

ANGOC Statement on Protecting Land Rights and Ensuring Food Security in the Time of COVID-19

The COVID-19 global pandemic has exposed many of our underlying fragilities and risks as a people – a heartless economy with widening inequities, destruction of our environment, unjust distribution of land and natural resources for shelter and livelihood, growing pollution and congested cities, the lack of basic access to food and nutrition, and the absence of universal health care, all amidst our planet's growing vulnerability to the impacts of climate change.

Meanwhile, large-scale deforestation, degradation and fragmentation of natural habitats, trade in animal species and plants, anthropogenic climate change – continue to drive the emergence of new diseases. More than half of global pandemics were borne out of zoonotic transmission of diseases from animals to humans, ushered in by clearing forests to make way for farmlands and commercial areas.

As scientists and medical experts try to find cures for COVID-19 and vaccines for SARS-CoV-2, economists, technocrats, and political leaders have responded to the pandemic, while starting to prepare for the “new normal.” Since March this year, governments have scrambled to address this pandemic primarily through physical distancing measures, travel restrictions, curfews, lockdowns and community quarantines.

Yet while COVID-19 started as a health crisis, present incidences suggest that the pandemic is quickly evolving into crises of poverty, hunger and malnutrition which burdens small scale farmers, agricultural workers, landless people and slum-dwellers the most.

Even before the outbreak of COVID-19, an estimated 821 million people worldwide were already undernourished in 2018, with the majority of the world's hungry people living in low-income countries, where 12.9% of the population is undernourished.¹

The food system is directly affected by the pandemic through disruptions in the food supply chains and markets. At the same time, the capacity to produce and distribute food is hampered as a result of loss of jobs and decreases in purchasing power, especially of those who are poor and vulnerable.

¹ According to the “State of food security and nutrition in the world (SOFI)” (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO, 2019). See <https://www.wfp.org/publications/2019-state-food-security-and-nutrition-world-sofi-safeguarding-against-economic-crisis-about-the-series-3a-the-state-challenges-for-achieving-this-goal>



Without access to land, markets, and inputs, farmers' livelihoods have become even less secure. Food producers who also rely on non-farm and off-farm work to support their livelihoods are constrained in their ability to travel to their employment. Nationwide lockdowns and restrictions on trade and travel have disrupted food chains, which in turn have crippled the livelihoods of small farmers across Asia, where agriculture remains the backbone of most nations' economies.

As governments ask people to stay home to prevent the spread of the virus, the need for secure land and housing tenure has become crucial for everyone, as never before. With restrictions on transportation, daily wage laborers and informal sector workers lose their incomes, and many are being forced to leave their homes due to their lack of legal tenure and inability to pay rent. Most vulnerable are the homeless and migrant workers who, with the loss of jobs in cities, have been forced to return to their rural roots, many walking hundreds of kilometers just to be with their families. In India, the biggest lockdown in history of 1.3 billion people, has left many millions of migrant workers unemployed and stranded in megacities, forced to take risky, long journeys back to their remote villages.

Included among the worst hit are the urban poor – those who live without security of tenure, in poor housing conditions, inside tight spaces with inadequate ventilation and sanitation, who run the risk of being stigmatized and evicted by host communities when health outbreaks occur. They also have low access to health care, and their lack of job security makes them more vulnerable to spikes in food prices. The absence of nutritious food increases their vulnerability to infections and morbidity.

Vulnerable groups of the poor, elderly, women, and children not only face greater risks of being infected by the virus, certain sectors also receive less attention. Competition between priorities for government resources can lead to tensions between health care and long-term food security priorities. In India, over 120 million children have lost access to their mid-day school meals, with the closure of schools due to COVID-19. Incidents of domestic abuse have also increased as women and children spend more time at home, with less access to means to seek help as strict quarantine protocols are put in place.

Already there are dim predictions that the economic fallout from the global pandemic could even increase global poverty by as much as half a billion people, or eight percent of the total human population, marking the first time that poverty will increase globally in three decades, since 1990.

Governments have hatched short-term social amelioration programs, safety nets for the poor, and corporate bailouts. Yet unless there is a drastic overhaul of the development model which puts people and communities at the center, these efforts will merely return us to "business as usual" and these COVID-19-response programs will become the passing "flavor of the month" for development aid and donors.



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Although these food and cash distribution programs alleviate immediate hunger, they are not intended to address its underlying causes. The key question about safety net programs is whether these are sustainable in the long-term, and whether they empower poor people to escape from chronic poverty, hunger and malnutrition. Already, developing countries with tight budgets have resorted to foreign borrowing, leading to increasing national debts which will have to be borne by our children. Further, there are reports of corruption in the implementation of COVID-response programs.

And with the shifting priorities and attention of governments, there are also reports of individuals and groups who seek to take advantage of the situation through illegal tree-cutting, illegal mining, and landgrabs. In the Philippines, at least four illegal mining activities have commenced since lockdowns began last March.²

Small farmers across Asia remain in the frontlines of this pandemic, by continuing to be major suppliers of rice, grains, pulses, vegetables, and seafoods, **yet small farmers and producers, rural artisans and indigenous peoples continue to be deprived of access and control over productive resources** (i.e., land, water, forests and coastlines) on which they depend for livelihoods.

Increasing corporate control of the food industry has further compounded the situation of Asia's small farmers as they face a new layer of barriers – difficulty in accessing services, credit and markets, weak extension services, and pricing policies that work against small farmers. This alienation process of farmers from the value chain has been magnified with the onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Politicians and State leaders have likewise taken advantage of the pandemic to consolidate their power, further increasing inequities that lead to hunger and poverty. Across a number of Asian countries, civilians and social activists alike point out disturbing instances of increased State militarization and aggressive policing; government crackdowns on dissent, media and free speech. In the Philippines, dissenters and activists are being threatened under the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020 that has been enacted to stifle opposition to the government. Such law was legislated during a pandemic lockdown, and in the absence of public scrutiny and debate.

Today, if Covid-19 has taught us anything, it is that we need to rebuild our immune system not only as individuals, but also collectively as a society.

The world will continue to struggle against similar crises, but we must work together to ensure the best possible outcome for generations to come. We should build societies that our children would be eager to grow up in, a future that they would thrive in.

² As shared by Alyansa Tigil Mina during the Webinar on "COVID-19 in the Age of Extractivism and Climate Change - Voices From the South," 22 April 2020, organized by Peoples Dialogue.



There should be no return to the “old normal” – the *status quo* and *business-as-usual*. Instead, societies and communities need to recover and build back better. As stated by the UN Secretary-General António Guterres, “[We must build] more equal, inclusive and sustainable economies and societies that are more resilient in the face of pandemics, climate change and the many other global challenges we face.”³

Development frameworks must be transformed into ones that put primacy on people and the environment. Access and control over land and natural resources should be in the hands of small producers – sufficient government support ought to be in place to ensure that they are able to stably produce adequate, safe, and nutritious food, that is accessible and affordable. The role that indigenous peoples and forest-dwellers play in biodiversity conservation must be recognized, to prevent the emergence and spread of new diseases. Moreover, just economic conditions, fair wages, and comprehensive public healthcare must be prioritized, to ensure that people and State infrastructure will be able to withstand sudden shocks brought on by crises such as pandemics.

We need to rethink our paradigm if we are to ensure food for all – i.e., making sure that food is equitably distributed, and is made accessible to the poor and marginalized. It is not sufficient that States focus their attention solely only on global and national value chains. As an overall food systems strategy, Governments need to provide specific support and strengthening of local food systems and small-scale food producers to ensure food for all.

The fundamental working principle for building lasting food security is by *reducing food kilometers*, or “*reducing the distance* between where food is produced, and where the same food is consumed” – to the extent possible.⁴ We need a shift towards investing in community-led resilience and response systems.

This approach should ensure the rights of small producers to land and resources. We should focus on developing local markets to which small producers have direct access, and where they receive fair prices for their produce. This will build direct links and accountability between producers and consumers, will provide fresh produce, and will reduce carbon emissions associated with transporting food over wide distances.

Agrarian reform and land tenure security should be an integral part of national development strategies. Sustained food self-sufficiency and development in Asia will only be achieved with more equitable land redistribution, together with support services, agroecological farming technologies, sustainable resource management and community empowerment.

3 Shared responsibility, global solidarity: Responding to the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 (March 2020). See https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/sg_report_socio-economic_impact_of_covid19.pdf

4 Bangkok Declaration (April 1996). Drafted and signed by some 101 CSOs from Asia-Pacific, the statement analyzed and recommended priority areas for action as input to the World Food Summit (WFS).



Land is more than an economic asset or commodity. Access to land not only brings a source of survival but also increases one's sense of human dignity and security and the opportunity to break out of hunger and poverty. More equitable access to land reduces resource conflicts and rural outmigration, and improves overall peace for greater economic and political stability.

Small producers should have ownership and control over their lands; and the rights of indigenous communities over their lands, including their traditional systems of land governance, should be recognized. These are necessary and essential steps toward reducing conflicts and ensuring the sustainable management of resources.

Along with tenure security is the need for diversified and sustainable agriculture anchored on smallholder farming. Throughout history, small farmers and producers have served as the backbone of Asian agriculture and food security. Asia is home to 75% of the world's farming households, 80% of whom are small-scale farmers and producers.

There should be a marked shift from industrial agriculture to community-based agroecological farming systems which build resiliency by using natural and local inputs – to regenerate the soil, fertilize crops, and fight pests. Maintaining proper biodiversity and reducing carbon emission, agroecological farming systems are less dependent on external inputs like pesticides and fertilizers, and thereby reduce farmers' vulnerability to sudden shocks and price fluctuations. Agroecological systems likewise emphasize shorter supply chains and local territorial markets.

CALL FOR ACTION

The pandemic calls for urgent measures and concerted actions by the international community, governments, and peoples.

Immediate global response

- We support the global call for a safe, effective ***“COVID 19 People's Vaccine”*** that, once developed, should be widely produced and made universally accessible to all nations and people, free of charge,⁵ and unhampered by an intellectual property rights regime.
- We join many nations and groups in the call for an immediate ceasefire in active armed conflicts in all parts of the world, in order to focus on the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. States should ensure that their measures are conflict-sensitive, non-discriminatory, and aligned with international human rights law and standards and are sensitive to the

vulnerability of conflict-affected communities, refugees, internally-displaced persons (IDPs), people with disabilities, women, children, and elderly.

- As stimulus packages are launched, we call for urgent debt relief and debt cancellation for poor developing countries and especially those that suffer from internal conflicts.
- In December 2019, the UN headquarters announced the convening of a Food Systems Summit in 2021 with the aim of maximizing the benefits of a food systems approach across the entire 2030 SDG Agenda, to meet the challenges of climate change, make food systems inclusive, and support sustainable peace. However, unless there is meaningful participation and an effective voice by small-scale food producers' organizations and other civil society organizations concerned with food, this Summit could be a meaningless exercise.

Immediate actions for State response

- Beyond food aid and economic recovery programs, the governance of agriculture and food systems should be restructured and transformed so that policies and programs directly respond to the needs of small farmers and producers, indigenous communities, and the urban poor.
- Governments should shift priorities, increasing national budgets to address the impacts of the pandemic, particularly of the poor. Corruption should be stopped to ensure that resources are utilized effectively. Monitoring mechanisms with the participation of civil society and maintaining the independence of media should be established to ensure transparency of the delivery of such programs.
- In light of shrinking democratic space, which is further magnified during this pandemic, the rights of civil society organizations, land and human rights defenders, and media should be respected and protected.
- Protect and ensure the safety of farmers, farmworkers, fisherfolk, indigenous peoples, and others involved in food production, handling, and processing to help avoid catching and spreading COVID-19.
- Recognize the specific role of women in health and food systems, as food producers, processors and care workers. Promote solidarity among people and communities as a priority continue to empower and support everybody to collaborate and cooperate to confront the emerging challenges.



- Provide and ensure social protection mechanisms for the poorest and most vulnerable people during and in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis. Ensure the Right to Food for All, sufficient in both quantity and nutritional quality.
- Provide assistance to returning migrants from abroad and urban areas to the rural areas. Testing and active contact tracing though should be undertaken to ensure safety of all.

Immediate actions for civil society, communities, and peoples

- In the absence of government or humanitarian support, communities and CSOs have played critical role during this crisis. We thus encourage CSOs to continue monitoring the COVID 19 response activities of the Governments and sustain their advocacy works. CSOs should continue to work together, by engaging with farmers and fisherfolks, informal sector workers, marginalized and vulnerable people, community health workers, indigenous communities, youth and women groups, to ensure that their needs are met and voices are heard.
- While governments and humanitarian actors focus their efforts on new and more pressing priorities, we CSOs must remain vigilant against State actors and business interests who use the pandemic to exert their control over land, forests and natural resources, without regard for human rights standards. We will continue to monitor cases of land conflict, especially incidents of landgrabbing where they occur.
- We encourage CSOs to counter growing misinformation, prejudice, and discrimination in our communities and on social media against people and individuals on the basis of their race, ethnicity, nationality, gender and sexuality, religion, caste and social class – which has been exacerbated by the current pandemic. When viral infections or diseases spread, the targets of blame are usually those people who are racialized; minority and indigenous groups; people who are refugees, immigrants or migrants; people who are poor; and even health workers. We should all stand up and confront racism, prejudice, and discrimination when they occur. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights will be our main reference point.
- CSOs need to start collectively discussing and planning with communities for longer-term solutions to support recovery, strengthen preparedness, pursue food security and self-sufficiency, build local resilience, and promote sustainable socio-economic development for all. Civil society must also engage political and business groups towards formulating wholistic, decentralized, participatory, and climate- resilient land use and development plans, with the view of supporting local livelihoods and promote food sovereignty.



LOOKING FORWARD

Despite the challenges of today's times, there has been no shortage of civil society action. Undeterred by logistical difficulties, in many communities this pandemic has indeed invigorated the spirit of volunteerism, humanitarian work and civic action among groups, families and individuals, most especially among the youth. These citizens' actions should be supported, guided and sustained, so that they become a truly transformative force in society.

For our part, the Asian NGO Coalition for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ANGOC) will continue to work within and beyond its network to facilitate exchanges of experiences, lessons, innovations, and evidence-based recommendations for stakeholders, as we hurdle past these uncertain times. We will continue to strive to secure food and freedom, jobs and justice, land and labor, peace and prosperity for the present and succeeding generations

The ANGOC network and its partners have long advocated food sovereignty as the framework for agriculture, supported by agro-ecological systems of food production. 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.

As a step forward, the ANGOC network shall generate solid and community-based information to assess food security at the household and community level as basis for community-level planning and action and link these village-based initiatives with people-centered policy advocacy and mobilizations at the national and regional levels.

ANGOC's continuing commitment
towards a people-centered
sustainable development

*Food and freedom
Jobs and justice
Land and labor
Peace and prosperity*

Food is a minimum, basic human right but it is meaningless without freedom. The theme of freedom reminds us that much of our efforts today must center not only on political freedom but, equally important, on economic freedom and opportunity. Together, food and freedom are the most basic rights of an Asian – indeed of any – community.

There exists a distinctive Asian value of freedom – the survival ethic for all, moving from the shared poverty of the past towards a shared prosperity of the future. It is *justice* that is *community*-based, concerned about the effects of the world trade liberalization and globalization.

Globalization has also spurred the rapid deterioration of Asia's vast and diverse land and water resources. Hence, Asian NGOs – increasingly active participants in the environmental movement – must continue to express the now-universal concern for ecological harmony.

Many Asian peasants continue to till land they do not own; the prevailing agrarian structures remaining mired in bonded labor. There is need, therefore, for widespread agrarian reforms to harness *land and labor* for the benefit of all.

Finally, in this era of liberalization wars and ethnic conflicts, we are reminded of the need of amnesty with honor, and of peace with dignity. As there can be no peace without development, there can be no *prosperity* without *peace*.



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We shall facilitate the establishments of local food hubs to shorten the distance between small food producers and consumers.

Finally, we enjoin other CSOs and networks in enhancing, disseminating this statement and building dialogue to further the discourse and learn from each other, as we work together in building a resilient and compassionate tomorrow. □

Signed:

Asian NGO Coalition for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ANGOC)
Association for Land Reform and Development (ALRD)
Association of Voluntary Agencies in Rural Development (AVARD)
Community Development Association (CDA)
Community Self-Reliance Centre (CSRC)
Ekta Parishad (EP)
Konsorsium Pembaruan Agraria (KPA)
NGO Federation of Nepal (NFN)
Philippine Partnership for the Development of Human Resources in Rural Areas (PhilDHRRA)
Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement (SARVODAYA)
South Asia Rural Reconstruction Association (SARRA)
STAR Kampuchea (SK)

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For those interested in signing on to this Statement in the spirit of solidarity, kindly inform the ANGOC Regional Secretariat at angoc@angoc.org.

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