

# FOOD SECURITY FOR THE VULNERABLE HOUSEHOLDS OF ASIA

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I am honored and yet diffident as I speak to this fifth meeting of the Asian Development Forum. Why diffident? I recall a statement by Nobel-Laureate Professor Borlough and I paraphrase, "Plants do speak but they speak only in whispers. Unless you go near them, you can not hear."

The same is true of the farmer with the broken ploughs, the Nepalese mother who treks mile after mile to collect a few precious twigs to keep her children warm and to cook for them or another mother from Bangladesh who scavenges the roadside garbage for the dream of her little baby, a morsel of food. You are near them and you can listen to their whispers.

In contrast, most of my colleagues in the international and national bureaucracy are far away. We consider them dumb and therefore, with our goodwill, when we plan and execute the "empowerment" process for them, our benevolence becomes as "malefic as that of the oppressor." (Paulo Freire)

A good example is that of agricultural research systems, international and national. My compatriot, Professor Yunus, founder of the Grameen Bank said recently and I quote:

*"Scientists have their own language which is different from the language of the people. The entire network of research institutions and scientists who work there have formed themselves into a single tribe (with sub-tribal villages, local chiefs and their hierarchy) with their tribal language and culture. When I questioned this, I was told: scientists needed their seclusion to*

*concentrate on their research; but communication with the ultimate user is very much in their mind. Communication works this way - national research institutions learn from the elite international research institutions. National institutions in their turn pass on this knowledge to another group called extension agents. Finally, extension agents bring the "knowledge" to the farmer.*

*I am told that it is not strictly the one-way communication process I have described. The national system interact with farmers directly and through many other agencies and national and international systems also interact between them.*

*But given the tribal culture as it is, my guess is that the relationship is more one-way than two-way. This is particularly so because the national system is totally under the control of the government and its bureaucracy."*

A sweeping generalization perhaps. Yet my expertise, as a dilettante involved in both international and national research systems, tells me that the elite international centers involve the sub-elite national systems scientists in field trials without the latter having any say in research priority or design.

And the national scientists go down to the farmers' fields, not to learn from them nor to work with them as partners, but to use them as free labour in, very often, a condescending manner. In fact, we, the national and international bureaucrats and technocrats rarely perform our role as servants of

the people with any grace at all, to say nothing of good grace.

So much for a confessional! Allow me now to return to your commitment for a working consensus on "People-Centered Sustainable Development Agenda for Asia."

Confused as I am with the amorphous connotations of "sustainable development" in an abstract global context, allow me to explore the sustainability issues as they relate to the survival strategies of large numbers of people in marginal, and sometimes remote, rural communities and their knowledge system.

My story begins in June 1994 in a forest village in Ban Phue district of Udon Thani and I paraphrase from a Sunday Post report of 12 February 1995. One Mr. Prasit, a district official, came to meet about 300 villagers. They were asked to cooperate in "returning nature to earth." The villagers had no idea what the project was all about, but they promised full cooperation anyway. Living in a forest reserve and without any land title, they had no alternative.

So, three bulldozers arrived in the village and began clearing the village graveyard full of indigenous trees like *daeng, chik, rung, tabak, krabok, khor, yang na* and wild mango. Incidentally, indigenous trees in this deciduous forest provided the local community with firewood, mushrooms, herbs, and other products as well as grazing ground for cattle. Anyway, in four or five days, 100 rai of what used to be densely-forested land was cleared of trees and ready for reforestation.

"It was a big event. The district Chief Officer came to preside over the ceremony. The district official, an agricultural official and others also came," said Mr. Boonard, the Kamnan of Tambon Khao Sarn. More than 300 villagers also took part in tree-planting in the rain. In five days, the land was replanted with eucalyptus. Another 50 rai is proposed to be cleared in 1995 for eucalyptus farming.

"The villagers wanted to conserve the forest so they could bring their cattle to graze or could collect mushrooms" said villager Chom Thanachai. Having

realized their inability to stop the project, Chom said he would like to see the officials plant more species than just eucalyptus.

The two world views and their contradictions are obvious. For the villagers, the diversity in natural forests is linked to their livelihood security. Local communities, if I may generalize, rely on food collected throughout the environment. Khon Kaen University nutritionist Prapinora Somansang has recorded that, in the rainfed areas of North East Thailand, villagers gather or hunt more than 100 types of natural food from their environment, including wild leafy vegetables, roots, shoots, fruits, insects, fish, reptiles and small mammals. Research undertaken in 82 villages in semi-arid areas in India (Jodha, 1990) revealed that the poor obtain approximately 15% to 25% of their household income from common property resources that, in addition, provide them with one-third of their farm inputs. As it also happens, a number of such resources - fuelwood, medicinal herbs, resins and gums and others - are the responsibility of women and children.

Jodha noted a decline in the geographical area covering Common Property Resources, ranging from 26% to 63% over a 20-year period. In part, this was due to the privatization of land (more than half of which was awarded to the non-poor), population growth, and of course, commercial interests conniving with predatory praetorian guards, such as the forest and land settlement officials.

If access to environmental resources erodes, it is often the poorest of the poor, the women and ethnic minorities that bear the brunt of resulting destitution. If fuel wood is harder to gather, it is the poor who can not buy it in the market, and the additional burden of more distant collection falls on the women.

The other view, however, is driven by the logic of linear growth. Commercial plantations are a sound investment and necessary for industrialization. As for sustainability, all trees of whatever type sequester carbon.

Moreover, homogenized tree farms, like manicured lawns or golf courses, are aesthetically pleasing to the sophisticated eye.

### *That We May Live*

Let me cite another example. Anne Danya Usher of the Project for Ecological Recovery reports that people in the fishing village of Dato in Patani province in Southern Thailand have been managing the use of 100 hectares of mangrove forest for more than 150 years. They fish in the Bay of Patani, while using wood from the community's forest for making fishing equipment and for fuel. The indirect benefits of protecting the mangroves are, however, more obvious than the direct ones as the coastal forest provides shelter and breeding grounds for marine life that villagers then fish from the bay. Since 1987, people in Dato have been planting trees in an effort to expand the area of mangrove forest.

Contrast this to the resources-based export specialization that has converted 1.2 million hectares of mangroves in Asia into aquaculture ponds. In Thailand, 1.6 million rai, out of a mangrove area of 2.4 million rai, have been destroyed.

Without making any value judgment on the trade-off between a modernizing nation-state's requirement for export earnings and the ecological role of mangroves, or between private profit and livelihood security of coastal fisherfolk, I am reminded of Mahatma Gandhi's famous statement on the dichotomy between sustainability and linear growth: *"The earth has enough to sustain everyone. But it has got too little to satisfy every one's greed."*

Underlying the contrasting world views is the question of right: of the customary and natural right of the marginalized and their local livelihood concerns over the right of nation-states in the name of conservation or of modernizing entrepreneurs for dominating nature and the people who depend upon nature. Yet it is resistance to encroachment on natural and livelihood rights that has occasioned so many known and unknown environmental movements by the ethnic minorities, the marginalized

and women. Long before sustainability became a buzzword in development discourse, village women in Garhwal Himalayas in India chanted the slogan, "what do forests bear - soil, water and pure air."

I know I have already overshot the brevity required of my statement to you. Please bear with me for a few more minutes to talk about food security for the vulnerable households in Asia and of the crisis that looms large on the horizon of 19 food-deficit, low-income countries in Asia.

For the fifth time in as many years, Asia surged forward in 1995 as our "world's fastest growing region." Figures posted at year-end tracked growth at 7.9% -- better than the earlier forecasts of an already hefty 7.3%.

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The Asian Development Bank foresees regional growth may cool to 7.4% this year. In 1997, this could probably slip further to 7.1% as China, South Korea, Hongkong, Malaysia, Thailand and other high-growth countries ease from economic overdrive.

If we maintain this pace, the economies of our Region could become a full third of world GDP by the year 2000.

Equitably shared, such bounty could transform the lives and hopes of impoverished men and women of our Region - "people with the broken ploughs, who bear the face of hunger; men, women and children for whom it is almost too late."

In this most economically vibrant region, however, we dare not forget that over 493 million are ill-fed. Benefits of today's economic boom remain for these marginalized people "almost too late." The crisis of poverty is concentrated in the countryside; it also festers in the seemingly intractable income distribution gap even in the fastest-growing countries in Asia.

Current statistics for Asia and the Pacific region are depressing. One person in five does not have access to sufficient calories to lead a healthy, active life. Nineteen of this region's 27 developing member-countries of FAO are considered low-income and food-deficit areas.

It is true that, in two decades, South East Asia has halved the numbers of undernourished people and reduced the percentage from 44% to 16% of the total population. South Asia has also reduced the percentage of population undernourished by a third from 34% to 24%, but could not manage to bring down the absolute numbers owing to population growth.

Cereals self-sufficiency ratios are likely to be little changed at 97% in both East Asia and South Asia. At these self-sufficiency levels, net cereal imports in 2010 are likely to be 22 million tons in East Asia but may double to 10 million tons in South Asia.

A slight decline projected for the cereals self-sufficiency ratio in South Asia would double net imports. With prospects of limited export earnings and widespread undernutrition, even small additional import requirements are burdensome. The dominant paradigm of export-led growth could risk diminishing cereal production in favor of raw materials exports. Also, there is stagnation of global demand for some non-food agricultural commodities.

The year 1995 saw the steepest rise in prices of rice, wheat and corn. Nations paid more to buy foodgrains than at any other time since the 1970s. Food prices are primed to rise higher, and this will mean continuing high import costs.

Also, let us not forget the lessons of history. The food crisis in 1972 clearly illustrated that the surplus stocks of developed countries, which could have ensured the survival of all humanity, melted like snow in the sun without the poor being able to receive anything but the crumbs.

Yet, Mr. Whitney McMillan, chairman of the grain giant Cargill says: "*There is a mistaken belief that the greatest agricultural need in the developing world is to develop the capacity to grow food for local consumption. This is misguided. Countries*

*should produce what they produce best and trade.*" (1995)

Let us recall that arable lands are their thinnest slivers in this region. In just twenty years, the balance of the limited, uncropped land will be halved in South Asia. East Asia's will be sliced by a third. And a contemporary Chinese saying goes: "Asphalt is the latest crop."

Many aquifers have been pumped into salt-contaminated jugs. Water supplies today have slipped into a third of what they were in the 1950s. By the year 2000, Asians will use 60 out of every 100 gallons of the world's water. Most will be groundwater, although aquifer withdrawals exceed recharge in many areas. Crippling water shortages have appeared in North China and West and South India. Over-use of ground waters is a policy issue in the Philippines and Thailand.

Moreover, wind and water erosion strip farms in Asia of vital and fragile top soil. Eight countries of South Asia alone lose more than US\$10 billion each year due to land degradation. Water erosion has affected 34% of the 45.4 million hectares cultivated in China. The same has degraded 43 million hectares in Indonesia and 13.5 million in the Philippines. Soil fertility has occurred in over 3.2 million hectares in Vietnam. Salinization is affecting another 3 million hectares in Thailand.

Dr. Peter Kenmore, coordinator of the FAO's Integrated Pest Management Programme, sums up the issues when he says: "*The degradation of the paddy environment, whether by micro-nutrient depletion, atmospheric pollution, pest pressure or toxic change in soil-chemistry is greater than the capacity for genetic improvements in yield potentials that breeders can select.*" Indeed, yield is plateauing, if not declining.

These are some of the issues that we all must confront as the World Food Summit takes place in Rome in November 1996. The face of hunger and poverty in Asia bears features of its exhausted environment. The Director-General wants the commitment of all civil society to a world without hungry people and thirsty land.

Allow me to end with an ancient Vedic Chant:

*"What O'Earth I dig out of thee  
Quickly shall that grow again  
May I not O' pure one  
Pierce thy vital spot or thy heart."*

Ecological penury and human deprivation pierce the heart of nature and humanity alike. That precisely, my friends, is the challenge. Will the new century bring for our children abundance and

joy or will they grow up listless in perilous conditions that compromise their survival? Will their sky be resplendent with rainbow and singing birds or will it become even more desolate? Will there only be scorched earth and manicured plantation or will there be forests humming with innumerable species and giving us water, soil and clean air?

These are some of the questions that we must answer if we are committed to heal our planet and ourselves. And that, my friend, is spiritual work. "If we lose the environment, we lose God." ■

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