



When Survival of the Self is the Survival of Others

by Ryoko Tsuboi

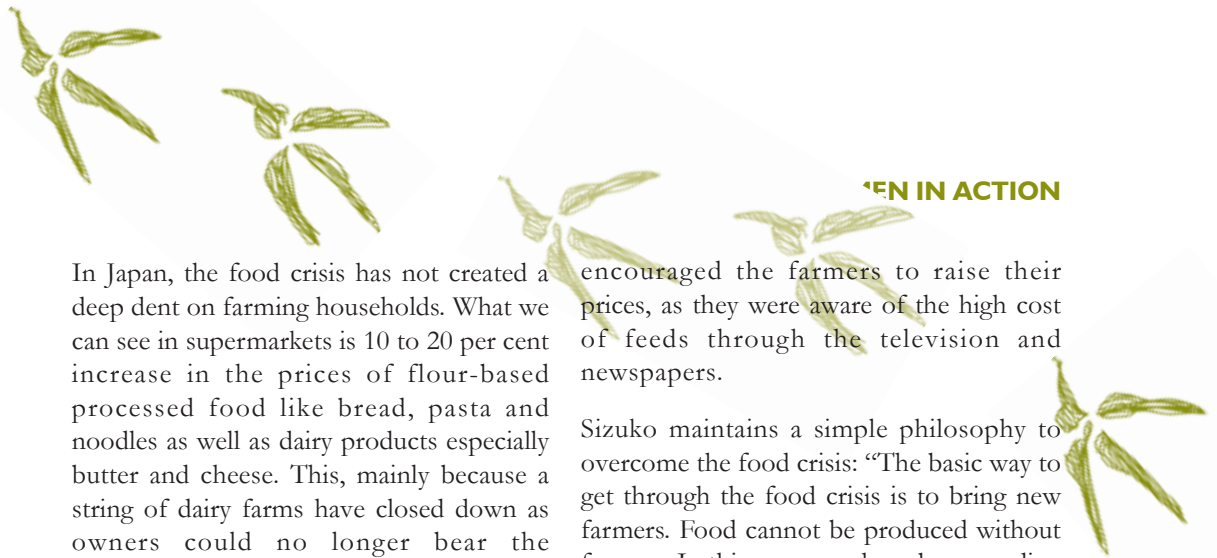
Sizuko Simoo, 61, is a woman rice and egg farmer in Saibouji area, Maizuru City, Northern Kyoto prefecture. Together with her husband, Seichi, 60, her son, 30 and his wife, 28, she works on a 5.5 hectare rice field and raises 2,350 chickens for egg production. Of these, 350 are floor-reared while 2,000 are kept in cages.

Chickens for the Community. Together with fellow women farmers, Sizuko Simoo (second from the left) prepares the dressed chicken. Organically raised, her chickens and other derivative products are directly sold within her community.

For Sizuko, the food crisis is not deeply felt in the family's daily life. What is palpable is the increase of prices of various products such as imported chicken feeds and cardboard containers, the ones used for packing eggs.

Their farm has been making self-mixed feeds using safer, non-genetically modified ingredients, so that they can produce safer

and healthier eggs. But the prices of the ingredients for such feeds have increased. The family could have opted for the cheaper formula feeds which companies are recommending. But Sizuko holds on to the healthier option, adding rice and chili peppers to their home-made feed. In the end though, they had to raise the price of egg, from 300 yen (US\$3) per kilo to 370 yen (US\$3.79) per kilo.



In Japan, the food crisis has not created a deep dent on farming households. What we can see in supermarkets is 10 to 20 per cent increase in the prices of flour-based processed food like bread, pasta and noodles as well as dairy products especially butter and cheese. This, mainly because a string of dairy farms have closed down as owners could no longer bear the increasing prices of feeds.

Vegetable and rice farmers who are using chemical fertilisers are also hit by the price increase. But they find it difficult to pass on the higher costs to their consumers, lest they lose their markets.

Sizuko sells most of her products directly to their consumers. Through the years, her family has built face-to-face interactions and mutual trust-based relationships with consumers: Producers provide safe food for their consumers' health. In turn, consumers support producers who serve them.

“The basic way to get through the food crisis is to bring new farmers. Food cannot be produced without farmers.”

With the increases in the prices of non-genetically modified ingredients for their self-mixed chicken feed, Sizuko's family joined other farmers in writing a letter to more than 100 consumers. They went door to door, asking for their patrons' understanding for the increase in the price of eggs.

The farmers have managed to maintain the loyalty of their customers, save for organisations that are limited by their strict budget and had to look for other cheaper alternatives. Some customers even

encouraged the farmers to raise their prices, as they were aware of the high cost of feeds through the television and newspapers.

Sizuko maintains a simple philosophy to overcome the food crisis: “The basic way to get through the food crisis is to bring new farmers. Food cannot be produced without farmers. In this sense, we have been sending rural youth from this village to an agricultural high school in Mie where they learn not only the techniques of organic farming, but also the importance and preciousness of farmers who support our lives.”

Her husband, Seichi, is the first graduate of this high school. Their son, Tomozo also graduated from this high school and then later went to a national university and finished his education. But he went back to the village together with a university classmate who became a new farmer. They have contributed to the great hopes in the agricultural sector of Japan, where the average age of farmers is above 65 years old and where rural villages are quickly vanishing day by day, with less people living and even less people tilling the land.

Indeed the Simoo family is self-sufficient. Other than producing rice and eggs which mainly supports their livelihood, the family also grows a variety of beans and other vegetables in a 2.5 acre farm land. Since they can also produce chicken meat from the farm, they need not buy so much food from outside. Also they make the most from self-made fertilisers, using chicken manure and seldom use chemical pesticides (although they spray only once in a year in a part of their rice field, most of other rice fields are cultivated without any pesticide) for their rice and vegetable fields. Thus they have protected themselves from the increases in the price of fertilisers.

“Regardless of the times we live in, the basic way of living as human being is to live in



Untiring. *Sizuko cultivates more than five hectares of rice field and raises more than 2,350 chickens, with the help of her family. She also tends some vegetables and other crops in a 2.5 acre of land.*

a self-sufficient way. If we live this way, we will never be threatened by any crisis. We have learned that we can survive by sharing and helping hand in hand with consumers who share our philosophy. We should not forget this fact and we should farm with this in mind. With this attitude, we are able to build a trust-based relationship with consumers. I am sure we could not have built this good tie with

the consumers had we gone farming just for making money,” Sizuko remarks.

With the depletion of natural resources that will come to us before long, we cannot continue with the conventional way of food production and distribution systems as well as other economic activities and lifestyles.

A beast named “free market economy” is attacking us. Together with global warming and climactic aberration, it has made much of food production unstable.

Given unforeseeable world situations, the farming method and lifestyle of the Simoo family, which are based on the ideas of “self-dependence” and “working with consumers” and which have been practiced for more than 30 years, might give us a clue on how to survive along with the rest. ■

Ryoko Tsuboi is the editor of the newsletter of *Ainou kai*, a Japanese agricultural organisation promoting organic farming. Since 1997 after graduating from Osaka’s *Otemon University*, Ryoko has been working with Japanese and international social movements, particularly with the agricultural and elderly sectors.