

Unsustainable agriculture: Reason for high-price of food grains

The crux of the current global rice crisis is also unsustainable agriculture. Vietnam, the world's second largest rice exporter, suffered huge production loss for three consecutive seasons due to pest attacks. Rice monoculture in Vietnam has pushed its farming into jeopardy. The insects associated with paddy became virulent. No pesticide could eradicate or contain them. The impact of pest attack was so widespread that Vietnam is now worried about feeding its own people.

NAZRUL ISLAM

A typical skinny, bearded farmer was examining his paddy field, which was attacked by a disease unknown to him and his co-farmers. Anxiety and uncertainty shadowed his face as the leaves of his hybrid paddy plants were withering fast (Prothom Alo, April 4, 2008).

Some 32,000 hectares of paddy land (according to official figures -- actually the figure is much higher), mostly with hybrid rice, had been attacked by the disease just prior to the flowering stage of the plants. The farmers don't know how to solve the problem. Some experts and agriculture officials were prescribing some solutions, but those were somewhat sketchy and unrealistic.

Their reassuring words -- "there is nothing to be worried about" -- could hardly calm the farmers as they knew that if they did not find any immediate remedy of the disease, it was unlikely that the diseased field would produce any

grain.

Crop loss means affected farmers would be brought to their knees. The investment, which was exceptionally high for hybrid crops, and the crop loss would be disastrous as it would be difficult for a farmer to feed his family for the next six months.

In contrast to the above scene, the face of a farmer of Netrokona haor area wore a smile as he was harvesting indigenous boro. He is happy having his crop readied for harvesting without much input (Dainik Jugantor, April 2, 2008). He was also happy with the yield as he was expecting 15-16 maunds of paddy per bigha. Prothom Alo also carried, on April 7, a news item of harvesting of HYV boro in Khulna.

Actually, the inevitable has happened. Imported hybrid technology can't be sustainable in Bangladesh. There are lots of problems associated with hybrid seeds. The profit-mongering private companies, with public sector patronisation, are cleverly conceal-

ing the ultimate disastrous future of Bangladesh's subsistence agriculture.

They want to commercialise agriculture through introducing modernisation or mechanisation; ousting the small farmers from their holdings. The introduction of hybrid seeds and GMOs is the beginning of the process to dispossess the small and marginal farmers of their lands.

We (who advocate eco-agriculture) have long been issuing warnings against mindless spreading of hybrid seeds and GMOs. But, despite the warning, hybrid seeds are fast covering Bangladesh's land. This is going on unabated, as our farmers are not aware of the long-standing adverse effects of the non-renewable seeds. On the other hand, none of the countries in Europe has yet allowed hybrid seeds and GMO food.

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fered huge production loss for three consecutive seasons due to pest attacks. Rice monoculture in Vietnam has pushed its farming into jeopardy. The insects associated with paddy became virulent. No pesticide could eradicate or contain them. The impact of pest attack was so widespread that Vietnam is now worried about feeding its own people.

A similar situation is prevailing in Cambodia, also a major rice exporting country. On the other hand, India's granary, Punjab, nowadays produces less quantity of rice as vast tracts of land went out of rice cultivation due to developing salinity. The Philippines leased out a million hectares of land to a Chinese company to grow hybrid crops.

It is true that global rice production was a bit less last year. But the extent of shortage is not so high that the global population will have to starve for non-availability of food grains.

Previously, rice production was much higher than the demand, and, at times, huge quantities of rice were destroyed. Actually, multinational companies (MNCs) across the globe control production of a sizeable quantity of food grains. They produce agricultural commodities in their own farms and also through contractual farms. These companies are big enough to create an upheaval in world food grains market. And that

has happened in the recent times.

The price of rice has doubled in the last two months in the international market, but there is no dearth of rice anywhere if you want to buy it at higher price. A well-organised syndicate, patronised by big MNCs and publicised by some big media houses, created the panic of shortage in South Asia, where people take rice as a staple.

The rice price has been artificially increased. The ultimate aim of the MNCs is to push forward hybrid seeds and GMOs in South Asia in a big way, citing the exigency of building food security.

But we have already seen that hybrid seeds are unsustainable and unpredictable. They will not guarantee our food security. Rather, they may break the backbone of our farmers and the country's economy, because our small and marginal farmers would not be able to recover from a total crop loss, which is a common phenomenon in the case of hybrid crops. We should not forget that, a few years back, hybrid seeds produced sterile paddy stalks in Bogra and some other districts.

I believe that there is no crisis of rice in the country. During 1974 famine, I still remember that food grains were sometimes not available in our local bazar, at a remote village of Bogra, in exchange for money. I saw that many small rice traders returned empty-handed

from district town or trading centres.

The 1974 famine mainly hit the northern districts, where repeated flooding damaged the aman crops. However, there were other reasons of non-availability of food grains among the poor at that time. No such situation has arisen in the country till now.

The main problem is that the prices of most of the essentials have gone beyond the purchasing capacity of poor and fixed income people. Abundance of items is meaningless to a person if she/he does not have the required money to buy those. And there is little possibility of a decrease in the prices of rice and other essentials to what they were even three months back. So, the only way out of the current situation is to increase the purchasing capacity of the people through creating more jobs and increasing wages in some cases.

Another problem is that the government godowns are empty, as food grains were not procured during the last boro and aman seasons because the government-fixed price was too low.

However, while visiting my village during the last aman harvesting season, I saw that local rice traders were stockpiling paddy for future profit. One of my acquaintances purchased some 2,000 maunds of paddy.



Now, how do we solve the food problem? We don't have any option other than increasing our domestic production. We mustn't go ahead for immediate benefit by destroying sustainability.

Some people are asking the poor to eat potatoes. I don't see anything wrong with the suggestion. But who is the advice for? Poor people eat anything they get when they are hungry. The suggestion should be aimed at those who can afford not only costly rice but also other costly things. It requires 8 kgs of food grains in order to grow a chicken to weigh 1 kg. Now imagine how much food grains a year the

booming poultry industry eats up.

So, policy-makers will have to determine whether they will encourage cultivation of food grains or flowers or strawberries. They will have to determine whether our agriculture policy will patronise the small and marginal farmers or the MNCs.

We have to determine whether we will feed the chickens or the poor with the food grains. We need a comprehensive homegrown, pro-people agricultural policy. When and how we get it is the big question.

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Local government reforms: Demand of the time

But, no step was ever made to train up or develop the public representatives to be efficient. To materialise the dream of building a democratic Bangladesh free from poverty, building a strong local government is a must. As such, bringing about reforms in the local government is now the demand of the time.

REHANA BEGUM RANU

LOCAL government has a long history in the subcontinent. The geographical boundary has changed twice by now, but local government has remained effective through numerous changes.

It got a legal shape at the hands of the British, who introduced the municipal administration system for the first time in 1793. But, prior to that, an identical system of local village society did exist in India, where Gram Panchayat (village arbitration committee) had a significant role.

In the gradual development of the system, the Bengal Act 1842 and Municipal Act 1850 were introduced. The local government system got a stronger foundation when 118 Municipal Boards were formed in Bengal in 1947 after inclusion of provisions relating to a newer system of social arbitrations, conservancy activities and appointment of choudkars (guards) for maintain-

ing security in villages and towns. In 1972, the local government system got a newer magnitude in independent Bangladesh.

Local government has always played a significant role in the social system of Bangladesh. Spreading into the remote rural areas, local governments act as a bridge between the people and the government through implementation of different government development projects and public welfare programmes. So, the need for bringing in reforms in the local government system must be analysed.

Though the government has been talking about reforms in the local government since long, it's not clear how they will be brought about. A commission has been recently formed to propose ways for reforms in local government, but none of those involved in the commission have any experience in local government. There is doubt that a commission comprising members who are neither elected public representatives nor

experienced in working with people will be able to realise the actual problems of the local government, and make reform proposals for establishing a strong democratic local government.

Framing laws can hardly ensure welfare and rights, for which reading the thoughts and feelings of the people is an imperative. Most people consider public representatives as local guardians who work with them, and with whom they can share all sorts of personal, social, religious and political thoughts and beliefs.

With the increase in power and volume of activities of the government, the responsibility and duty of the local government has also been increased by several times. Everybody realises the importance of local government, but corrupt practices, inefficiency, and lack of accountability raise questions about its role.

Structural defects can be attributed for this, and corruption and inefficiency of the bureaucrats could be blamed equally.

Regarding the second reason, it can be said that some public representatives are abettors of the bureaucrats embezzling government funds and earning bad name.

Regarding the structural or constitutional defects in local government, it can be said that the country is being governed through a constitutional, democratic system, while local government is being run through a presidential system. In local government all the powers centre around one person. This unchallenged power of an individual is giving rise to corruption and autocracy in local government bodies, where a chairman of a union parishad (UP) or municipality, or the mayor of a city corporation, enjoys all the power. Members of a UP and the ward commissioners of municipalities or city corporations hardly have any role in the implementation of any development project or programme in the locality.

As a result, a section of dishonest bureaucrats in collaboration with some of the UP chairmen, municipality chairmen and city corporation mayors indulge in corruption and irregularities. Under the circumstances, some recommendations could be made for bringing in reforms for the

sake of public welfare and good governance, transparency, accountability and dynamism in the activities of local government.

The recommendations are as follow:

- The local government has to be made a constitutional system, where a UP chairman, municipality chairman or city corporation mayor would be elected through votes by the concerned UP members or ward commissioners. A UP or municipality chairman or a city mayor would be accountable to the concerned members and ward commissioners who would preserve the right to impeach the chairman or the mayor with two-third votes.
- The local government is elected non-politically. It should be developed through political nomination. Election for the local government with participation of politically nominated candidates would help the local committees of political organisations become stronger and more democratic. The much talked about practice of democracy from the grass-root level could be developed through holding local government election through political nomination.
- Women comprise half of the

country's population. By keeping this huge workforce unused, unskilled and powerless, both socially and politically, neither durable development nor building up of a democratic society is possible. For building up a rights-based society, democracy and development, political empowerment of women has got recognition as a new challenge across the globe. Overall empowerment of women has emerged as indispensable in the greater interest of development. The goal could be achieved through ensuring participation of women in the power structure of local government.

In the existing local government system, a woman is elected directly through votes in reserved seats. A little reform could bring about balance of power and take the country's democracy far ahead. Instead of keeping seats reserved for women, in the reformed system one member and one female member would be elected through direct votes in each ward under a UP. These elected male and female members would have the responsibility of electing the UP chairman in their respective unions. In the same way, the elected male and female commissioners would

be responsible for electing the municipality chairman and city mayor in the municipal areas and city corporations.

In the elections, each political party would nominate one male and one female candidate for each ward or union and, thus, ensure women's participation in both the political and social activities.

● The responsibility and duty of all the elected public representatives should be determined, fixing higher salaries for them. Every individual of any profession in the society would demand wage or salary, but, despite working throughout the day and night, a public representative doesn't have a salary -- this mindset or outlook needs to be shaken off.

We are criticising the public representatives of the local government since long, and talking about their "inefficiency," "inability," and "corruption" when the limitations of these public representatives have always been overlooked.

The public representatives have a lot of social responsibilities, going beyond the area of their duty and responsibility they are assigned for. They conduct social arbitrations, giving solution to various types of family feuds and

disputes over land to save the society from crimes and violence, free of cost. Questions could be raised regarding the necessity of such work, but if they did not do this thousands of files would have been lying stockpiled in the courts.

Alongside the development works there are some programmes, like immunisation and birth registration, which could not be implemented without the help of public representatives.

Being mostly poor and illiterate, the people hardly go to bureaucrats with their problems because they are afraid to approach them. As such, they approach the local public representatives, whom they consider as local guardians well aware of their needs and feelings. But, no step was ever made to train up or develop the public representatives to be efficient.

To materialise the dream of building a democratic Bangladesh free from poverty, building a strong local government is a must. As such, bringing about reforms in the local government is now the demand of the time.

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Minors in jail

As a result, the children who are living in different jails, excepting the Dhaka central jail, are deprived of universal primary education and minimum recreational facilities. They are growing in an environment that is not congenial for normal growth of mental faculty and physical health.

NURUL HUDA

At least 350 minor children who are living in jails with their mothers are denied even the minimum opportunities for primary education and recreation. This is a denial of constitutionally guaranteed fundamental human rights.

It has been clearly stated in the

constitution that "The state shall adopt effective measures for the purpose of (a) establishing a uniform, mass-oriented and universal primary system of education, and extending free and compulsory education to all children to such stage as may be determined by law; (b) relating education to the needs of society and producing properly trained and motivated

citizens to serve those needs; (c) removing illiteracy within such time as may be determined within law."

Of the 407 minor children (as on April 1) in Bangladesh's 66 jails, only 73 staying with their mothers in the central jail of Dhaka are fortunate to have access to day-care centres, while children in the 65 other jails do not have such access to even primary education or recreational facilities. Thus, they are languishing in jails, for no fault of their own, without the basic needs required for healthy growth.

Children up to six years are allowed to live with their mothers as per jail rules if the convicted/under trial mothers so want. The authorities make arrangements for children above six either to live with relatives or in orphanages as per the wish of their under trial/convicted mothers.

In this context, it may be recalled that the day-care centre in Dhaka central jail was set up in April, 2003 to ensure the basic facilities so that the mental faculty of the children of female prisoners could develop properly. Necessary

facilities were also provided for the normal physical growth of the female prisoners' minor children.

Children who have been living in Dhaka Central jail are also provided with facilities for games and sports. As a result, the management of the female prisoners has reportedly become easier for the jail authority, as the authorities are looking after their children.

The proposal to set up similar day-care centres in the central jails in Chittagong, Rajshahi, Sylhet and Barisal remains stalled due to bureaucratic bottlenecks. Though there was movement of files of the proposed project among the relevant ministries, little concrete progress has been made.

As a result, the children who are living in different jails, excepting the Dhaka central jail, are deprived of universal primary education and minimum recreational facilities. They are growing in an environment that is not congenial for normal growth of mental faculty and physical health.

The DIG (Prison) Major Shamsul Haider Siddiqi, however, sounded quite optimistic about getting the nod of the authorities for implementation of the day-care centre project, as the matter deserves urgent consideration.

The question that has been haunting us is: Why have the innocent minor children of the female prisoners been denied the right to

universal primary education and other facilities required for normal growth? It remains unclear to us why the decision makers have taken so much time in giving approval to a project like setting up day-care centres in the jails.

There is no reason to create unnecessary impediments regarding the approval of the project, which, when approved, would help healthy growth of children who live with their mothers in jails.

The money required for the project would be well spent because of the benefit that can be expected out of it -- both short-term and long-term. When their money is spent for such a welfare project, the taxpayers will have reason to feel happy.

The authorities can also give serious thought to devising ways and means of rearing up children of female prisoners in a normal and healthy atmosphere instead of day-care centres in jails. If the children can grow in a better atmosphere, they can be expected to develop as worthy citizens of the country. Why should the innocent children suffer for no fault of their own?

Can we not think of doing something better for the country's future citizens? Let the decision makers seriously ponder over the matter and take steps suiting the situation.

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IN MEMORIAM

My father, Shaheed Lt. Colonel Mohammad Abdul Qadir

RUBINA QADIR

TIME heals all wounds as the saying goes, but, in my experience, time never healed my wound, it only gave a thin covering so that I could carry on with my life.

Not a single day goes by without my thoughts turning to my papa. Thirty seven years have gone by since I lost him, but the pain is so excruciating that talking about it only makes it worse.

My papa Lt. Col. Mohammad Abdul Qadir of the Corp of Engineers hailed from Rangpur, and graduated from Dhaka University in Physics. Subsequently, he joined the Pakistan army and passed in Civil Engineering. He was a brilliant officer, and became the first Bengali Lt. Col. in the Pakistan Army in 1965.

He was a die-hard Bengali, and proud of his heritage. He once struck a Punjabi officer for insulting Bengalis. He was punished for it, but he did not care.

He was a loving husband to my mother and a wonderful father to

us. We were so happy and cherished every moment we spent with him. Whenever he was posted in Pakistan, our house would be a haven for all the Bengali officers as they would come every weekend to enjoy my mother's cooking, and Bengali music.

In 1970, he refused to be posted as Military Attache to Jordan, but opted for Chittagong as Controller of Operation Oil and Gas Development Corporation. While in Chittagong, as early as January 1971, there were many meetings every other day in our house, with Bengali politicians and army officers, including late president Ziaur Rahman and ex-home minister Major Rafiqul Islam, present.

I was too young to understand anything then, but later on we learned that papa had supplied explosives and ammunition from the OGD store to the Mukti Bahini, and had also been planning with army officers to defend Chittagong port. Major Rafique was supposed to inform my papa of any such attack, but no warning was given.

It all started from March 26, when bullets whizzed all around Chittagong and our house and, in the month of April, papa looked very grim and worried but kept his worries secret from my mother and us, never letting us know the great danger his life was in or his plans for Bangladesh.

Then came the dreadful April 17 of 1971, the most horrible day of my life. It was seven in the morning when we heard gunshots near our gate, and then the sound of fierce kicking on the front door till it broke open. Around ten Pakistani soldiers walked in with machine guns yelling "Col. Qadir, gaddar kaha ho (Col. Qadir, traitor where are you)." Papa was calm, he got up from his chair, his unfinished breakfast still on the table, and faced the soldiers. They took him to a waiting jeep, and that was the last I saw of him.

The Bangladesh army honoured my papa by naming the engineering center in Natore as Qadirabad Cantonment, and the Bangladesh Postal Service issued a postal stamp on him in their intellectual martyrs series in 1992.

