



POVERTY AND THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS

LIZA, AN AETA from a village at the foot of Mt. Pinatubo in Zambales, Philippines, often went to school hungry because her parents' income as farmers was not enough to support her and her four siblings.

She also worked as a health worker in the village to have a little allowance to keep her in school. It was not nearly enough to meet her needs, so she was forced to stop school to look for another job.

Liza ended up a domestic helper in the Philippines' capital of Metro Manila, around 160 kilometers away from her hometown.

In Tondo, Manila, 19-year old Lovelyn Bacani who sells slippers at the public market, still dreams of becoming a high school teacher. So she saves a little of her income to pursue her studies.

Her mother had died of skin cancer and her father could not raise enough money from farming to fend for her and her four other siblings, forcing her to stop school after getting her high school diploma.

Liza and Lovelyn's stories are unfortunately shared by millions of others who are considered among the world's extremely poor, or those who live on less than \$1 a day.

Never before in the history of man has there been so many hungry and poor people in the world, this despite the significant advances in science and technology.

Consider these disturbing facts:

- ❖ 799 million people go to bed hungry every day.
- ❖ Around 115 million of the 680 million children who are supposed to go to school are not enrolled, mostly girls, because their parents do not have enough money.
- ❖ 879 million people are not able to read and write, mostly women.
- ❖ Every day, more than 30,000 of the world's children die from preventable diseases, such as malaria and tuberculosis.
- ❖ In 2002, 3.1 million people died of AIDS and around 42 million are still suffering from it.
- ❖ 1.1 billion of the world's population, or about one in five, do not have access to safe water.

It is also a fact that two of three of the world's poor are in Asia. Most of them live in rural areas and are dependent on agriculture for a living, but lack access to land and suffer from low productivity.

Hardly anyone thinks that they will ever get out of the pits of poverty.

But such a situation of having so many poor people in a world that is also characterized by excess food production in industrialized countries can not continue if the world is to survive to the next millennium.

The heads of the world's governments realized this and decided to finally act together to alleviate poverty, the biggest scourge of the 21st century.

MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS

Thus, at the start of the new millennium six years ago, the world's governments unified to make a remarkable promise to the victims of global poverty.

particularly in the area of poverty reduction, the overarching goal of the MDGs.

But there is hope.

Meeting at the United Nations, they signed the Millennium Declaration, a solemn pledge "to free our fellow men, women and children from the abject and dehumanizing conditions of extreme poverty."

This comes from the increasing recognition on the part of governments and decision makers of the role that a dynamic agriculture sector can play in poverty and hunger reduction.

In short, they wanted to make poverty history.

The bulk of the poor, after all, depend on agriculture for a living. As agriculture develops, so will the farmers' standard of living. Even the United Nations has realized this basic truth.

The declaration provides a bold mission rooted in a shared commitment to universal human rights and social justice backed by clear time-bound targets.

In 2005, the UN Millennium Project Report concluded that "the global epicenter of extreme poverty is the smallholder farmer."

These targets, popularly known as the Millennium Development Goals, include halving extreme poverty, cutting child deaths, providing all of the world's children with an education, rolling back infectious diseases and forging a new global partnership to deliver results.

A report by the UN Secretary General recognized agricultural reform as "one of the major means of wealth creation and income redistribution in the newly industrialized countries of East Asia."

All these targets are expected to be met by 2015.

There have been significant steps toward meeting these ambitious goals, but with just nine years left to meet the deadline, most of the targets are in danger of not being met,

The Food and Agriculture Organization added that the battle to achieve the MDGs, in particular the goals on poverty and hunger reduction, would be lost or won in the rural areas of the developing countries.

RURAL DEVELOPMENT

The promotion of rural development increases employment opportunities in rural areas, reduces regional income disparities, stems premature rural-urban migration and ultimately reduces poverty at the very source, the FAO said.

Agriculture has not always been considered a priority. In fact, the opposite is true: it has been neglected and the people that depend on it left to fend for themselves.

It is partly due to this neglect by governments that rural poverty in Asia has grown over the last 10 to 20 years.

World Bank data showed that its investments in agriculture declined from around \$50 billion in 1980 to just \$15 billion today, or from around 30 percent of its total loan portfolio to as low as 10 percent.

Even development agencies seemed to have taken agriculture for granted.

In the 1990s, multilateral donor investments in agriculture fell by 58 percent and bilateral investments by 36 percent.

Governments and development agencies are fortunately taking a fresh look at agriculture and the opportunity that it presents to achieving the MDGs.

So too are non-government organizations and development organizations.

In 2001, more than a hundred representatives of NGOs, workers unions, universities and civil society groups met in Tokyo to discuss how to support the achievement of the MDGs.

Focusing on their experiences and expertise, they decided to focus on three program areas: basic education and human resource development; microfinance and sustainable agriculture.

AJPN

To follow up on their commitments, they formed a loose coalition called the Asia Japan Partnership Network for Poverty Reduction.

It aims to promote and contribute to the halving of the number of Asian people living in poverty by 2015 and the improvement of their quality of life.

And while other agencies have focused on merely raising agriculture production, AJPN argues for the promotion of sustainable agriculture, one that increases production while

protecting the environment, ultimately raising the farmers' income.

Some policy makers have questioned the capacity of sustainable agriculture to supply the food needs of the increasing population, and consequently the increasing ranks of the poor.

The yields are low and the technology backward. It is labor intensive and the products are not attractive market, they said.

The allegations are not entirely correct and

have been proven wrong in a number of scientific studies. But what is unfortunate is that agriculture development has come to mean increasing productivity alone.

This thinking has dominated agriculture policies and programs, but as the growth in the number of poor people has proven, modern agriculture programs have not been of much help, despite all that support.

While productivity is an important goal, stability and sustainability of the farming systems are equally important.

In sustainable agriculture, diversification and integration are integral components of production technologies.

Diversification stabilizes the production system as natural processes come into play, while integration reduces production cost and maximizes the output.

The recent study conducted by Jules Pretty of the University of Essex in England, in coordination with colleagues in Thailand, China, Sri Lanka and Mexico, also belies allegations that yields of sustainable agriculture technologies are low.

The study covering 286 farm projects in 57 countries concluded that “crop yields on farms in developing countries that used sustainable agriculture rose nearly 80 percent in four years.”

SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE

Proponents argue that sustainable agriculture stands a better chance of providing the basic needs of rural poor communities since it is not dependent on expensive chemicals and fertilizers.

Its potential lies in its indigenous local agricultural traditions that are ecologically sound, culturally appropriate and cost-effective.

Yet, the question remains: Is sustainable agriculture an effective tool for poverty reduction?

It is this fundamental question that AJPN has tried to answer through its “Enhancing Capacities on Sustainable Agriculture for Poverty Reduction” project.

The Government of Japan provided the needed funds, which were coursed through

the United Nations Development Program.

The timing could not be better as the unabated rise in the cost of chemical inputs and the increasing demand for natural and organic products in the market have forced policy makers to look more closely at adopting sustainable agriculture practices.

It is slowly being recognized that farmers, who comprise the majority of the poor people in Asia, can increase their income by adopting sustainable farming practices while taking advantage of premium prices for organic products.

Demand for natural and organic products have increased in the last five years by 15-20 percent, as consumers become more aware of the ill effects of chemically-produced food.

This demand has pushed up prices, giving farmers an incentive to consider sustainable agriculture that produces organic products.

A number of Asian governments have supported this trend toward organic food by formulating organic standards and setting up certification processes over the last three years.

NGOs and farmer organizations played key roles in fostering a more friendly policy environment for organic food and sustainable agriculture practices as they have the experience.

AJPN is one of these organizations.

With this project, AJPN aims to further contribute to the movement toward sustainable agriculture by seeing exactly how natural farming

practices can work at the farmers' level.

Six project sites were selected: Bihar and Andhra Pradesh in India; Central Java and Jogjakarta in Indonesia; and Bukidnon and Sultan Kudarat in the Philippines.

The knowledge of and capabilities of the communities in these sites to implement different sustainable agriculture techniques were enhanced. Development plans were devised based on the unique set of capabilities of the farmers in these areas and the resources that they have at their disposal.

The communities were involved at the start in coming up with the development plans to enhance their sense of ownership of the project, which is vital if the projects' gains are to be sustained in the long term.

ENCOURAGING RESULTS

The two-year project came to an end in 2006 and this paper attempts to document the experience at these sites, from which other AJPN members can learn.

As to the question of whether sustainable agriculture is viable for poverty reduction, the initial answer is yes, it is.

This paper provides proof by looking more closely at the project sites, what the farmers there have done as they adopted sustainable agriculture techniques, the results of their efforts and finally, the lessons learned and the recommendations to those who want to follow the example of the farmers that participated in the project.

This puts particular focus on how sustainable agriculture has contributed to reducing poverty in these sites.

It looks at the economic benefits measured in terms of net income and analyzes various factors contributing to the increase or decrease of net income, particularly yield, production cost and the price of products.

While two years is not enough to make definitive conclusions, the results have been encouraging: They show the unmistakable trend of farmers and their communities doing better than they did before the field studies began in 2004, putting them firmly on their way out of the clutches of poverty.