

**BY 2050**, the global population is expected to rise to nine billion. Food production needs to increase by 70% to feed the extra two billion persons 40 years from now. Meanwhile, competition for land, water, and energy is increasing amidst worsening effects of climate change.

With almost a billion people hungry, an unstable climate affecting food production, and the volatility of food prices, agriculture is ironically back on the international agenda. For civil society organizations (CSOs) and rural communities in Asia who have clamored for changes and decried injustice in this sector, this renewed attention is a welcome development.

Presently, we put forward our questions: What kind of agriculture and what kind of support to agriculture are being promoted by international organizations and national governments? Why is it that hunger and malnutrition continue to plague the Asian region despite the pronouncements and programs introduced by various institutions?

The ANGOC network and its partners have long advocated *food sovereignty* as the framework for agriculture, supported by agro-ecological systems of food production. Many farmer groups have already demonstrated the potential of sustainable agriculture to ensure household food security while raising farm productivity and preserving biodiversity. Governments thus should uphold sustainable agriculture in the mainstream to achieve the best impact to productivity, conservation of the resource base, and sustainable development in general.

During the food crisis, Asia was the site of a glaring irony: higher food prices did not accrue benefits to the farmers. The recent spikes in food prices (2007 to 2008 and 2010 to 2011) corroborated

this marginalizing trend. Studies show higher food prices saw to more losers than gainers, because small farmers have been largely left out of the commercial food market chain (ADB, IFAD). Moreover, small farmers rank among the poor who spend about half their incomes on food. Any increase in the domestic price of staples and food affects household nutrition and other basic needs, including those of small producers.

Many small food producers have neither ownership nor access to land and resources needed to improve land productivity. Many of the resource-poor farmers remain isolated and unorganized, detached from centers of power and government. Gender imbalances in land ownership exist, as traditional and customary practices preventing women from gaining access to land and resources prevail. At the same time, farmers are ageing, with more women taking over farming, while men and the youth continue to migrate to towns and cities in search of better employment. Farming communities also take a hit from calamities and political upheavals, to add to their dire situation.

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ANGOC believes that food insecurity stems primarily from unequal distribution of resources and the inequitable access to productive assets, prejudicing the rural poor. In most cases, the national economic development agendas set by national governments promote grants of land concessions, expansion of plantations, mining operations, joint venture agreements, corporate farming, and the establishment of special economic zones – all of which require that land be distributed to the landless poor.

In 1996, ANGOC organized a Regional Forum with the theme “Food and Freedom, Jobs and Justice, Land and Labor, Peace and Prosperity” among NGOs and People’s Movements. The participants called for an alternative people-centered sustainable development paradigm that restores the environment and the rights of communities to their resources and livelihood, enhances the capacities and participation in

governance of the rural poor, and enables them to be self-sufficient in their basic needs. This paradigm has five major elements:

- stewardship through community-based natural resource management;
- ecological and food security through the promotion of sustainable agriculture;
- equity through the promotion of community social enterprises;
- spirituality as the basis of the Asian community; and
- decentralization and democratization as the guiding principles towards redefining political accountability and security.

Sixteen years later, we find that the principles of people-centered sustainable development hold true and magnify the concept of food sovereignty.

We likewise evoke the call made by over 100 CSOs through the 1996 Bangkok Declaration for the World Food Summit:

“Democratic control of the food system is the ultimate test of democracy. Food security cannot be ensured by entrusting agriculture, food production and trade to global markets. Land, water, biodiversity and traditional/intellectual practices, which are the vital resources that make food security possible, should be under the democratic control of those who produce food.”<sup>1</sup>

Beyond policy changes and patches of agricultural programs, there is a need to restructure global governance and push institutional reforms for commitments to be translated into actions, and eventually to results. Unless there is no fundamental shift in the current agricultural paradigm, then small producers’ lack of access and control over agriculture and land will persist.

Several international platforms are opening discussions to avert another food crisis and to propound a more sustainable solution to the perennial problem of hunger and poverty. However, reform should happen within the UN system for food and agriculture. The ANGOC network is one with many CSOs in calling not just for tighter coherence, but reform of policies to respond directly to the needs of small farmers and producers, indigenous communities and other rural poor groups of the UN, and other international and intergovernmental institutions such as the FAO, WFP, IFAD, World Bank, ADB, GFAR, the CGIAR, APAARI, ASEAN, SAARC, and other similar platforms. More importantly, reforms and

actions should also be elevated to the regional and national level.

Towards this end, the ANGOC network will continue to engage with relevant stakeholders and decision-makers in constructive policy dialogue. We vow to explore other modalities of cooperation in enhancing household food security and furthering the rights and empowerment of small food producers in Asia. □

<sup>1</sup> The Asia-Pacific NGO Declaration for the World Food Summit of 1996 (known as The Bangkok Declaration), a statement signed by 101 CSO representatives on 30 April 1996 in Bangkok, Thailand at the Asia-Pacific Consultation of NGOs on the World Food Summit.