



Equity and Justice
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Is food price hike leading South Asia toward commercialization in agriculture

Food security within the framework of food sovereignty: protecting farmer's right and sustainability of the nature.

The concept of food sovereignty that represents an alternative to neo-liberal policies was developed by Via Campesina and brought to the public debate during the World Food Summit in 1996. Since then, this concept has become a major issue of the international agricultural debate, even within the United Nations bodies. So far it has been evolved as a movement of the peasants and subsistence farmers' for upholding their sovereign rights over agriculture systems. Within the right based framework, food sovereignty considers food as alienable rights of the human being and it is the responsibility of the state to provide it. The concept of food sovereignty has made correlation of the rights of the farmers to natural resources, farming means and methods etc. that are ecologically, socially, economically and culturally appropriate to the unique circumstances of people, communities, and countries. It includes both the right to food, and the right to produce food. While exclusive notion of food security only emphasize production to meet the need of populations, it is not linked with the sustainability or regeneration of the nature. In view of present food crisis, mostly created by the neo-liberal policies, it is important to forward the concept of food sovereignty, especially in South Asia where one forth of world population lives and around half of them are poor.

Changing scenario in South Asian agriculture system: Neo liberal path will yield more pauperization and degeneration of nature

In the recent years, the soaring prices of basic foods all around the globe have brought into light a looming food crisis. Nearly every region of the world has recently experienced drastic food price inflation. Retail prices are up 18 percent in China, 17 percent in Sri Lanka, 10 percent and more through out the Latin America and Russia, around 20 percent in Bangladesh; double digit price hikes for almost every basic foodstuff have driven that inflation over the past years. Among the agricultural commodities, dairy products are as much as 200 percent more expensive since last year in the same in some countries. Maize prices hit a 10 year high in February 2007, while wheat is up 50 percent, rice up 16 percent and poultry nearly 10 percent.

Therefore the causes of rocketing food prices are complex settings of demand-supply mechanism, which, in the recent years, is being influenced by a number of global socio-political factors; and by increasing natural calamities around the globe. This situation clearly indicates that the neo-liberal concept of food security, which is merely based on production and trading of agriculture commodities, is not working; even the prominent food exporting countries are putting more and more tariff and non tariff barriers on the export of agricultural commodities, especially on rice.

The situation gives birth new social and political tensions in the food deficit least developed country like Bangladesh and Nepal. In the last two decades or more, deregulation were imposed upon the developing countries via the structural adjustment policy (SAP) package of the IMF-World Bank and entrenched further through the WTO Agreement on Agriculture which endangered country's food self-sufficiency. Now the failure of market mechanism made a new realization to the countries to attain immediate food self sufficiency for now and also for the future. In the changing situation, the institutions which are largely responsible for present food crisis- the IMF and World Bank are also wording differently what they didn't in the past. Bretton Woods twins (World Bank and International Monetary Fund) and also the ADB (Asian Development Bank) are suggesting countries to give emphasis in agriculture investment even with subsidy; to re-open of public distribution system to stabilize the market and to give more finance on agriculture research.

In fact, there is little hope that the situation will be ease in near future. All the major food importing countries especially the least developed countries might give emphasize on gaining self sufficiency in agriculture but, as most of them are in the grief of neo liberal regime within the frame of PRS (poverty reduction strategy) and debt dependency, again the countries will be compelled to follow the neo liberal paths, i.e., (i) emphasizing mere production; little concern to regeneration of environment which will lead to the degeneration of nutrition capacity of the land and nature, (ii) introduction of hybrid seeds,

which will make farmers dependent on companies and will make farmer more indebted, (iii) increase of subsidy in national budget which might go to the rich farmers who has the capacity to produce surplus and who is consuming high level fertilizer and fuel, (iv) rich farmers and big companies will invest in agro food and as well in agro fuel production which will create land alienation of small farm holders.

Challenges for the food sovereignty campaigners: reorientation of the campaign agenda

The above scenario indicates a demand for reorientation of campaign agenda on attaining food sovereignty. In this relation two things are strategically important; (i) formation and facilitation of farmers' organization and, (ii) bridging grassroots activism with the campaign at national and international level. It is also undeniable fact that, we have to work with the political process, especially with the political party leaders at all level although separate political identity of the farmers organization is necessary to uphold the farmers interest. Here, considering the perspective of South Asian countries, some agendas have been proposed which could be implemented in three levels e.g. national and grass root level, regional level in South Asia, and finally in global level.

Protecting small farmer's rights to agricultural inputs is a fundamental issue in national level

In respect of grassroots and national level; (i) experimentation and promotion of sustainable / regenerative agriculture especially in small holding and challenging the yield and food quality of chemicalized farming system, (ii) formation of farmers group in local level, (iii) inclusion of farmers as well as community resources/interest in the IPR (intellectual property regime) which will be prepared by the least developed countries by 2016, (iv) campaign to protect small farmers especially from the land grabbing by commercialization and industrialization purposes; for example in India small farm-holder's are losing agricultural land for the establishment of SEZ (special economic zone), (v) campaign and engagement with state so that the agriculture subsidy increased and tailored to the real farmers, (vi) campaign and engagement with state to strengthen public distribution system and also to introduce employment guarantee scheme; meanwhile some of the governments in South Asia have started those schemes.

Would SAARC be able to frame a climate action plan with 'common but differentiated responsibilities' in view of individual state capacities?

In the 14th SAARC Summit held in Delhi in 2007, a decision was taken for setting up the SAARC food bank, and an agreement has been signed by all member states. Therefore, SAARC Food Bank should be immediately functional to create the mechanism to face the food security issue at a time when the global warming is impacting the agriculture and food production of the South Asian nations from recurring floods, droughts and other erratic weather conditions.

In fact, the impact of climate change in food crop production in SAARC countries especially in Bangladesh will be devastating. The SAARC ministerial meeting on climate change held in Dhaka on 3 July 2008 agreed to prepare a three year climate change action plan in upcoming 15th SAARC summit. In this relation we demand a 'pro poor' and agriculture sensitive 'climate action plan' with common objectives but with differentiated responsibilities in view of the capacities of the countries. We also demand transformation of SAARC development fund to the SAARC Development Bank, so that the SAARC countries can find a flexible financing window alternative to the other international financial institutions.

The recent Dhaka ministerial meeting also agreed to take common position in different international forum for claiming compensation from the highest emitters of the developed countries for climate change impact. In this regard, SAARC countries should commission a joint study for the assessment of 'ecological debt' and 'carbon debt' of the rich countries to the poor which should claim specifically and categorically. SAARC countries also should take common position on the 'movement of natural persons' to the other countries and also with the SAARC countries as consequences of climate related disasters will make more people homeless and asset less especially in Bangladesh as a World Bank study predicts around 20 million environmental refugee in Bangladesh by 2050.

Restructuring Neo Liberal Global Structure: UN Human Right Council and International Court of Justice to investigate the crisis.

In global level, with all means, we have to resist the IFIs involvement in climate fund. Any other funding mechanism parallel to the UNFCCC Adaptation Fund, as proposed by the G8 under the World Bank, will undermine multilateral effort and put developing countries in disadvantageous position. Besides, we have to create pressure to the development countries for deeper emission reduction, 20-40% by 2020, as stated in the Kyoto Protocol and also reflected in the UNFCCC Bali conference. Therefore, the latest declaration of G8 leaders of 50 percent reduction of carbon emission by 2050 is a farce to the commitment. There should be an assessment of ecological debt of the developed countries to the least developed countries. The big carbon emitters must pay those debts as compensation; carbon trading or offsetting atmospheric carbon is a false solution.

In view of the La Via Campesina, an international peasant movement proposes replacing the current model of food security with the notion of food sovereignty – the right of country to determine its production and consumption of food and the exemption of agriculture from global regimes. It also call upon UN Human Rights Council and the International Court of Justice to investigate the contribution of agribusiness in the violations of the right to food; the establishment of a UN Commission on Food Production, Consumption and Trade, and the restructuring of multilateral organizations including the World Bank those are involved in food aid and agriculture. We should also campaign for 'moratorium on bio-fuel production', especially in the South Asian countries.

Still there is no formal space for CSOs participation in the SAARC. SAARC must recognize the role of civil society in global democratic society building. So like other international forum, SAARC must recognize and create space for the engagement of civil society. According to the SAARC constitution, bilateral issues can not be discussed in the forum; such a structural limitation should be reconsidered at least for climate change and food crisis issues which involved more than two states.

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