

*The existing market system for agricultural products does not consider the pollution of the environment, nor does it properly value farmers' labour. Prices are often unstable.*

*Tei-kei is a Japanese direct-distribution system for agricultural produce in Japan. Consumers buy their food directly from organic farmers. Farmers produce what consumers need and get stable prices. No shops, no middlemen.*



## Tei-kei: partnership between farmers and consumers

### Koyu Furusawa

Let's take the Sakurai family as an example. Their farm is located in Ritto district, about 60 km from Kyoto city in central Japan. Together with his wife and parents, Sakurai produces rice on 0.7 hectare, 50 kinds of vegetables and fruits on 0.6 hectare and he keeps 800 chickens in an ecological manner. The different farm operations are linked effectively. He fertilises the fields with chicken compost (5 tons/ha) and horse compost (10 tons/ha) from a Horse Training Centre, nearby his farm. Most of the harvest is distributed through Tei-kei.

Why is Mr. Sakurai's poultry farm ecological? For example, the roof, made of zinc, is especially curved to make the air flow easily. There is an opening in the top for ventilation. The warm roof makes the air flow and warms the chickens. On the floor, 30 cm of fine straw is spread to produce valuable compost, as the droppings are mixed into the straw by the chickens themselves. Young chickens are fed with wild grasses to make their stomach strong. While saving human labour, an interdependent relationship is created between chickens, rice crops and dry field farming. This way, about 60% of the inputs are self-supplied, compared to an average 20-30% in the case of conventional farmers.

#### Consumer-run distribution

In the Tei-kei system, Mr. Sakurai receives a better price although the price of the product is only a little bit higher than the

market price. This is because there are no shipping and market costs. Taking turns, consumers pay for transport and invest time in collecting the products. In this way, farmers, consumers and the environment thrive well. The conversion from conventional to organic is closely related to our learning the value of these benefits. And that's also what Tei-kei is about! In this specific case, farmers and consumers started "The Society for Reflecting on the Throwaway Age" in 1973. There are now 1800 members in the Society, including 80 farmers and 10 full-time staff. They established a Supply Centre which enables smooth distribution. The centre is financed by members' investments and runs like a workers' collective. Another example of Tei-kei is the Seikatsu Club. It involves 11 co-operatives and more than 200,000 households in central and northern Japan are involved in its activities. They have a capital of more than ten billion yen.

After 20 years, "Wakabakai" or "Young Leaf Society", located in Tokyo, consists of several farmers and 300 consumer families. The farmers deliver their products to a centrally located farm. The products are then sorted into lots corresponding to the clusters of families. Careful records are kept of the amounts and prices. From there, consumer families handle distribution along established routes. At drop-off points some members of that area divide the lots into family-sized portions. These are picked up by individual households. This sorting work is done on a rotating, voluntary basis and involves three or four persons spending a few hours in an afternoon.

Very often the crops that are harvested in the morning are cooked in the evening!

#### Mutual understanding

Tei-kei consumers recognise that, since organic farming depends on nature, it is highly subject to climatic conditions. The consumer may not always receive the desired amount of produce and cannot eat certain foods out of season. Tei-kei consumers understand that this is the result of the farmers' efforts to supply safe food. Prices are set through direct consultation, which gives consumers a better chance to understand the conditions of production. The fluctuating market price is largely ignored. Twice a year, a plan is drawn up concerning what and how much shall be grown. If there is no mutual understanding, the relationship will break down. When a new member enters the co-operative, the terms and conditions are carefully explained. Some co-operatives have consumer courses on organic farming. Farmers too gain from their relationships with consumers. They appreciate their contribution to the well-being of consumers and overcome the common tendency to look down upon their job.

#### History of Tei-kei

Modernisation of Japanese agriculture was promoted after 1945 with dependency on chemicals and fossil fuel energy, intensification and mono-cropping for commercial purposes. It resulted in a great crisis: rural communities were destroyed. Dairy products were contaminated by chemicals, anti-biotics and the like. The organic



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farming movement emerged as a result of farmers' concern about the health hazards and soil deterioration caused by chemical fertilisers and pesticides. At the same time, in many cities consumers started to demand safe food. In 1971, the Japan Organic Agriculture Association (JOAA) was established. It was different from other concerned consumer movements, as it tried to create alternatives in the socio-economic system.

The first oil crisis in 1973 and the subsequent low economic growth resulted in an energy and food crisis. The prices of imported foods like soybeans and animal feeds sky-rocketed. During this period, new views were incorporated into the Tei-kei movement such as local consumption of locally grown food, regional self-sufficiency, energy self-sufficiency and appropriate technology. By the end of the 1970s, the JOAA published the "10 Principles of Tei-kei":

1. Face-to-face relationships based on friendship, not business.
2. Planned production based on agreement between farmers and consumers.
3. Non-discriminatory total purchase of harvested products.
4. Price setting based on mutual benefits.
5. Strengthening exchange programmes; deepening two-way communication for mutual respect and trust.
6. Independent delivery system and management of self-distribution.
7. Democratic management of each group.
8. Emphasis on education programmes.
9. Maintain appropriate size of a group.
10. Consistent efforts towards realisation of ideals.

It is estimated that there are 500 to 1,000 consumers' groups which are connected with organic producers in the Tei-kei relationship across the country. Depending on

the way a group is organised, the size varies from less than 10 families to more than 5,000. Each Tei-kei group consists of small neighbouring parties.

### Advantages

The advantages of the Tei-kei system in the modern society can be summed up in the following three points:

- Emphasis on relationships. The relationship involves both sides, producers and consumers come to a mutual agreement. Equality in the producer-consumer relationship can stimulate co-operative development through this distribution and communication system. In a sense, it represents genuine participatory democracy.
- Seeking a fair price. To establish reasonable prices between producers and consumers, attention should be paid above all internalising environmental costs.
- Discovery and creation of variable values in today's society. The invisible values and functional aspects of society can be re-evaluated and created properly under this system instead of just blindly following the current commodity-based society and market mechanisms.

### Changing lifestyle

The lifestyle of the consumers within this particular co-operative relationship has changed. From the viewpoint of consumption, even if agricultural products cost a little bit more, overall lifestyle tends to be easier. This is because if your healthy diet suits natural conditions and seasons, you need not buy anything extra, such as products out of season, junk food and too much meat. As a result, life may even be cheaper. The relationship between the farmers and consumer groups is not only through the production or distribution of goods and selling or buying. There is much more communication between producer and consu-

mer and various values are learned. Among the consumers, communities are building, with members of different generations and social backgrounds sharing ideas about everyday life. Better methods of sharing and self-improvement are developed, from sharing recipes for cooking to exchanging children's clothes and unwanted items. Consumers organise visits to farms, to help the farmers. For example, they use an old barn to establish together with the producers an agricultural processing factory to produce pickles or miso (bean paste). There are examples of revitalising local foods and traditional culture. Some consumer groups borrow a small area of farm land and use it as a place for agricultural and environmental education. Depending on how people associate and co-operate, Tei-kei offers various benefits in addition to just buying organic agricultural products.

### Tei-kei for Asia?

JOAA hosted the first IFOAM Asia meeting (International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements), held at Hanno City in August 1993. Representatives from 13 Asian countries drew up the "Hanno Declaration". It stated: "We strongly urge farmers and consumers to develop partnerships like the Japanese community supported agriculture system Tei-kei, towards ensuring the availability of healthy food for all and greater food self-reliance."

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