



ENSURING LAND AND FOOD RIGHTS AT THE TIME OF COVID-19 AND BEYOND

The Daily Star and Association for Land Reform and Development (ALRD) jointly organised an online discussion titled "Ensuring land and food rights at the time of COVID-19 and beyond" on December 18, 2020. Here we publish a summary of the discussion.



SHAMSUL HUDA,
Executive Director,
ALRD

Two-thirds of the world's population and two-thirds of the poor people live in Asia. The poverty situation and vulnerabilities of the marginal farmers and the various marginal communities are of great concern to us. This COVID-19 situation is very critical for their existence.

Through this discussion, we are hopeful that we can come up with some recommendations in regards to our future actions to ensure the land rights of the people and reduce their vulnerabilities.

We have to work for a safer today and secure tomorrows for the farmers in relation to food, land, environmental and human rights. We need to fight all kinds of systemic discrimination against women, indigenous peoples, farmers, and all other marginalised communities across Asia.

VIDEO PRESENTATION.

Asian NGO Coalition for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ANGOC), Philippines

COVID-19 has evolved into crises of poverty, hunger, and malnutrition which burden family farmers, fisherfolk, agricultural workers, landless people, indigenous peoples, and slum dwellers more. Nationwide lockdowns and restrictions on trade and travel have disrupted food chains. As the government asked people to stay home, the need for secure land and housing tenure has become crucial for everyone.

There are individuals and groups who seek to take advantage of this situation through illegal logging, illegal mining, and land grabbing. This situation confirms that development frameworks must be transformed, recognising the primacy of people and the environment to ensure food for all. Access and control over land and natural resources should be in the hands of the small producers.

A fundamental working principle for building lasting food security is to reduce the distance between where food is produced and where the same food is consumed.



ANTONIO B. QUIZON,
Researcher and
Former Chairperson
and Executive
Director, (ANGOC),
Philippines

COVID-19 has deepened the pre-existing inequalities and poverty. Small farmers remain at the frontlines of this pandemic, as food producers.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused severe disruptions in the food chain supply, undermining the ability of small food producers to access their land and the natural resources. Illegal mining has reportedly increased over this period along with increased militarisation in areas with land disputes, especially in territories of indigenous peoples.

Furthermore, women's land rights are at risk as their titles and certificates are in the hands of their husbands. Some have been forced to concede their land after losing their husbands to COVID-19. Overall, the COVID-19 crisis has created an environment where it has become easier to violate the tenure rights of the vulnerable population. We have also witnessed the curtailment of political rights during this pandemic.

We need to build greater crisis-resilience in our land and food systems. We need to implement agrarian reforms, support smallholder farmers, and promote agro-ecology that reduces dependence on external inputs and emphasizes shorter supply chains and local territorial markets.

We have protected areas for cultural and historical sites. Such Similarly protected areas also need to be created for agriculture. In Bangladesh, research shows that on average, one percent of agricultural land is lost every year.

Lastly, we must address the digital divide for farmers and small producers. Environmental changes, especially improper use of land, have been the primary drivers of past disease emergencies, including the current pandemic. We need to seriously review the ways in which we produce food and utilise our environment. We need to heed the lessons learnt from this pandemic to refocus actions on ending poverty and inequalities.



ROWSHAN JAHAN MONI,
Deputy Executive
Director, ALRD,
Bangladesh

Though Bangladesh is known as the "land of farmers", farmers in this country have no control over their agricultural lands. Although women's contribution to agriculture is 72.6 percent, they are not recognized as farmers.

To achieve middle-income country status, the government of Bangladesh has virtually strategised its land investment for growth, allocating more agricultural Khas land for off farming use like EPZ/SEZs, thermal power plant, etc. Deprived of fair prices, debt-ridden small farming families shifting their occupation from farming to off farming, often migrate to city area. Forest being cleared for commercial interventions have also resulted in the eviction of many indigenous communities from their lands and deprived them of their livelihood.

Despite achieving self-sufficiency in food production, a large portion of the country's poor and marginalised people are deprived of their right to food, specifically nutritious and safe food. This right to food is also not constitutionally guaranteed in Bangladesh.

Despite bumper production of rice this year, harvested crops were not able to reach markets due to the lockdown. According to a 2020 survey report by BRAC, extreme poverty is projected to rise from 24 percent to 84 percent in the immediate term.

COVID-19 has been a wake-up call reconfirming that agriculture is the backbone of this country's economy and a stepping stone for inclusive development. It is high time to go for comprehensive land and agricultural reforms. We also need to extend all possible support to promote the small producers to ensure their food security and enable an environment for inclusive development.



UJJAINI HALIM,
Executive Director,
Institute for
Motivating Self
Employment (IMSE),
India

In India, smallholder farmers are still the pillars of the rural economy. Women play a vital role in this sector but face various kinds of discrimination starting from non-recognition to lack of access to governance.

India ranked 94 among 107 countries in the Global Hunger Index 2020. In the context of COVID-19, a majority of the people belonging to lower castes and religious minorities are predisposed to the vulnerabilities of the pandemic.

Although we have enough food grain reserves, the supply chain is very weak. There are a few things the government can do to make the Public Distribution System (PDS) more effective. Firstly, PDS needs to be made universal. We have a rationing system, but the prices of the essential commodities are on rise. This needs to be checked. The relief packages need to contain foods that can provide the nutritional requirements of the people.

The ongoing farmers' protests in India are huge and are extremely important. Farmers are protesting vehemently against three farm acts which are pushing further corporatisation of agriculture and contract farming.

One of these acts has taken out cereals, pulses, oilseeds, edible oils, onions, and potatoes from the list of essential commodities, thus curbing government role in regulating these essential commodities and allowing private companies to act freely there. This can have adverse effects on not only the farmers but also on middle-income and poor consumers. The COVID-19 restrictions have been used to curb protests against various newly-enacted government acts and policies which are issued often as ordinance, not even through parliament.



DEWI KARTIKA,
General Secretary,
Konsorsium
Pembaruan Agraria
(KPA), Indonesia

Indonesia is afflicted with land-grabbing conflicts, forced land acquisitions, and land conversions. Criminalisation and violence has also become rampant during this pandemic. The military and the police are yet to adopt

an effective approach in handling situations related to land-conflict.

We are facing challenges due to the inconsistent release of information on national food security situations. At the onset of the pandemic, we were told that our food supply is very secure. However, around June, the President announced that there is a food crisis. On the other hand, the small producers could still produce their own food and remain independent. Therefore, the pandemic showed us that most villages with agricultural lands demonstrated resilience.

During the pandemic, there were mass protests due to the speeding up of the legal drafting process of the Job Creation Law, also known as Omnibus Law. But, it did not stop the government from drafting the law. Then there is the anti-agrarian policy in the name of food security which actually strengthens food corporations instead of small producers. The political space is also shrinking.

We need to come up with a new business model for food sovereignty and extend our solidarity beyond COVID-19. A comprehensive reform is relevant and urgent in Indonesia. We are facing issues of food sovereignty and food security, while trying to fulfil the land rights of the people.



JAGAT DEUJA,
Former Executive
Director, Community
Self Reliance Centre
(CSRC) and Expert
Member, Land
Issues Resolving
Commission, Nepal

Nepal's economy still largely depends on agriculture. 27 percent of our Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is agriculture-based. Landlessness is a major problem; about 29 percent of families are landless and living mostly in disaster-prone areas. Another major issue is the insecure tenure. About 25

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Employ community-based agro-ecological farming systems
- Reduce the distance between where food is produced and where the same food is consumed
- Create protected areas for agriculture
- Introduce comprehensive land and agricultural reforms
- Create an enabling environment to help poor rural households make their lands productive
- Adopt policies based on the needs of the majority
- Formulate laws on the right to food, farmers' rights, and protecting agricultural lands
- Ensure that the food production system is green
- Create new investment and employment through fiscal policy rather than monetary policy
- Ensure equitable distribution of land
- Regulate urbanisation and industrialisation

percent of people are living in informal land. These people are denied basic services.

An estimated 1.3 million families are waiting for their land titles. Eviction of poor people from settlements for large-scale development is also an issue. This trend is now increasing. Recently, there has also been an increase in land-grabbing, mainly in the name of tourism promotions.

In the 2019 Global Hunger Index, Nepal ranked 73rd. As per the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), 15 percent of household members are living with less than the daily minimum requirements of calories.

One silver lining is that the pandemic has made the policymakers realise the importance of family farming. There needs to be a sort of joint campaign at a multi-country level in order to highlight resource distributions and address poverty and hunger issues.



VAING SAMRITH,
Program Manager,
Star Kampuchea,
Cambodia

The land rights situation in Cambodia is very concerning for the communities. They have to take out loans from banks. Their daily livelihoods are hugely affected due to job losses and there being no income source. Taking out loans also affects their land security, since they will have to sell their lands to pay back the loans.

The natural resources in the 15 provinces are not sufficient in amount, especially if we look at their availability in the past. The private sector wants to encroach upon the lands that belong to the local communities. The communities are also concerned about their forests and natural resources that are no longer available because of the economic land concessions. In the past, the indigenous people also relied on the natural resources offered by the forests but these forests have already been cleared for farming.



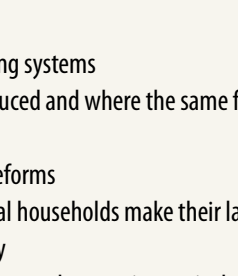
NATHANIEL MARQUEZ DON,
Executive Director,
ANGOC, Philippines

A number of milestone legislations have been passed by the Congress in response to the clamour of farmers, indigenous people, and small fisherfolk, such as the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Law (1988), Indigenous People's Rights Act (1997), and Fishery Code (1998).

About 42 percent of the county's land area has been transferred to the smallholders till now. Despite this, there is a need for the enforcement of land rights, an enabling environment and support services to help poor rural households make their lands productive.

Poverty still remains a major challenge. According to a survey carried out between September 17, 2020 and September 20, 2020 by Social Weather Survey (SWS), around 7.6 million Filipino households experienced hunger due to lack of food. SWS also noted that these numbers have been rising since May of this year, at the height of the strictest lockdown in the region.

As per the 2018 Philippines Land Conflict Monitoring Report prepared by ANGO, 352 cases of land and resource conflicts were documented covering 1,318,501 hectares, which account for four percent of the total territory of the Philippines. 48 percent of the cases documented were related to communities against a business establishment and 16 percent were related to community members and the government. According to the November 24, 2020 report by ANGO, land and resource conflicts have been increasing, with most of these cases happening between March and June 2020.



DR RASHED AL MAHMUD TITUMIR,
Professor, Department
of Development
Studies, Dhaka
University

The availability of agricultural land is on the decline because of rapid urbanisation and land grabbing. Arable land in the country shrank to 7.7 million hectares in 2019, from 9.13 million hectares in 1972. In the last few decades, there has been massive land fragmentation in the country and, in the process, a lot of land is going to waste due to the creation of boundaries. Smaller lands make farm mechanisation difficult and inefficient since tractors and tillers cannot function in lands with smaller dimensions. A comprehensive agrarian reform is needed.

In terms of food security, the supply of food is now well beyond the country's average requirement, according to statistics. But, issues arise when it comes to the affordability of food. The availability of nutritious food is also in a vulnerable state. Bangladesh ranked 88th among 117 countries in the Global Hunger Index of 2019 and thus has serious hunger problems. The impact of COVID-19 has made the situation worse as food inflation continues to rise while real wage is falling.

There is a need for a universal basic income grant for every citizen. Provision of universal public goods should be made adequate. Policies must be taken for the majority, instead of considering only the interests of a few. The production system must be green and clean to ensure sustainable recovery. New investment and new employment must be created through fiscal policy rather than the current reliance solely on monetary policy through the credit-based stimulus package.

There is no doubt that distributing khas land among landless people can significantly help curb poverty and food insecurity. A full-fledged lifecycle-based social security

programme must be designed to ensure support in every life cycle phase of an individual. These schemes may curb poverty and inequalities as well as ensure food security.



SYEDA RIZWANA HASAN,
Chief Executive,
Bangladesh
Environmental
Lawyers Association
(BELA) and Advocate,
Supreme Court of
Bangladesh

Whether it's Indonesia, Nepal, Bangladesh or the Philippines, we are all facing a crisis of the system and the development paradigm. It's not about who has more land and who has less; it's about who has ownership of the land and how it is being used for urbanisation. Is it being used for industry or are we prioritising humankind's very basic need - your right to shelter and food? We have a development model that asks for more and more GDP, but that obsession with GDP destroys our natural resource base.

We need to talk about laws that protect the agricultural land and the right to food that will protect the farmers' rights to hold land and produce food.

Every year, around one million people lose everything due to land erosion in Bangladesh. We need to ensure that our land is equitably distributed. The government has said that no private economic zone will be set up in farmers' land, but extremely fertile lands are being grabbed.

We need a law on the right to food, legal promulgation on farmers' rights, and laws on protecting agricultural land. A draft is pending with the government for many decades now. The government does not want the process of urbanisation or industrialisation to be regulated because the people involved in business and industrialisation are their allies, and they pay for their election campaigns.



DR MOHAMMED HELAL UDDIN,
Director Research,
Centre for Integrated
Rural Development for
Asia and the Pacific
(CIRDAP)

GDP growth cannot be maintained without focusing on the ecological aspects.

In Bangladesh, there has been a move from agriculture to non-agriculture. In 1990, 58 percent of rural households' main occupation was agriculture. Only 23 percent were in non-agriculture. In 2010, households engaged in agriculture went down to 38 percent and households that shifted to non-agriculture increased to 41 percent. Those who have access to land are not cultivating it because farming is no longer profitable. If farmers forsake their operations, the government is forced to ask for commercialisation and seek commercial firms' recourse.

There hasn't been a substantial increase in encroachment during the COVID-19 crisis. Small food producers are facing mobility restrictions in terms of access to water, seeds, labour, forest resources, and the land upon which they rely for their livelihoods. If there is lesser access to markets, there will be high prices for production inputs and lower prices for the producers. This means they will have lower income and have a reduced ability to pay for land rentals. As a farmer, if you face lower income and higher price of foods, you will consume less.

The pandemic has also increased rural indebtedness, forcing small farmers to pawn or sell off their lands. In poor countries, where there is little regulatory oversight, money lenders have targeted rural villages where residents have limited financial assets. All the recovery packages are tailored to serve formal medium and large enterprises. There is almost nothing for small-scale producers.

SHAMSUDDOZA SAJAN,
Commercial Supplements Editor, The Daily Star & Moderator of the session

We know that 80 percent of the global farmland is occupied by the farmers and they produce 80 percent of the world's food. Asia supplies the highest percentage of agricultural produce in the world. But, unfortunately, it is observed that in many Asian countries, the food insecure family farmers, the fisherfolk, and the forest dwellers do not have sufficient access to and control over land and other natural resources. The main reason behind this is the growth-oriented development infrastructure which only focuses on the growth of food production while ignoring the rights of the farmers or producers.