Olives have a reputation as a healthy food, as they contain polyphenol, which can reduce the risk of cancer and arteriosclerosis. But did you know that the olives grown in Tunisia, one of the world’s leading producers of the fruit, contain 10 to 20 times as much polyphenol as those from elsewhere around the Mediterranean? Many years of academic exchanges between that country and Japan have helped uncover evidence of the functional components of Tunisian olives.

Located in northern Africa and facing the Mediterranean Sea to the northeast, Tunisia is a crossroads of Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, and African civilizations, making it a treasure trove for researchers in fields ranging from the humanities and social sciences to natural science. To advance various types of research, Japan and Tunisia have engaged in academic exchanges for more than two decades. The University of Tsukuba in Japan was particularly quick to become involved in Tunisia, initiating exchanges in the late 1990s. In 2004, it established the Alliance for Research on the Mediterranean and North Africa (ARENA), and in 2006, opened its first overseas office in the country’s capital of Tunis. The university has thus facilitated organic collaboration connecting possibilities for Tunisia with Japanese science and technology.

ISODA Hiroko, an ARENA professor, is linked with Japan’s support, the Borj Cedria Science and Technology Park has garnered attention in Tunisia. Located on the outskirts of Tunis, the technology park has garnered attention for identifying the seeds of new businesses through collaborations among industry, government, and academia in the fields of biotechnology, water resources, and renewable energy. Professor Isoda said, “We are trying to turn our research into economic benefits, and I hope that the two countries will enjoy a win-win relationship.”

Mohamed Moncef Harrabi, former director of the National Agronomic Institute of Tunisia (INAT) and former head of the technology park, said, “Despite having limited experience with Japan, I was convinced of the country’s high level of technology and science, which led to my decision to encourage exchanges. Academic exchanges with Professor Isoda and others from Japan have had a big impact at many levels in Tunisia, such as the transfer of technology.”

Academic exchanges have also been focused on developing professionals in technology. So far, almost 100 Tunisian students have studied in Japan, pursuing collaborative research. What worries Professor Isoda, however, is that the students, once return to Tunisia, have few employment opportunities available to them to apply the research skills that they acquired in Japan. To address the situation, she established a company last year in Tsukuba that supports drug discovery, thereby creating places for such students to thrive. She plans to merge the venture eventually with a local company in Tunisia to promote research and development there. Research into functional bioresources is one area where Japan leads globally, and she aims to create significant added value through local discoveries in Tunisia that will lead to related production being launched there.

Professor Isoda said, “With the current attention on well-being, my hope is that the talented students who have studied in Japan will connect their research to business and become professionals who demonstrate leadership around the world.”