



GMO free South Asia

# Peoples demand for securing food sovereignty

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## 1. Background

The concept of food sovereignty, developed by Via Campesina during the World Food Summit in 1996, represents an alternative to neo-liberal policies. Since then, that concept has become a major issue of the international agricultural debate, even within the United Nations bodies. It was the main theme of the NGO forum held in parallel to the FAO World Food Summit of June 2002. Neo-liberal policies prioritize international trade, and not food for the people. They haven't contributed at all to hunger eradication in the world. On the contrary, they have increased the peoples' dependence on agricultural imports, and have strengthened the industrialization of agriculture, thus jeopardizing the genetic, cultural and environmental heritage of our planet, as well as our health. They have forced hundreds of millions of farmers to give up their traditional agricultural practices, to rural exodus or to emigration. International institutions such as IMF (International Monetary Fund), the World Bank, and WTO (World Trade Organization) have implemented those policies dictated by the interests of large trans-national companies and superpowers. International (WTO), regional (Free Trade Agreement of the Americas-FTAA) or bilateral "free" trade agreements of agricultural products actually allow those companies to control the globalised food market.

Therefore the South Asian countries should take integrated strategies and action plan to face the so-called neo-liberal policies of market economy that have been undermining food sovereignty and the right of peoples, communities to define their own agricultural, labour, fishing, food and land policies.

## 2. Food Security and Food Sovereignty Nexus

Food sovereignty goes beyond the concept of food security. Concept of food security merely ensures that a sufficient amount of safe food is produced without taking into account what kind of food is produced and how, where and on what scale it is produced. Attaining food security is the official agenda of all the States and UN organizations. FAO's Committee on World Food Security defined its objective as ensuring **'that all people at all times have both the physical and economic access to the basic food they need'**. It was also recognized three conditions in terms of food security. These are: ensuring adequacy of food supply or availability, ensuring stability of supply and ensuring access to food at the household level, particularly by the poor.

Such concept of food security alternatively promotes or allows unfair trading of food grains, food aid politics and food grains dumping by the developed countries. It is argued by the WTO that importing cheap food from the agriculturally advantageous countries will be a better way for poor countries to achieve food security than producing themselves. But massive imports of cheap, subsidized food undercut local farmers, driving them off their land. Such strategy will aggravate poverty situation at local level and subsistence economy will be placed in the hands of the cash economy.

On the other hand, food sovereignty says that feeding the people of a nation is an issue of national security, which complies with the national sovereignty. If the people of a country depend for their next meal on kind of global economy, on the goodwill of a superpower, on the aid weapon of the developed countries or on the unpredictability and high cost of long-distance shipping, that country may not be secured in the sense of either national security or food security. In that perspective, the socio-political dimension of food sovereignty is wider, much supportive to the development of sustainable agriculture, poverty eradication, and aim of providing an alternative to neo-liberal policies.

## 3. Corporate Control on Production System and Food Sovereignty

### a) Context: Green Revolution

Green revolution introduced modern farming methods throughout the world. But it couldn't end starvation. Instead, it created many problems of its own. The fertilizers and pesticides used in this new method of farming caused water pollution, soil erosion and lowered soil fertility. They also harmed biodiversity and made farmers dependent upon chemical companies for their livelihoods.

In Bangladesh, during the two consecutive decades of Green Revolution, cropping intensity increased by 600 percent, proportion of irrigated land has increased by 800 percent, population of HYV land has increased by 1300 per cent, and rice yield rate has increased by 65 per cent. No doubt, through marketing of Green Revolution tonic boosted rice production, but at what cost, what about other crops, what about subsistence economy, all those were by passed. A number of unexpected consequences also occurred as the by-product of Green Revolution. For example;

- I. Increasingly shifting of non-rice farmland, wetlands and public commons to the rice monoculture.
- II. Increased cultivation cost considerably due to increasingly price hiking of agricultural inputs, consequently financial rate of return decreased.
- III. Different Government policies like; Gradual withdrawal of government subsidy, liberalization of food grain imports, low ration price, food aid etc have pushed country farmers in irrational competitive market and thus subsistence economy have been ruled by market economy.
- IV. Excessive application of pesticides and fertilizers has made aquatic ecosystem unfavorable for feeding and breeding of fishery resources. This made fishers livelihoods vulnerable.
- V. Decrease in cropping diversity affected supply and pricing of cereal crop, which in turn, affected poor people's nutritional status as pulses are the cheap sources of protein to them.

### b) Gene Technology: Poor Countries Targeted Again

Like Green Revolution multinational biotech companies come forward with huge investment to promote and popularize Gene technology in the developing and least developed countries putting excuse that -GM technology will ensure food security of the starving LDCs. Therefore there is an increased dilemma of receiving or denying the GM technology as well as of prioritizing food safety or food security issues. The International Financial Institutions (IFIs), and even UN bodies advocates to promote GM technology in the developing countries.

About 1.2 billion people mostly in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, live in a state of absolute poverty with an income less than 1 USD per day (World Bank-2000). About 800 million people are food insecure (FAO 1999), and 160 million preschool children suffer from energy protein malnutrition, which results in the death of over 5 million children under the age of 5 every year. A much larger number of people suffer from deficiencies of micronutrient such as iron and vitamin A. Food insecurity mal and under nutrition result in serious public health problem and loss human potentials in many developing countries are the excuses of IFIs for advocating GM technology in the LDCs.

In contrast, population of the developed countries has reached a stationary state. Increased food production is no longer an issue. The developed country consumers have enough income to afford a diversified diet needed for balanced nutrition. They are more concerned with safe and healthy food and hence with the perceived risks of the genetically modified organisms (GMOs).

### c) Rice Biotechnology: A Potential Threat to Food Sovereignty in South Asia

Rice is the staple food in the most South Asian countries. The average annual per intake of rice varies from 100 to 170 kilograms in the most low-income countries. Therefore, rice is the only major crop that cultivated widely almost by all farmers. Once there were some 1400 varieties of rice in Bangladesh, but now only 14-15 varieties are found available at farmer's level, remaining has been disappeared and replaced by HYV seeds. In the recent day's further conspiracy is speeding up to make farmers seed and asset less through introducing biotechnology in rice seed. Now the excuse is to reduce malnutrition and vitamin A deficiency.

The level of micro-nutrient induced malnutrition in Bangladesh remains one of the highest in the world (ADB-2001). Nearly 60 percent of the children under age five are underweight and more than half are stunted. In the rural areas where three-fourths of the population lives, malnutrition is high due to lack of knowledge regarding (of financial capacity to afford) balanced diet or economic capacity to purchase supplemental iron and vitamin-A. Since the poor consume nearly 150-170 Kg of rice per year-so incorporation of a small amount of iron and Vitamin-A in rice can go a long way in meeting the deficiency of these critical micronutrient- a corporate statement favouring Rice Bio-Tech.

Therefore genes controlling Beta-carotene (obtained from daffodil and bacteria) have already been incorporate into IR64 and in BRR1 29, the most widely grown Boro rice variety in Bangladesh and now in the way to wider cultivation.

The risks associated with the modern biotechnology fall into four categories i.e. food safety, environmental safety, ethical issues and socio-economic impact. The potential risks of biotechnology on human health assumed to be toxic reactions, food allergies, food contaminations and antibiotic resistance. Apart from this, by-products of biotechnological agriculture like increased pesticides residues, genetic pollution, damage of beneficial insects, creation of super weeds and super pests, creation of new viruses and bacteria etc. would have adverse affect to the ecological system as well as to the human health. In the country context of Bangladesh, biotechnology will mostly affect to the socio-cultural aspects of small farmers. Agriculture in Bangladesh cherishes rural culture and social relationship and farmer don't treat agriculture as business. Therefore small farmers are pushed constantly towards commercial farming and being exploited increasingly by the multinational business giant.

#### 4. Hurdles of Food Sovereignty in South Asia

Over 70% of South Asian people's livelihood comes directly from agriculture. Yet, agricultural income is declining, as is the overall share of agriculture in GDP. South Asia is increasing its food imports while more people are going hungry today than previously. At the same time, South Asian countries now want to commercialize agriculture and propose setting up special economic zones in the countryside which may alienate the local peasantry and bring in privatized commercial farming. Such policies are likely to create more distress amongst agricultural communities if the problems of the local peasantry are addressed adequately.

Country	% of GDP
Bangladesh	24
Bhutan	33.2
India	23
Nepal	40
Pakistan	23
Sri Lanka	20

Fig: Share of Agriculture to GDP in 2004

Besides, Asian governments that continue policies favoring big commercial farms, consequently, turning small farmers to landless, migrant labourers or agricultural wage labourers. The entire South Asian region has seen a general reduction in food production and increase in grain imports. To make matters worse, governments in South Asia are encouraging genetic seeds from MNCs like Monsanto, which have led to water depletion and no new seed generation and also which undermines local varieties and biodiversity. Moreover South Asian countries would face, also presently facing the following crises;

- Displacement of Labour force and Small Farm holders
- Degradation of Human Health and Land Fertility
- Disappearance of Local Seeds and its Preservation Culture
- Monoculture and Bio-piracy Threatening to the Community Owned Bio-diversity
- Privatization of Public Commons
- Land Ownership Pattern: Question of Land Reform
- Export led Farming and Corporate Control on Farming System
- Corporate Control on Seed Market and Violating Farmers Right

#### 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Hunger and poverty is a prolong situation in the rural areas of the Third World Countries. The only lasting way to eliminate hunger and reduce poverty is through local economic development. One way to achieve such development in rural areas is to create local circuits of production and consumption, where family farmers sell their produce and buy their necessities in local towns. Thus food sovereignty, with its emphasis on local markets and economies, is essential to fighting hunger and poverty. Food sovereignty is a concept that should make sense to farmers and consumers in both Northern and Southern countries. We must struggle together against global trade policies and in favor of real agrarian reform and more participatory, sustainable and locally controlled food systems everywhere. We must take back our food and our land. Therefore we have the following recommendation to the South Asian leaders for securing food sovereignty;

- No GMOs in South Asia;
- Resist corporatisation of Agricultural Production System;
- Land Reform and Declare new land ownership ceiling;
- No privatization of public commons;
- Appropriate measures to promote indigenous agriculture system;
- National Gene Bank Establishment;
- Listing biological resources under sui generis act of WTO and to protect this from illegal patent;
- Encourage Community based seed preservation;
- Reducing Agriculture subsidy in South Asian Countries and balance level of subsidy from chemicalised farming system.

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