

[Kakenhi Essay]

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Kakenhi: A Vital Support for Surveys and Research

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According to the JSPS classification, my research field is agricultural science as a branch of biology and my specialty is in socioeconomic agriculture. Up to fiscal 2012, my specialty in this classification went by the title of agricultural economics and that is the title I am more accustomed to using. Some readers may feel that it is out-of-place to classify agricultural economics—a social science—as a branch of biology. However, I think it was assigned that classification on the understanding that agricultural science is a comprehensive discipline with foundations involving the farming, forestry, and fishery industries so essential to human life and the interaction of biological production in natural and artificial ecosystems with human society, and comprising structural elements that include the life sciences, bio-resource science, environmental science, human life science, and social science (definition in the Agricultural Charter established by the National Conference of the Deans of University-Agricultural Department on June 6, 2002). These are the attributes of the agricultural science field, with the implication that agricultural economics is a social science with foundations rooted in the relationships between biological production and human society.

As illustrated by the issues surrounding negotiations over the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), we live in an age where national policy frameworks can be strongly influenced by international trends. Accordingly, we must fully comprehend and adapt with those trends whenever we explore the design of new policy frameworks. Close to 20 years ago, international studies that were eligible for JSPS grants for scientific research were limited in terms of the research topics they were allowed to pursue. My research interest back

at that time had to do with farm products and particularly the market distribution of fresh fruit and vegetable produce. However, the information available through the limited research literature in this field was my only source of the knowledge I was able to gather on fresh produce distribution trends abroad. To be honest, I thought that the Japanese system represented the mainstream approach to the physical distribution of fresh produce. My first involvement with a JSPS grant-supported international study came in 1997 with my participation in a project that received a Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (A) (“Gazo joho ni motozuku seikabutsu boeki intanetto shisutemu no joken-seibi ni kansuru chosa-kenkyu” [“Development of conditions for an image data-based internet trading system for fresh fruit and vegetables”]) led by then Professor Kozo Kasahara of Tottori University’s Faculty of Agriculture. Although internet-based trading in fresh produce is no longer anything special today, at the time, it warranted attention as a research topic because the internet was then still in its infancy. In the process of pursuing this study, we faced the necessity of simultaneously developing a clearer picture of fresh produce distribution processes overseas and thus launched a survey for that purpose. I was completely startled by the findings of that survey and particularly by the rapid changes then taking place in the Netherlands’ market for fresh produce. I sorted through and organized the literature available on the Netherlands’ fresh produce market and laid out plans to engage in a more-detailed survey of the synchronized, consolidated multimarket auctions that were not yet being conducted in Japan. However, in that country’s local market, the shift from auction-based trading to direct, negotiated trading was already well under way, to the extent that the Netherlands had already lost status as one of the leading centers for auction-based trading in fresh produce. As an outgrowth of this research, I became strongly aware of the importance of integrating into future research plans survey data that allowed international comparisons of Japan with other markets.

Later on, spending JSPS grants for international surveys became less restrictive and the grants evolved into a major support for international comparative studies. I was the research leader for a project supported by a Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (B) on the theme, “Fudo shisutemu ni okeru nosanbutsu ryutsu no shinkaron-teki hikaku seido kenkyu”

“Distribution in Agricultural Produce: An Evolutionary and Comparative Institutional Analysis”). In that study, we noted that the structure of farm produce distribution changes in a single direction by forces resulting from technological advancement and accompanying changes in the structure of farm produce cultivation and retailing. However, through comparisons with a selection of atypical countries, we were also able to shed light on the process whereby marketing channel-dependent changes are influenced by historical and societal forces, and thus succeeded in moving the accomplishments of earlier research a step forward.

Naturally, research themes also tend to be defined by the mission of the organization with which one is affiliated. In 2000 and ensuing years, food safety became a serious social issue following major outbreaks of food poisoning and news about the BSE problem (mad cow disease). Under its 21st Century COE Program, in 2002 Obihiro University decided to step up its promotion of a framework for education and research concerned with the assurance of food safety and farm animal hygiene. To that end, efforts were launched on the theme, “Comprehensive studies on sustainability and safety in food animal production for world harmonization with special emphasis on the control of protozoan diseases.” Accordingly, the food system-related subjects that had been a focus of much of my research to that point in time were augmented with a fresh focus on food safety, and as one effort in that area, I served as research leader for a project selected for a Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (B) devoted to the theme, “Baio sekyuriti kakuho to keizai-teki kachiku hoken eisei kanri shien shisutemu no kochiku ni kansuru kenkyu” (“Research on the Assurance of Bio-Security and the Development of Economical Animal Health Management Support Systems”). In terms of assuring biosecurity for individual livestock farming, the findings of this study highlighted the importance not only of treating farm animal disease prevention measures as the norm, but also of implementing such measures with attention to their economic viability. I continued to pursue this focus afterward as the leader of another project supported by a Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (B), on the theme, “Shoku no anzen kakuho no tame no fudo shisutemu ni okeru seisan kyokyu shutai no kodo keizaigaku-teki kenkyu” (“Behavioral economic research on food producers and suppliers for food safety”).

In addition to the projects on the above-cited themes, I also participated in several other JSPS grant-funded projects as research leader, including one that received a Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (C) another that received a Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (C) and also some others as a research collaborator. Had I not enjoyed grant-based support, I doubt that my fact-finding surveys and other research would have delivered satisfactory results. We are now in an age of dramatic social change. If we are to accurately identify the manifestations of that change and pursue research that harnesses such information to predict future change, it will be vital to put together appropriate study plans. Additionally, financial support for those studies will be absolutely essential. Through researcher participation, the JSPS program of grants-in-aid for scientific research has been managed fairly. That includes measures taken to verify and improve the viability of the grant framework. This program has fostered advances in diverse fields of scientific research and serves an instrumental role in the promotion of academic studies in Japan. I am deeply grateful for the grant-based research assistance I have received to date and look forward to seeing this program expanded in the years ahead.