

Leading at the Grassroots:  
A Study of the Influence of Asian Rural Institute Graduates  
on Communities

**Executive Summary**

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The Asian Rural Institute (ARI) in Tochigi, Japan has focused for more than forty years on training rural leaders, mostly from Asia and Africa. The curriculum provides leadership skills on an organic farm with the motto “ That we may live together ”. This study was launched to learn how the now more than 1300 graduates have influenced their communities and organizations following their nine-month experience living in community and focusing on the connection between food and life. The goal of the study was to provide recommendations for future curricula as well as to provide a model for ARI for ongoing assessment of graduate influence on communities.

Researchers traveled to eleven countries and visited 229 graduates, 32% of graduates in those countries. Unstructured interviews were used to obtain qualitative information from graduates about their experiences. Thematic analysis with Nvivo software was used to systematically analyze the transcripts of 202 recorded individual interviews and the extensive field notes taken from visits to graduates, their sending bodies and communities. Key concepts at ARI were explored: serving the marginalized, the value of rural life, foodlife, rural leadership, servant leadership, community building, community development, and spiritual growth.

Visits also included organizations called sending bodies that make referrals of potential participants to ARI with the expectations that they will accept the graduate back into their organization upon graduation. Deeper understanding by ARI of these organizations, and vice versa, is needed for more satisfactory integration that meets both organizational and graduate needs and aspirations, especially in a global climate of donor interest in project funding.

Participants with a basic proficiency in English are referred to ARI from faith-based and secular NGOs as well as from graduates. The primary source of referrals has changed from predominantly faith-based entities in the beginning to more recently NGOs and graduates. The percentage of women participants has increased from 10% to 47%.

While on campus, the major emphasis on “ learning by doing ” combines experiential and classroom learning by living in community and rotating leadership. This was key to a deeper understanding of and appreciation for other cultures and values, including time and resource management. Challenges, especially during the first three months, of cultural and language adjustment were surpassed by the benefits of skills in engaging with a wider world in terms of economics, culture, religions and cross-cultural relationships.

Graduates are given an opportunity to return to ARI for further training. Japanese Graduate Interns may continue for one year to deepen learning, while international graduates may return after five years as Training Assistants. Managing the balance between work and learning for the latter continues to be a challenge.

Graduates leave with a written dream or plan for how they will implement their learning on return home. CompARlson of those “reflection papers” with field data showed that 53% were able to implement their plans in whole or in part; however, that does not include the significant impacts all graduates have had in their communities but had not envisioned during their time at ARI. Their ability to do so depended on the practicality of the plan in

addition to the context they were returning to. The most important factor determining if the plan was implemented or not was how the plan fit into the vision and financial capacity of their sending body.

Graduates' ability to implement plans also depended on geographic, political and social factors. For this reason, information on each geographic region visited was documented for the following locations: East Africa, Indonesia, Northeast India, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Western Africa and Japan. The context of each was briefly described and then graduate activities explained in terms of their relationship to a faith-based organization, secular development organization, government or independent activity. It was evident that the highest graduate satisfaction as well as the ability to effect sustainable change happened when there was a good relationship and congruity between graduate and organizational aspirations but in all cases interventions had to be developed to specific contexts.

Numerous factors affect what graduates are able to implement when they return to their unique home settings. Social structures of family and community especially impacted women, who hold the key to food production along with household and childcare responsibilities in contexts with fewer opportunities than men in access to capital, land, education and leadership roles.

In contrast to Japan, graduate contexts were often described in terms of " lacks " of infrastructure such as basic commodities, communication, health care and education. Road access is the first and most influential change, making these accessible in addition to agricultural inputs and marketing opportunities. Land availability for smallholder farmers is increasingly challenging with increasing prices, urban expansion, generational subdividing and multinational purchases of large tracts, supposedly intended to increase food production but rarely benefiting local communities.

The combination of these challenges and farmers' desire to meet their immediate felt needs makes it more difficult for graduates to promote organic practices where the benefits tend to be long term. Acceptance of organic practices is further complicated by widespread promotion and subsidization of chemical inputs, which often have short term benefits but may not be sustainable over the long term. When livelihood needs are not able to be met people migrate, youth for better opportunities without the labor of farming which many consider a last resort, and women in desperation to feed their children. War and corruption lead to further devastation in the wake of trafficking of drugs, arms and humans. Government policies can help or hinder specific groups of people with internally displaced people often continuing to be at the mercy of those who caused them to be displaced in the first place. Signing of agreements may mean that " the war is over but the conflict continues " if basic needs for human dignity are not met.

Even the best intentions of foreign institutions often create unintended challenges. The chemicals of the "green revolution" leaching into rivers and ground water in Sri Lanka have led the government to ban glyphosate because of the prevalence of kidney disease in rice growing areas. Relief interventions have disrupted community mutual support systems and many survivors have learned to wait on handouts. Trees such as eucalyptus, in spite of their use in construction, are being uprooted in many places because of their adverse effects on water tables and hence agriculture.

Graduates returning home from ARI are faced with many community expectations of gifts and interventions that will bring income much sooner than occurs with needing to experiment with practices from ARI to learn which are applicable in home contexts. Graduates faced many challenges in organic agriculture practices and livestock raising,

often feeling guilty if they were unable to replicate the ARI model of a demonstration farm. Those that adopted models such as farmer field schools in communities had more physical results and positive community relationships.

Graduates were significantly more effective in leadership than in implementing agricultural skills. This is in keeping with ARI's desire to be a leadership training institution using organic agriculture as a means to that end. Effective leadership did not seem to depend on whether or not a graduate lived in a particular community as long as they had captured the importance of being like the people. Those servant leaders who used participatory models of community mobilization and followed them up with support and monitoring contributed towards positive long-lasting development in a wide variety of unique aspects.

Some of the diversity of achievements of these servant leaders is reflected in graduates' diverse roles. For example, one graduate promoted peace between pastoralists and farmers by introducing night paddocking of animals in farmers' harvested fields. Another, who introduced conservation agriculture has helped families feed themselves and orphans. Yet another introduced a reflexology practice that brings physical healing. Advocacy of graduates with communities and governments have resulted in a wide range of benefits: stable pork markets in one remote area, death benefits to families of deceased migrants in another area, and communities being supported in advocating for their rights with governments in several countries.

There was wide recognition that the roles of graduates in "rural" areas have necessarily changed over forty years in a changing world. Some now describe little difference between rural and poor urban communities with both being poor and marginalized as well as needing food security and dignity.

Recommendations to help ARI shape a response to these changes and challenges as it heads into the future were developed based on graduates' and researcher perspectives. Recruitment and preparation of potential participants:

- Choose participants who have commitment and vision for communities wherever they are working.
- Develop deeper relationships with sending bodies and potential candidates.
- Accept two, but not more, participants from any one organization, area or language group at any one time.
- Develop teams of two to three trusted graduates in geographic areas to assist in screening applicants.

ARI participant experience:

- Strengthen the leadership component beyond rotation of leadership roles to providing tools that support development of leadership and transformational community activities.
- Prepare participants for group facilitation.
- Prepare participants for leadership in gender equity.
- Understand and respect participant contexts.
- Go beyond working with hands in agricultural and livestock aspects, to teaching the scientific method and practical cost-effective methodologies that graduates can translate to their own contexts with fewer or significantly different resources.
- Present curriculum material step by step with repetitive, frequent cycles of action and new information.
- Include marketing, adding value and microfinance components in the curriculum.
- Be aware of, and include aspects on changing world trends.
- Take whatever steps are possible to formalize certification for graduates.

Post-graduation monitoring by ARI:

- Organize ARI staff visits to graduates, sending bodies and communities for purposes of deepening relationships and learning.
- Explore opportunities for ARI graduate internships near their local contexts.
- Explore feasibility of seed money for projects to sending bodies.

ARI continuity:

- Provide continuing education opportunities to equip staff to provide the optimum quality training for participants.
- CIARIfy the role of Training Assistants and recruit accordingly.
- Develop a strategic plan for long-term sustainability that responds to changing world realities.
- CIARIfy roles and relationships of staff levels, governing bodies and American Friends of ARI (AFARI) and find an appropriate place for sending body participation.

General:

- Respond to graduate suggestions and give reasons when ideas are not implemented.

“ That we may live together’ ” has been the guiding principle at ARI for more than forty years. The journey to continue toward that goal over the next forty years has begun well with the fortieth anniversary theme “ Transformation at the Grassroots: walking with grassroots leaders ” and the efforts of staff in already implementing some of the recommendations proposed here.