

# FOOD SOVEREIGNTY, INCLUSIVE FOOD SYSTEM AND ACCESS TO LAND

The Daily Star and Association for Land Reform and Development (ALRD) jointly organised an online discussion titled "Food Sovereignty, Inclusive Food System, and Access to Land" on October 26, 2020. Here we publish a summary of the discussion.



**TANJIM FERDOUS**  
Moderator of the session

World Food Day 2020 marks the 75th anniversary of FAO in an exceptional moment as countries around the world deal with the widespread effects of the global COVID-19 pandemic. On this momentous occasion, The Daily Star and ALRD have come together to arrange today's discussion.

Our agriculturally dependent economy has changed drastically over the last few decades. About 82 percent of our farmers have lost their land over this period due to various reasons. However, we have been able to achieve self-sufficiency in food through increased adoption of agricultural technologies.

The involvement of women in food production has been essential, but even now, their contribution to agriculture is not recognised and they don't get equal wages.



**ROWSHAN JAHAN MONI**  
Deputy Executive Director, ALRD

Small-scale family farming is the foundation of our traditional agriculture. About 95 percent of Bangladesh's overall food demands are supplied by marginal and small-scale farming families. At present, 40.6 percent of our total labour force is engaged in the agriculture sector where women farmers constitute 72.6 percent of total.

Two and a half crore people in Bangladesh are suffering from malnutrition. Indigenous people are more prone to hunger and malnutrition. Women and children are generally the worst victims. Almost half of the pregnant women in Bangladesh are suffering from anaemia. In some remote hilly areas, more than 50 percent of the population suffers from malnutrition.

A large proportion of the country's poor and marginalised people falls victim to unequal food distribution and marketing system. A significant number of this population doesn't have the affordability to purchase safe and nutritious food. Food security and food sovereignty can be assured for this group by allowing them access to land.

Research has shown that every year, on average, one percent of agricultural land is lost. A major reason behind such loss is unplanned construction of megaprojects and new infrastructures. Influential people have also grabbed large parts of khas land and other government lands suitable for farming.

To establish farmers' right to land, we have to bring comprehensive reforms in the land and agricultural system. Ceiling needs to be re-fixed for private land ownership and surplus land must be recovered and distributed among the landless farmers. Our current khas land ownership policies are discriminatory towards women. Particularly the provision of women with "an able son" as an eligibility criterion needs to be removed so that single, widowed women without an able son can apply for Khas land. A database needs to be created for indigenous and women farmers so that they can get all types of agriculture support from the government.

Recently, we conducted a study among agricultural workers at the grassroots level in Faridpur, Dinajpur, and Chattogram and it was revealed that they were not properly paid during the COVID-19 pandemic. A large number of them also didn't receive any support from the government. The government should take immediate measures to support these small scale farmers who are mostly landless women, marginal farmers, share croppers and members of indigenous communities.



**PROF. DR. M M AKASH**  
Department of Economics, University of Dhaka

The agricultural sector is a broad sector and the problems associated with this sector cannot be eradicated by overlooking the non-agricultural issues. Development of rural areas is essential in this context.

A minimum wage law needs to be enacted to ensure equal pay among all the farmers irrespective of their gender. Another factor that has an impact on the wage of farmers is the pricing of their agricultural produce and the associated materials.

When food is processed for consumption, value is added to it. For example, the price of rice is higher than that of paddy. The intermediaries profit from the value added through processing. They also charge extra, which is why consumers have to pay higher prices. A solution to this problem is vertical integration. Vertical integration means the main producers will have authority over the value chain.

Amul, an Indian dairy cooperative society, is an example of a company that has successfully incorporated vertical integration strategy into their business. All the profits made by the company are distributed among the producers and the consumers. As a result, the interests of both the consumers and the producers are kept in mind when the board of directors decide on the pricing of their products.

We must enact ownership laws, establish new institutions, and ensure corruption-free management. We must also ensure equal land owning rights for all people irrespective of their gender.

The marginalised people in our country are unable to afford the insurance premiums. Furthermore, the agricultural sector also has a higher premium rate due to its products being high risk. A credit insurance scheme can be a possible solution here. This scheme would require subsidies from the Bangladesh Bank.



**BARRISTER RAJA DEVASISH ROY**  
Chakma Circle Chief

About 80,000 indigenous families reside in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and a large number of them reside in Sajek union. But, this area has very poor electricity connection and water supply.

COVID-19 has now brought to the fore the issues related to food security. There are possibly 50,000 indigenous garments workers in CHT and a large portion of them are facing unemployment in the present situation. To ensure food safety for these people, jhum farming can be a solution. The second wave of COVID-19 can exacerbate the situation if the present problems are not tackled and dealt with properly. The local government and the food ministry can work together to come up with possible solutions. CHT still has many areas affected by extreme poverty. Special support packages need to be provided to these areas to ensure food security for the people. Special packages also need to be created for those who have lost their jobs.



**DR NUR AHMED KHANDAKER**  
Assistant Country Representative (Program), FAO, Bangladesh

Even though there has been a decline in agricultural land, production per unit area has increased due to the use of high-yielding varieties of crops and modern technology. Judging by the rate at which the population is rising, we will need to use better technology in food production and invest more in the agricultural sector. Our country is still not self-sufficient in the production of a lot of important crops due to our limited land capacity.

Due to genetic erosion, after five to seven years, crops become susceptible to disease. Therefore, new varieties of crops are needed continuously. Farmers are now trying to diversify crop production by converting paddy fields into fields where various kinds of fruit are grown.

A fair amount of materials required

for agriculture have to be imported. The pandemic, hence, poses a problem since the importing countries themselves are impacted by COVID-19, which is creating challenges for our farmers. These imported materials include certain seeds for the crops, fertilisers, and so on.

Farmers play the most important role in the food production sector of our country. It is our responsibility to provide them with all the necessary materials in a timely manner and ensure that the pandemic does not affect their livelihoods.

Food safety is built on four pillars. These include food availability along with physical, social, and economic access to food. The fulfilment of all of these criteria, coupled with access to safe and unadulterated food, will lead us to achieve food safety.



**SHAMSUL HUDA**  
Executive Director, ALRD

According to the United Nations Charter of Human Rights, the right to food is also a human right. However, our constitution does not recognise the right to food as a basic right. After 50 years of independence, it is now high time to recognise right to food as a human right.

Our agricultural land is being misused. The land is used by non-agricultural sectors, sometimes out of necessity while at other times for no valid reason which must stop. The grabbing of land from marginal farmers and indigenous people by a particular section of people must end. We must revive and reform our legal framework regarding

break out frequently due to the government not recognising ancestral land rights of indigenous people. Therefore, this recognition is critical. Bangladesh must introduce new laws for indigenous people. Conventional laws will not be able to protect the land rights, human rights, and identity of indigenous people.

Indigenous people all over the world have been facing historical injustices. Even though Bangladesh has gained self-sufficiency in food, this is not the case for indigenous people.

The state, indigenous people organisations, United Nations, civil society, and the media have to work together to create policies that will ensure food safety and protect the human rights of the indigenous people.

Bangladesh should have a bank for its indigenous people. To ensure true inclusivity when it comes to land access and ensuring food safety, we must keep everyone in mind starting from the marginally poor population to our indigenous population.



**SM NAZER HOSSAIN**  
President, Consumer Association of Bangladesh (CAB) Chattogram

Big corporations have now become heavily involved with food production in the country. This has left many farmers deprived. The government is dependent on businesses when it comes to the market for daily necessities. Alternative mechanisms by the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB) or the Directorate General of Food could have been better.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Recognise right to food as a human right and enact the Right to Food Act
- Land reform is needed to restore land rights to farmers
- Strong farmers' organisations and cooperative methods of agricultural production and marketing can save the country's agriculture sector
- Recognise women's contribution to agriculture and ensure equal wages
- Establish warehouses in rural areas to reduce wastage of agricultural produce
- Provide special subsidies for the poverty-stricken and unemployed indigenous people
- Ensure access to safe and unadulterated food
- Ratify ILO C141 to ensure rights for the rural workers
- A credit insurance scheme is required to provide insurance facilities to small farmers
- Agricultural Land Protection Act needs to be implemented to protect our agricultural lands

illegal possession of land. A land bank should be established to control the land market and land ownership. This will reduce land grabbing.

Food management in the country must be made women-friendly and indigenous people-friendly. Farmers have no control over the market for the food they produce, which is why they do not receive a fair price. A warehouse system should be established, down to the union level, to avoid wastage of food crops. This would call for changes in our national budget as well.

Discrimination in food distribution system poses a major hurdle towards the formation of an equitable and inclusive food system. This sector requires major reform with laws in place to ensure proper distribution.

Agricultural Land Protection Act needs to be implemented to protect our agricultural lands.



**SANJEEB DRONG**  
President, Indigenous Peoples Development Services (IPDS)

FAO has a policy on indigenous and tribal people which recognises the right to food as a part of the collective rights for indigenous people. These collective rights need to be recognised, and FAO's policy should be implemented.

Even in a free country like Bangladesh, speaking up about policies regarding indigenous people is not an easy feat. Bangladesh should develop a policy for indigenous people. Clashes and conflicts



**SWAPAN GUHA**  
Executive Director, Rupantor, Khulna

Land reform is extremely important. Agricultural land rightfully belongs to the farmers. Industrial development should be

encouraged while protecting agricultural land.

One visible development in Bangladesh is the agricultural sector. Even though there has been no increase in agricultural land, we have still managed to become self-sufficient in food. This has been made possible by the contribution of our farmers. The state also has many policies to support this, but the problem lies in implementation yet again.

Women associated with agricultural work are not given any recognition. The aid announced by the government, in light of the pandemic, was only given to those workers who are recognised by the state. If the contribution of women in agricultural work is accounted for in our GDP, their work will gain recognition.

Due to climate change, there were recent warnings of a cyclone in the southern region of Bangladesh. Cyclone Amphan occurred recently as well. Since these natural calamities have become frequent, establishing farmers' insurance is crucial. This insurance will allow farmers whose crops have been destroyed to plant crops again.

More robust monitoring should be put in place when it comes to food processing. If food was stored in silos before being sold, farmers could get a fair price.

The central bank had instructed all the commercial banks to give out certain amounts of loans to farmers affected by the pandemic and a guideline was provided for handing out this loan as well. The administration had also been monitoring this at the district level but the banks have shown reluctance about this loan. These loans were supposed to be handed out by 30th October but district-level monitoring has revealed that the majority of the banks have not complied. This is a clear example of a situation when the government policies are unable to reach and benefit the marginalised people due to the presence of certain unnecessary complications. Our aim should be removing these unnecessary complications.



**KHUSHI KABIR**  
Coordinator, Nijera Kori

We sometimes tend to confuse the two terms, food sovereignty and food safety, with each other. Food safety refers to the ability of the government to provide food for all its citizens. On the other hand, food sovereignty refers to the self-sufficiency of a country. Our aim is to make Bangladesh self-sufficient in food production.

Food inclusivity and food accessibility are also important topics and these issues are interrelated with each other. Alongside food sovereignty, the formation of an inclusive food system is essential and we must also ensure access to land and access to natural resources.

Ratification of ILO C141 will ensure some rights for the rural workers. This convention can help us achieve food sovereignty.

I want to stress upon creating preservation facilities at the rural level which will help the farmers sell their produce at the fair price. Without proper preservation systems, the farmers are forced to sell their produces at lower prices to middlemen and incur substantial losses. The consumers, on the other hand, end up buying these products at a higher price.

We are seeing increasing use of combine harvester machine throughout the country. This machine can carry out reaping, threshing, and winnowing for a variety of crops. Although this machine eases the harvesting process it is also taking over the jobs of the day labourers, most of whom are women, and putting them in a vulnerable position.

While increasing food production we must also focus on producing food which is safe for both the environment and our people. Otherwise, we may end up doing more harm than good. Most importantly, we must ensure that livelihoods of the poor people, particularly women, are not threatened in any food production process.

The policymakers must focus on establishing equal wages for female workers and ensuring their access to khas land. All of these will help us move towards our aim of achieving food sovereignty.