

Chocolate, pepper, fruit



A cacao harvest



A local
fruit factory

WHEN JAPANESE EMIGRANTS FIRST moved into the rich alluvial lands of the Amazon River delta in the 1920s many chose to harvest 'black diamonds' as their route to success.

Despite overcoming massive initial problems, the farmers faced economic and social ruin when their crop of diamonds—the local nickname for black pepper—was wiped out by disease.

Agro-forestry was a concept taking root in many parts of the world at the time and the farmers, both locals and Japanese emigrants here, embraced the idea.

Agro-forestry encourages farmers to diversify away from a single species and its obvious dangers and plant a series of crops which would both complement each other and co-exist with the surrounding environment—in this case the endangered Amazon rain forest.

JICA has been involved for several decades in a series of Amazon programs, and saw the introduction of agro-forestry there not only as a way to enhance its overall aim of environmental and biodiversity conservation but also to bolster agriculture and the standard of living for local communities.

Michinori Konagano arrived from Japan at the age of two and now oversees a farm which yields

hardwoods such as mahogany, fruits, vegetables, black pepper and cacao, known locally as "the food of the gods" because it was first discovered and cultivated by high officials of ancient regional civilizations such as the Inca and Maya.

"Like many farmers here we started with black peppers but were wiped out in the 1970s," he said as he toured his land recently. "Then we began to introduce such things as melons, papaya and vegetables. Today we can harvest crops at different times of the year. Which means we can employ people all year round."

He added, "We can use banana trees to provide the necessary shade for the cacao plants and the banana leaves for soil nutrients. It is a comprehensive and integrated form of farming."

Konagano is a member of the local agricultural cooperative, CAMTA, which, though started by Japanese emigrants, today also embraces local farmers.

JICA has provided technical assistance and support to these agricultural 'foot soldiers' with such initiatives as the establishment of an agricultural research center, and cooperation with government organizations such as Brazil's state research organization, EMBRAPA, and CEPLAC, which is devoted to improving cacao production.

To complete a 'virtuous circle' and help farmers not only grow crops but successfully market them, JICA supported other initiatives such as the construction of a local juice factory which has established domestic and export markets, including to Japan.

A leading Japanese confectionary group, Meiji, now markets agro-forestry chocolate from CAMTA's internationally certified cacao crop.

A major aim of many JICA projects is a so-called knock-on effect whereby initial beneficiaries share their newly acquired expertise with neighboring communities and countries.

Regular training seminars are now conducted for officials and experts from Bolivia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Colombia and Peru in agro-forestry and cacao production. ■

A Love Affair



Early Japanese immigrants in Latin America. Nikkei volunteers support community enterprises. Successful Nikkei businessmen, farmers, researchers and development officials.

Since **Japanese emigrants** first arrived in Latin America **more than 100 years ago**, the ethnic Japanese population has grown to some **1.7 million people**.

From earlier pioneers, their descendants have become **successful businessmen, educators, entrepreneurs, scientists, teachers and farmers**. **JICA assisted** those early Japanese communities with technical expertise, training and financial assistance. In recent years the agency **helped them fully integrate** into their national societies but also **retain cultural links** with the 'motherland' by **supporting** local Japanese communities, Japanese language schools and other social activities.

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Cover: Latin America is a continent in transition, full of economic progress, optimism and natural wealth but also long-term poverty and social inequality.



The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) is the world's largest bilateral development organization, operating in some 150 countries to help some of the globe's most vulnerable people.