it can be said that follow-up intervention depends largely on the nature of the work and the trainees' familiarity with it.

6. Challenges of the Technical Intern Training Program

There are issues regarding workforce shortages in the supervising organizations themselves and the relationship between the sending agencies and the supervising organizations. In order to make sustainable use of the TITP, the most critical issue is to improve the system of hosting and following up by supervising organizations. In other words, organizations are expected to provide supervision and guidance to host farmers and trainees to prevent human rights violations such as abuses of power and sexual harassment by host farmers, unpaid wages, and excessive working hours, and also to ensure that trainees can return home with satisfaction. To achieve this objective, it is necessary for both host farmers and trainees to deepen their understanding of the TITP itself, so that the needs of both parties are well matched. However, supervising organizations are engaged in a wide range of operations, including regular audits of host farmers at least once every three months, post-entry training for stage I trainees, and guidance on the preparation of the technical intern training plans. Due to the overwhelming



shortage of human resources in the supervising organizations, they have not been able to provide detailed follow-up services that cater to the individual circumstances of trainees and host farmers. Furthermore, it is important that trainees not come to Japan as mere migrant workers, but that they put effort into learning things such as the Japanese culture, their way of working, and how they value working. As for the host farmers, instead of treating foreign workers as a simple labor force, they need to make efforts to understand them by compromising, communicating, and working with them. Sending agencies and supervising organizations need to cooperate closely to help develop a common understanding of the system and the working custom in Japan among trainees. However, currently, there are many cases of fragmentation between the sending agencies and the supervising organization due to the supervising organizations' excessive workloads. Therefore, in order for this program to be sustainable, comprehensive governmental support is essential, including the formation of relationships between the sending agencies and supervising organizations.

Furthermore, it is necessary to ensure that entire communities are welcoming of the trainees, instead of only the host farms. The presence of regular Japanese employees at each farm is vital as well. In most cases, trainees have no communication with Japanese host farmers other than at their workplace, and they do not participate in community activities. Most farmers do not even care if trainees have adequate food, clothing, and housing. The relationship will never grow closer without the host farmer's active involvement with the trainees. Lack of communication ultimately leads to problems such as the inability to build good relationships in the workplace and trainees' isolation. The trainees are also responsible for these problems. In particular, there are always senior trainees at farms hosting new trainees every year. In such cases, the second and third-year trainees often provide assistance to first-year trainees in various areas. However, it has been pointed out that this decreases the need for the trainees to acquire Japanese language skills and gain an understanding of Japanese culture more and more, which results in further lack of integration. In addition, with the spread of smartphones, a further lack of communication has been observed, such as the reduced interaction with Japanese employees that used to be seen during breaks. In this context, there is a growing expectation for the role that Japanese regular employees can play. Due to these changes the presence of on-site supervisors will become essential. Such supervisors can transmit skills and other information to trainees on a day-to-day basis, something that is not in the capacity of supervising organizations. In other words, to further expand the TITP in the future, I believe that there will be an increasing need for regular employment positions that can create a bridge between the host farmers and trainees.

The third challenge is the reform of the system itself. The TITP is based on the principle of upgrading the skills of foreign workers, and thus the trainees are obliged to carry out their training program at the training site in accordance with the technical internship plan. Therefore, even if the trainees are dissatisfied with their work or the host farmer, they are not allowed to change the type of work or their host farm. As a result, illegal practices such as low wages, unpaid overtime work, and power harassment are rampant, triggering disappearances in some cases. The TITP must ensure that trainees are eventually brought back to their home countries. The content of the training is set based on the technical internship plan, and trainees who have used the program once are not allowed to use it again. In the case of Kawakami Village in the Nagano Prefecture, most trainees are employed for a short period of eight months. Therefore, trainees can only exercise their right to stage I of the TITP and will not be able to use the program thereafter. In addition, since it is impossible to spend the remaining four months of the visa period in other industries, many trainees are tempted to break the rules and stay in Japan⁹⁾. Therefore, I think that a more flexible operation of the current program in a way that conforms to real circumstances will be required in the future. Contrary to the government's official premise, the current TITP has established an exploitative structure due to many restrictions, which results in part to illegal labor being rampant. In order to

avoid these problems, I believe that it will be necessary to reform the program in a manner that sufficiently guarantees foreign workers' freedom of choice of occupation and promotes equality between workers and employers, rather than tightening the controls on the supervising organizations and the host farmers in their preparation and accreditation of technical training plans. The same is true for the Specified Skilled Worker system. It is necessary to guarantee foreign workers' safety at work, rather than just employing them on an ad hoc basis to fill the labor shortage. In doing so, it will be indispensable to have support from local governments and the national government by providing assistance beyond industries and regions. In other words, I argue that it is crucial to build new employment relationships by reforming the system to secure foreign workers' safety, enhancing the understanding of the system among different stakeholders, and raising awareness, and thus creating the condition to form a new system of global agriculture management.

Conclusion

The presence of foreign workers in the agricultural sector is becoming a vital labor force in some regions or crops and will be one of the critical elements deciding the survival of Japanese agriculture in the future. Especially in cases where foreign labor is required, agricultural businesses tend to form a pyramid organizational structure. In this structure, the family members who manage the business are at the top, the Japanese employees are in the middle, and the trainees are at the bottom. This means that the system cannot function unless Japanese people are also employed, as they are capable of acting as a bridge between trainees and employers. This role is currently carried out ineffectively by supervising organizations, who have many resource-based constraints.

However, there are many issues to address even if Japanese regular employees are guaranteed. Since the application of labor-related laws and regulations concerning trainees is becoming stricter, and the current TITP framework of providing the status of residence only once, the foreign workers' recruitment in the agricultural sector, which is season- and weather-dependent, is likely to become more difficult than in other industries. Therefore, for the sustainable development of the agricultural sector, it is increasingly necessary to consider creating various frameworks that bolster cooperation within communities and industries.

Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest directly relevant to the content of this article.

Notes

- 1) The Training Program for Foreigners was launched in 1982 to institutionalize the training that companies had previously conducted on an individual basis.
- 2) At present, the TITP can be applied for up to five years. However, those trainees on the fourth and fifth year are considered as stage III Trainees, and their employment is limited to competent supervising organizations and practical trainees who meet certain conditions. For this reason, the status of many trainees after the fourth year are shifted to the specified skilled worker status.
- 3) The reason for the shift from Chinese to Filipino workers was that the village could no longer accommodate Chinese workers due to the human rights issues that occurred there.
- 4) Before hiring Filipinos, he had hired Indonesians for about 10 years, but due to language and other issues, he switched to hiring Filipinos.
- 5) However, the number of employees is the total of the mentioned company (nursery and cultivation) and another company (cultivation and sales of cut flowers).
- 6) Before Indonesian trainees, the company had hired Chinese trainees. However, since there were many issues among the trainees,



the company switched to Indonesian trainees. Another rose-selling company hires nine female Indonesians (three of whom are specified skilled workers). The company adjusts the number of male and female workers depending on the type of work (mainly rose seedling cultivation or sales and management).

- 7) Company D, on its expansion in scale, their employment was on the rise and continues to employ aged workers. And the work content is almost the same between the aged workers and trainees.
- 8) Employment examinations include not only interviews but also a combination of physical fitness, technical skills, and aptitude tests. However, test results are not necessarily the only criteria that are considered. In some cases, the applicants' physique, already accommodated trainees, their place of origin, and referrals such as relatives of returnees, are also considered, but the criteria are not necessarily fixed within the management or organization.
- 9) Nearly 50 Vietnamese disappeared last year, among other incidents.

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