

Food Sovereignty in the Asia Pacific: National Stories, Regional Aspirations

Friends of the Earth
Asia Pacific

Food Sovereignty in the Asia Pacific: National Stories, Regional Aspirations

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Friends of the Earth Asia Pacific

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Friends of the Earth Asia Pacific (FoE APac) is a regional body of Friends of the Earth International (FoEI), a federation of environmental justice organisations present in 75 countries with over 1.5 million members. FoE APac is a collective of sovereign organisations working with grassroots communities on environmental and rights-based concerns in the Asia Pacific region. FoE APac is composed of diverse organisations, which range from a very small volunteer-based group (of 4 – 5 people) to big membership groups (of 250 staff to 90,000 members). At present, FoE APac is composed of 13 member organisations based in: Australia, Bangladesh, Japan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Nepal, Palestine, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Russia, South Korea, Sri Lanka and Timor Leste.

Our vision is of a peaceful and sustainable world based on societies living in harmony with nature. We envision a society of interdependent people living in dignity, wholeness and fulfilment in which equity and human and peoples' rights are realised. This will be a society built upon peoples' sovereignty and participation. It will be founded on social, economic, gender and environmental justice and be free from all forms of domination and exploitation, such as neoliberalism, corporate globalisation, neocolonialism and militarism. We believe that our children's future will be better because of what we do.

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Cover image: *A woman farmer harvests carrots from her farm in Gaza. Credit: A'aed Baker.*



A Teduray farmer in Maguindanao, Philippines. Credit: LRC.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	4
OUR COMMON PROBLEMS	6
NEOLIBERAL ONSLAUGHT	16
IS FOOD SOVEREIGNTY NATIONALLY RECOGNIZED?	23
INTERNATIONAL PLATFORMS	28
VIABLE ARENAS	39
RECOMMENDATIONS	44



1 INTRODUCTION

In discussing the current state of food and agriculture in Asia-Pacific, multilateral institutions led by the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) are putting a great deal of focus on the impact of COVID-19 and prioritizing the need for 'resilient food systems' and 'innovations' to cope with the pandemic. But this approach tends to obscure the real and deep-seated problems of food and agriculture in the region.

COVID-19 has only highlighted the basic and pre-existing problems of Asia-Pacific countries. Long before the pandemic, the region has been reeling from worsening hunger and malnutrition, loss of agricultural jobs and livelihoods, and declining agricultural outputs. Despite the rapid economic growth in Asia-Pacific, rural poverty has only become acute in the last four decades. Today, several countries in the region are also most vulnerable to negative climate and ecological changes, rather disproportionately to the huge carbon emissions and environmental footprints that were not their own making. COVID-19 has only added to the multiple crises of economy, climate and environment, and, now, health, to highlight the need for systemic transformation.

Most of the problems may be resolved in the realm of policymaking. This is so, if only policies were reformed to favor the protection of domestic food and agriculture production and the promotion of people's right to choose their own production systems. But multilateral institutions and governments have peddled the idea that it is enough to rely on market logic to take care of these problems.

Policymaking for the past 40 years has been guided by neoliberalism, which is a "form of free market fundamentalism that has been the dominant global economic ideology for the last 30 years in which profit and 'efficiency' are the central goals of society.

A training on environmental farming in Palestine. Credit: Sa'ad Dagher.

It is a framework focused on reducing the role of the state and taxation while promoting privatization, deregulation, and corporate trade deals. This has led to soaring inequality, whereby just eight people have the same wealth as half the world's population and an environmental crisis in the form of unprecedented species loss and dangerous climate change."[1]

In the process, policymaking has favored the marketization, corporatization and globalization of food and agriculture, including the corporate capture of multilateral institutions that are supposedly mandated to uphold people's rights. Policymaking has only entrenched monopolies in food and agriculture.

The problems call for political struggles. The assertion of food sovereignty (FS) by people's movements, non-government organizations (NGOs), and civil society organizations (CSOs) has become one of the most effective platforms both nationally and internationally in directly confronting monopolization, profiteering and unsustainable production patterns in food and agriculture. Fundamental to the assertion of FS is the peasants' assertion as well of agroecology (AE). In the words of Friends of the Earth in Asia-Pacific (FoE-APac), "Food sovereignty is the right to enough, nutritious, ecologically produced, and culturally appropriate food. It is the right of peoples to determine and control their own food production systems. Food sovereignty is about feeding people rather than corporate profit and it defends the interests of future generations."[2]

Both FS and AE are increasingly being recognized constitutionally and in principle by some governments and the United Nations, respectively, under the pressure of social movements. Not all states would give in to such pressure, however, and would react differently, if not adversely, if only to preserve the neoliberal status quo. There is a need therefore to amplify, explore, and exhaust all pressure points in order to realize the correct way of dealing with the multiple crises and eventually changing the system.

This scoping paper will identify viable areas and mechanisms of national advocacy and regional policy engagement in promoting FS and AE among FoE-APac. It focuses the question on the experiences of Indonesia, Nepal, Palestine, Philippines, and Sri Lanka. In order to achieve this general objective, the paper will specifically provide the agrarian contexts of the focus countries, the global and regional discourses, and the level of advocacy on FS and AE in the focus countries. This way, both strengths and weak points or gaps in advocacy and engagement may be identified.

[1] https://www.foei.org/what-we-do/economic-justice-resisting-neoliberalism

[2] https://foeasiapacific.org/program/food-sovereignty/

2 OUR COMMON PROBLEMS

The world continues to wrestle with the irony of growing hunger and poverty in the midst of plenty. Globally, the number of people experiencing severe food insecurity increased further by 148 million in 2020, to reach 928 million or a staggering 12% of the global population. FAO observes that this increase equals that of the previous five years combined. Another 291 million people will go hungry in 2021, FAO projects, of which 72% will be in developing Asia, particularly Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, and Pakistan.[3]

Asia-Pacific is statistically producing enough food for its growing population, but malnutrition persists. This is due to the population's worsening lack of economic access to nutritious food, especially by the direct producers themselves, due to declining rural incomes. While food production is theoretically sufficient and sustained (which was evident even during the pandemic when other economic sectors plunged while agriculture gained, albeit a little), agriculture in the region faces crisis trends.

[3] ADB, 2021. Asian Development Outlook 2021 Update. Transforming Agriculture in Asia, September 2021

Promoting organic farming in Sri Lanka. Credit: CEJ.



AGRI'S DIMINISHING VALUE

Agricultural growth has been notably slowing down in the past decades. In most of the focus countries – Indonesia, Nepal, Palestine, Philippines, and Sri Lanka – the annual average growth rate has been 2-3%, remarkably slower than population growth. In Sri Lanka and Philippines, for instance, this figure even dipped to less than 2% beginning in 2017. Only Indonesia has shown a higher average of 3.71% per year in 2014-2021.

All reporting focus countries reiterate the primary importance of agriculture in their respective economies. Yet, the other bothersome trend is how the share of agriculture to the gross domestic product (GDP) has also shrunk over time. Again, this indicates not so much diminishing productivity but the undervaluation of agricultural production. Even Nepal which reports the highest employment share is showing a decline from 42% of GDP in the 1990s and 32.7% 10 years ago to 25.8% in 2021. The others have only about single-digit shares now, following a four-decade declining trend.

Agriculture employment is shrinking in relation to the total labor force. Rural population is decreasing as well in relation to the total population. Although farmers remain a primary force in the region and continue to provide food increasingly for a growing urban and non-agricultural populace, their number is decreasing. This trend is contrary to the agrarian character of Asia-Pacific, which only indicates the decreasing economic benefits from farming.

Except for Nepal that has 64% of its population still identified to be engaging in agriculture, the rest of the focus countries – Indonesia, Palestine, Philippines, and Sri Lanka – are reporting declining agricultural labor force. Indonesia notes an increasing number of agricultural corporations vis-à-vis a decreasing number of farming families, while the Philippines has witnessed a steady decline in agricultural employment in the past decades to reach only 23% today. Likewise, Sri Lanka reports only 27.1%, while Palestine notes 16.6% of the labor force in agriculture in 2006, falling to 10.4% in 2014 then 8.7% in 2015.

An identified neoliberal trend that has adverse impact on local production is the increase in food and agricultural imports. Except for Nepal, all other focus countries have increasingly become net importers of staple food as a result of liberalization policies.

The Philippines is the world's biggest rice importer at the moment, dislodging China from the top spot. Nepal, on the other hand, notes a staggering 60% increase in paddy importation, as the country shifts from being erstwhile rice exporter to a major importer. It also notes that Basmati is imported in huge amounts even when the domestic production of other paddy varieties meets the food need.

Dwindling government spending on agriculture is another observable neoliberal trend among Asia-Pacific countries. For decades now, Indonesia, Nepal, and Philippines have had an annual average of only about 3% of the national budget allocated for agriculture. Palestine allots less than one percent.[4] Although Sri Lanka reportedly allocates 14% of the national budget for agriculture, the deviation between promised and actual spending ranges from 10 to 40 %.[5]

LAND MONOPOLIZATION



Protesting against land monopolization in Rideemaliyadda, Sri Lanka. Credit: CEJ.

Globally, and even more ironically so in agricultural regions, there is not much net expansion in arable land. Since 1995, the total area of arable and permanent cropland has tended to remain the same or even shrink. Aggravating this lack of resource is the host of environmental problems such as land degradation, changes in weather patterns, and the decreasing availability of blue water resources.[6]

The situation of the productive forces – the farmers, agricultural workers, peasants, fisherfolk, indigenous people, foresters, and women – is the most glaring irony in production sufficiency, as they face various challenges in their subsistence and survival. The most common is their landlessness and the lack of access to resources. Except for Palestine where 88% of agricultural lands are fully owned by households, the rest of the focus countries are unfortunately victims of spurious land reform programs that only ended up reconcentrating the lands to the big landowners.

4 UNCTAD, 2015. The Besieged Palestinian Agricultural Sector. United Nations, 2015

5 https://www.internationalbudget.org/wp-content/uploads/sri-lanka-budget-credibility-snapshot-ibp-2019.pdf

6 IBON Primer on Food Sovereignty and the Food Crisis, IBON International, 2012

Nepal implemented the Land Reform Act, which placed a limit on land holdings and provided tenants the right to possess the land. But only around 47% of the farming population holds 0.5 hectare or less of land, while there is only 3% holding more than 3 hectares of land. Compiling data from various sources, an Amnesty International report found that "overall, 26.1% of agricultural households in Nepal do not have land to farm on. Only 19.71% of women have ownership of land.[22] Landlessness among Dalits is very high. It is at 36.7% among the hill population, 41.4% among Madhesi Dalit and those that do hold land have very small landholdings.[23] As 5% of the population controls 37% of arable land, the concentration of land in the hands of a few is also high." [7]

The country abolished some of the bonded labor system. But instead of providing access to land, the abolition produced 1 million more landless farm laborers. Yet, some of the bonded labor system, such as adhiyaa and bataiyaa, still exist. Meanwhile, the so-called former landlord group, owning a huge portion of the land, has retained 20% of agricultural land uncultivated. This leaves the direct producers with less or no land at all.

The Philippines has gone through more than a century of ineffectual land reform programs. The last of which, the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP) saw agrarian reform beneficiaries (ARBs) having to pay amortization to fully acquire the land. CARP also exempted from distribution the large areas to be dedicated to commercial purposes.

The latest statistics show that only more than half of the ARBs are distributed the lands that they have to pay for, yet around 76% of them can no longer afford to pay. This leaves 9 out of 10 peasants in the Philippines landless, while the vast landholdings and estates or haciendas of the big landlords remain intact.

In Indonesia, the decree to implement agrarian reform came about during the reform era in 2001, but it was never fulfilled due to the introduction of neoliberal policies.[8] Today, one of the main components of Indonesia's Just Economy policy is a rapid land reform program that targets about 12% of the country's land area for redistribution to farmers and communities by 2019. But much of the reform is occurring on forest land, while the cultivable and alienable and disposable lands remain in the hands of land developers and corporations. [9]

In 2015, the Jokowi government targeted to acquire and redistribute 9 million hectares, including previously granted land but not used for cultivation. The government reports 5 million land certificates distributed to smallholder farmers in 2017, although unclear as to the coverage in terms of hectarage. Among several pledges, the government further announced a target guaranteeing smallholder farmers the right to use 12.7 million hectares of state forests, but the government has been criticized for being too slow in reality. As late as the last quarter of 2018, the Indonesian president was still making promises to accelerate land registration with the aim of redistributing large landholdings by 2025.[10]

[7] https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/ASA3112212019ENGLISH.pdf

[8] B.F. Sihombing, Agrarian Reform in Indonesia, A Juridical Review, International Journal of Civil Engineering and Technology, November 2017

[9] https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1389934118303939

[10] https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/09/27/indonesia-pledges-accelerated-agrarian-reform

Like the Philippines, Sri Lanka had to go through various land laws before and after independence. The most important piece of legislation is the Land Reform Law of 1972, which fixed a ceiling on private ownership of agricultural land – 25 acres (10.12 hectares) for paddy land and 50 acres (20.23 hectares) for other land. The law established the Land Reform Commission, which expropriated the excess lands and vested these in the hands of state-run organizations, landless individuals or those who owned less than the ceiling, cooperative, or collective farms, or to people as individual allotments for any other intended use. An amendment in 1975 included the ceiling on land ownership to publicly owned estates. Based on the most recent available statistics, it appears that the government has redistributed only less than 90,000 acres (36,422 hectares) and, through the law. has only shifted the control and management of lands to itself.[11]

LAND GRABS AND CONFLICTS



Timuay Alim Bandara in the ancestral domain of the Teduray and Lambangian in Magunidanao, Philippines. Credit: LRC.

Land monopoly gives rise to a host of exploitative relations that remain ingrained in agriculture. These include overpricing of inputs and underpricing of farmers' produce by traders, their monopolization of trade, and how they also take advantage of the direct producers in terms of expensive lending and capitalization. All these lead to abject poverty among the direct producers who are often the poorest sectors in their respective societies.

On the other hand, land monopoly is a favorable condition for neoliberalism to thrive in agriculture, and vice versa. The liberalization and privatization of the commons and public domain is the norm, and the states have practically lost control over land resources. Or, in cases where they are seemingly in full control, such as in Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Indonesia, they nonetheless alienate the lands to private developers and big landowners. Land use is being converted from agricultural to non-agricultural, or crops are being changed from food to commercial, and sometimes non-food, crops. One adverse result of these shifts is land speculation, where the land is treated as a financial rather than a production asset to make it command a commercial price. Many of the Asia-Pacific countries have embarked on real estate development rather than agricultural development that has run against any plan to redistribute lands to the tillers.

[11] Janaranjana Harath, Distributional Impact of Land Policies in Sri Lanka, University of Mount Olive, August 2006

Governments, also upon the influence of the World Bank, have set up land banks of 'idle properties' and made these up for grabs for prospective financial investors. This has resulted in massive land grabbing, whether made legal through certain laws or by outright dispossession of peasants and communities. Oftentimes, land grabbers employ the services of military and paramilitary forces in the guise of development. Land grabbing is carried out by real estate developers, infrastructure corporations, mining corporations, corporate plantations, tourism companies, and even governments for their gentrification projects in order to attract foreign investments. Thus, instead of serving social justice to long-deprived direct producers, neoliberal policies and in such cases, greed, have only fed land conflicts and social unrest.

In Sri Lanka, when the president asked the officers to release the lands to the farmers, which had been cultivated for generations, some villagers and outsiders took this as cue to clear the forests. Unfortunately, this included even the elephant corridors and important, as well as rare plants and animals. Furthermore, according to the circular 02/2021 the Secretary to the Ministry of Land vests authority on the Divisional Secretariat to take in to its custody state lands that the Conservator General of Forests has not gazetted as forest lands and those that the Conservator General of Wildlife has not gazetted as wildlife areas. Hence, this has exacerbated deforestation of other state forests, loss of biodiversity, loss of important animal and plant species, and wildlife damage. This has also caused conflicts between humans and wildlife and deaths of both elephants and humans. It may appear bizarre, but this is what happens when land distribution is made only voluntary and not an official policy.

Land conflicts have ultimately led to killings of land and environment activists, which have escalated especially after the 2008 global crisis. In the Philippines, nine peasant massacres and more than 500 individual farmers' killings occurred in the last five years under the Duterte administration. In 2021, for the eighth straight year, the international watchdog Global Witness named the Philippines the deadliest country for land and environment defenders in the Asian continent.[12]

[12] https://www.rappler.com/nation/philippines-asia-deadliest-country-land-defenders-2021/

ENVIRONMENTAL AND HEALTH PROBLEMS



Field farming activities of the Dayak Seberuang Indigenous People in West Kalimantan, Indonesia using a rotational planting pattern that observes mutual cooperation, or beduru. Credit: WALHI.

Environmental problems such as land degradation and loss of ecological integrity compound the lack of resources, or more precisely, the lack of people's access to resources. In agriculture, these problems are mainly brought about by the loss of traditional farming systems, specifically because of the intensive and extensive use of hybrid seeds and agrochemicals.

Governments have apparently made it a policy to prioritize hybrid seeds that are heavily dependent on the use of agrochemicals, whether to increase food production or to make farmers cope with the demands for export crops production. Packaged as solutions to farmers' poverty, this policy has led to land degradation and a host of environmental and health problems not only for the farmers but also for the entire communities. On the contrary, as Nepal notes, this has only led to harvest failures and deeper poverty.

Sri Lanka, for instance, relates the rise of the chronic kidney disease of unknown etiology (CKDue) among farmers to the use of pesticides and other environmental contaminants. The disease is prominently seen in farmers engaged in paddy and sugarcane cultivation, leaving several families in financial crisis either by death of family member or for medical treatments such as dialysis. The focus country cites a recent study that reveals that as of today more than 150,000 people are affected and 3% of them lose their lives each year. At worst, apart from CKDue, chemical fertilizers also increase the risk of cancer in adults and children. Chemically fertilized food consumed adversely affects fetal brain development.

The Sri Lankan government canceled the importation of agrochemicals in May 2021 under the Imports and Exports Control Regulations. But the ban was lifted on 24 November 2021 due to the pressure made by the private traders themselves who exploited the farmers' demand for production support. The fiasco has only shown how chemical farming has been so much ingrained in the region's agriculture that a drastic shift without political readiness may only prove futile. It has also only proven that the government's failure to curb the use of chemical fertilizers is due to its own failure to follow proper procedures.

Climate change is an overarching as well as cross-cutting issue in the region and among the focus countries. Corporate agriculture is pointed out as one of the major contributors of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, but it is the production of smallholder farmers that suffers and is the most vulnerable to climate-related disasters. Droughts, heavy rains, and floods have brought about untold losses for farmers and communities. The continued government policy of peddling agrochemicals to the farmers as well as non-support for their traditional and organic systems add to the climate crisis and lack of social justice.

The climate crisis extends to fishery, which all the focus countries have mentioned as quite important for food security. The fishery sector, however, has its basic crisis long before the planetary emergency brought about by climate change has come into full play. Degradation of water resources and depletion of fish stocks have occurred long before, and these are also due to unsustainable production patterns.

The Philippines identifies the loss of marine biodiversity and declining fish stocks as trends, which are rather irreversible or take time to be remedied. These have resulted in loss of fisherfolk's revenues and benefits from fisheries and coastal resources. Displacement from land resources and farming has also pushed the peasant communities to the coastal areas, thereby compounding the twin problems of population growth and resource depletion.

As in the case of Indonesia, the Philippines has also liberalized fishery rules to allow the encroachment of big as well as foreign fishing corporations in the waters of small fisherfolk. Institutional and stakeholder capacity to plan and implement coastal resources management is being weakened, while the government is practically defaulting on supporting sustainable fisheries.

Inland and freshwater fishery, on the other hand, as in the case of landlocked Nepal and the rest of the focus countries, suffers from lack of government production, technology, capital and price support for the fishers. These push fishers to utilize destructive fishing methods just to survive. Many of the practicing fishers in Nepal are indigenous people who are marginalized from the general population thus lack economic support from the government. Meanwhile, in the Philippines, the government has promoted commercial aquaculture especially for export and exempted large aquafarms from agrarian reform. This adds to the problem of land degradation and unsustainable production system, as commercial aquaculture heavily uses inorganic feeds. All these threaten biodiversity.

GENDER INJUSTICE



Women farmers practice sulagad in Maguindanao, Philippines. Credit: LRC.

These problems tend to highlight as well as heighten the structural gender inequality that persists in various contexts in the region. To say that women bear the brunt doubly hard is an understated irony in food and agriculture production. Worldwide, almost one-third of employed women work in agriculture, according to UN Women. But the figure even excludes self-employed and unpaid family workers, which actually make up the majority of employment in developing regions such as Asia-Pacific. In some parts of the world, such as South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, more than 60% of working women are in agriculture, in informal and poorly paid jobs with little or no social protection. They do not have access to land, credit or capital, technology and markets, and engage in marginal and subsistence agriculture.[13]

Nepal reports around a huge 70% to 80% of the women population employed in agriculture. They are in perilous conditions and working mainly as subsistence producers. Many women are taking up additional activities such as ploughing and marketing due to job-related out-migration of rural men. The shortage of agricultural labor has also caused the abandonment of rural agricultural land and decline of agricultural production. And the women are picking up the farm work while tending to house work in order for their families to survive.

The Asian Rural Women's Coalition (ARWC) notes that women make up about 43% of the agricultural labor force in developing countries. Yet, they are more likely than men to end up in seasonal, informal, part-time, and low-wage jobs. They receive lower wages for the same work, and work longer hours, on top of their domestic and nurturing responsibilities. [14] They also have lesser access to social services, ironically even to reproductive health services. They are victims of different forms of patriarchal violence.

[13] https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/women-and-the-sdgs/sdg-2-zero-hunger

[14] https://asianruralwomen.net/iwd-2020-asian-rural-women-call-for-food-sovereignty-and-gender-justice/

Landlessness is a structural double burden for women. Globally, less than 20% of the landholders are women; of the women formally employed in agriculture, only 13% are landholders.[15] Women are seed keepers and bearers of traditional knowledge, but they are utterly marginalized from land ownership and access to resources.

Exceptionally, Nepal notes women's ownership of agricultural land increasing, with female-headed households accounting for 20% of total number of agricultural landholders in 2011, whereas the figure was only 10% in 2001. However, this happened only due to the introduction of several proactive measures to promote women's access, ownership, and control over land and property. These measures, depending on the geographical location, include a 25 per cent to 50 per cent tax exemption on registration when land is owned by a woman; a 35 per cent tax exemption for single women (Financial Bill 2016, Ministry of Finance); and joint registration of land in the names of husbands and wives with a fee of Rs. 100 (or less than $1).[16] It may still be considered marginal, taking into account that women work the lands 18 hours a day. Meanwhile, the Dalits, mostly women, comprise 20% of the population and are mostly farmers, but their agricultural landholdings are only 1% of total area.

These gender inequalities have been all the more highlighted during the pandemic, when more women than men lost their jobs in agriculture and women lost a more significant portion of their pre-pandemic earnings than men. The pre-existing gender pay gap worsened, as it was already widening pre-pandemic. For instance, in Indonesia, the average gender pay gap among casual agricultural workers stood at 23.6% in favor of men from 2011 to 2019, which widened from only 18.9% in 2011.[17]

Irony of ironies, these gender inequalities become the stepping stones for more unjust and neoliberal policies to thrive in agriculture. Corporate agribusiness, big landowners, and so-called state development projects in food and agriculture take advantage of the available surplus of women informal labor, and in the tradition of unpaid family work in agriculture, including even their children. This is in order to relegate women to the menial tasks for global value chains, to command cheap wages, and to skirt labor and environmental standards. Agrochemical, as well as seed corporations, appropriate women's traditional and agroecological knowledge for their own profiteering. Banks can also come up with credit policies that take advantage of women's vulnerabilities, such as so-called microcredit that further mires women peasants and their families to deeper debt. The list is endless , but it is clear that neoliberalism has been founded and built on the exploitation of women peasant labor.



Pro Public researchers interview communities on food sovereignty in Nepal. Credit: Pro Public.

[15] Ibid.

[16] https://www.iom.int/news/securing-womens-land-and-property-rights-nepal

[17] https://panap.net/2021/10/upholding-women-agri-workers-rights-and-welfare-builds-foundation-for-food-systems-change/

3 NEOLIBERAL ONSLAUGHT



The Meratus Dayak Indigenous Peoples of South Kalimantan, in Indonesia, plant banih, or rice, using a rotational planting pattern of every 5 years. Credit: WALHI.

Most of the region's problems are due to the institutionalization and implementation of neoliberalism, even in traditional sectors such as food and agriculture. Laws and policies give utmost importance to the market, in the mantra for instance of *"let market forces decide,"* and make governments deregulate and step aside in favor of the private sector. In the name of modernization, these laws and policies emphasize openness to private and foreign investment in food and agriculture, openness to foreign food and agricultural products and machinery, and privatization of land and natural resources.

Neoliberal policies have also introduced the intellectual property rights (IPR) regime that has further intensified corporate monopoly over agricultural technology, inputs, innovations, and even genetic resources including seeds. They have also captured life sciences and the inventions of genetically modified organisms (GMO) as new arenas for profit-making. International financial institutions (IFIs) such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) have been quite instrumental in facilitating these neoliberal policies through their lending programs. But the most comprehensive in blasting open food and agriculture is the open, multilateral trading system entrenched by the World Trade Organization (WTO).

INDEPENDENCE?

All focus countries have national plans for agriculture and food security. But Nepal and Palestine are worth mentioning with regard to how both are somewhat assertive of self-reliance and independence from foreign dictates or intrusions. Also, both have nationally recognized food sovereignty as principle and main goal. Yet, just like the other focus countries, there may be the tendency to fall into the rhetoric of development and fail in implementation, which should be one of the criteria for monitoring.

The Constitution of Nepal recognizes the rights to food, food security and food sovereignty. It also recognizes the rights of farmers to access land and to select and protect local seeds and agro-species for traditional use, among others. It guarantees land reform; land management; commercialization, industrialization and modernization of agriculture; and providing farmers access to agriculture inputs and products at fair price and market.

Nepal has policies on biodiversity, forestry, and seeds, among others. Its Agriculture Development Strategy (ADS) is the guiding framework for the entire sector. The ADS envisions a self-reliant, sustainable, competitive and inclusive agricultural sector for economic growth, improved livelihoods, and food and nutrition security – all leading to food sovereignty.

However, it does not sit well that the strategic framework of the ADS is agricultural transformation, "for agribusiness to grow faster than agriculture."

This is interspersed with goals of "profitable commercialization" and "competitiveness," which tend to contradict the very vision of the framework, if not placed in the proper perspective. At times, the strategy is vague enough to cast doubts on its realization, as worded in ADS: "Critical land issues such as tenancy, fragmentation, degradation, and land use planning need to be resolved over the course of the ADS and their resolution will require the participation of the farmers' organizations, cooperatives, and private sector in order to find equitable and efficient mechanisms for enhancing land productivity."[18]

Palestine, on the other hand, articulates its vision for the sector in its National Agricultural Sector Strategy 2017-2022. It also recognizes the importance of national and global competitiveness thus the need for investment to fulfill market requirements. This may be done through development partners, which include farmers' cooperatives, the private sector and other non-government actors. Such vision, the strategy articulates, should not be at the expense of sustainability in any way, which however remains an unproven premise by any experience.[19]

Palestine's market orientation for agriculture is already unsettling under normal circumstances, as it may run counter to the strategy of ensuring national food security. This is even more unsettling under the conditions of Israeli occupation. But what choice does one country have when violations against its sovereignty, land and environment are being committed, than to rely on international partners, including the United Nations? This is where the reiteration of food sovereignty at the international level and freedom from market dictates should be a priority.

[18] Agricultural Development Strategy 2015-2035, Government of Nepal, Ministry of Agricultural Development

[20] National Agricultural Sector Strategy 2017-2022, "Resilience and Sustainable Development", The State of Palestine, Ministry of Agriculture

SUBVERSION OF LAND REFORM

Other than the peculiarities of Nepal and Palestine, however, the rest of the focus countries exhibit neoliberal policies that have devastated their chances of pursuing food sovereignty. Foremost of these policies is the neoliberal subversion of land reform. This has been done primarily by reorienting the principle of free land distribution for social justice towards what neoliberalists call a "market-oriented land reform". This converts agricultural land from being a production resource for domestic food into a production resource for exports, or worse, non-food products to earn a commercial profit. But worse, "market-oriented land reform" basically turns agricultural land from a production asset into a financial asset, thereby turning land use into a non-agricultural one.

Market-orientation has been carried out through "lawfare" (like warfare), or the use of land laws that are token recognition but in reality violations of various land rights. The laws liberalize private and corporate encroachment into agricultural land and other natural resources and allow the privatization of these for commercialization and profit. Market-oriented land reform is the key framework for the liberalization of foreign capital in agriculture and the privatization of the commons in the name of more profitable ventures. Privatization has come in many forms, including so-called public-private partnerships (PPP), i.e. with the fund or policy support from governments for the private sector to make money out of the partnerships. PPP is basically the transfer of public funds to private hands.



A small farm in South Cotabato, Mindanao, Philippines. Credit: LRC.

More than smallholder farming, corporate agriculture and plantations as well as large agribusinesses thus tend to dominate PPP projects, along with natural resources extraction such as commercial forestry, commercial fishery, and large-scale mining. Otherwise, there is the bigger tendency now for big landowners and developers to turn to real estate development which is more profitable with less investment and inputs needed. These trends have caused not only high risks to food security but also escalated conflicts between corporates and the communities where the deployment of more troops in the project areas is a common sight. As push comes to shove, market-orientation has also been carried out through outright land grabbing.

In Indonesia, the Sustainable Food Agricultural Land Protection presumably protects the land from land conversion but has no record of implementation. On the contrary, several laws are put in place to ensure market-orientation of food and agriculture. The Job Creation Bill 2020, for instance, abolishes the minimum forest area limit, the criminal and civil sanctions for corporations operating in forest areas, the definition of small fishermen to allow foreign vessels to compete with small fishermen, public litigation rights against environmental concession permits, and the strict liability concept on environmental law. The law spells the loss of land rights in the name of "national strategic projects" and of people's participation in environmental impact analysis (EIA), while it changes the EIA mechanism so that corporations can operate ahead and EIA can just follow afterwards.

The National Vital Object Policy allows the expropriation of land rights in the name of "public-private- interest development". It also allows military involvement in so-called security, which oftentimes only escalates risks and conflict with the communities. The Food Estate Policy, on the other hand, promotes large-scale food production or monoculture. It exempts a food estate from paying the reforestation fund, allows it under certain conditions to ignore the disaster hazard map, allows it to ignore a forest area, and shortens the process for a "strategic-environment study."

In the Philippines, the contentious CARP and its iteration, CARP with extension and reforms (CARPER), set the stage for legalizing land grabbing and land reconcentration. CARP had many loopholes, including exempting from distribution commercial farms producing for export, making application for coverage voluntary, and most of all, imposing land amortization on distributed lands. Thus, it has become easy for landlords to retain their large landholdings and for the government to revert distributed lands due to farmers' default on land payments.

The Philippine government was able to introduce several schemes to retain large landholdings while making it appear that the tillers had been compensated. One vicious example is the "stock distribution option" wherein the landlords distribute stock shares to the farmers of large plantations instead of land. The farmers are treated as "stockholders" with low wages, while the land is not distributed in reality.

The other scheme is to group together the ARBs of awarded contiguous lands and partner them with private investors in an agribusiness venture agreement (AVA) to plant high value crops for export. AVA is couched by the Philippine government as land consolidation intended to improve farm productivity and income, that is to effect economies of scale through the consolidation of ARBs in the adoption of modern technologies.

In the absence of government support upon land distribution, which should be the main characteristic of a genuine agrarian reform, the private investors capitalize making use of the awarded lands to ensure the productivity and profitability of the awarded lands. AVA is made to appear as a business partnership between the ARBs and the private investors and presumably enhances the transformation of the ARBs into small-medium farmer-entrepreneurs. But in reality production decisions and full operation have been taken over by the private investors, while the farmers are divested of their control over the agricultural products. In many ways, the farmers revert to being tenants of their own land. Ultimately, AVA leads to displacement of communities, dedication of vast tracts of land to monocrop production, and degradation of otherwise productive agricultural lands.

The Duterte administration has embarked on an ambitious infrastructure program called *Build, Build, Build* that gives priority to transport and mobility development and gentrification projects to please real estate developers, foreign investors as well as transport corporations. The major conflict between the program and agriculture is that agricultural lands when covered by the infrastructure projects are grabbed from the tillers and converted to non-agricultural uses. The other visible problem is that the program, despite its huge indicative amount, barely has projects for agricultural infrastructure and extension services.[21]

On the drawing board is a National Land Use Act (NLUA) that aims to resolve what is already an anarchic trend of land grabbing and reconcentration by landowners. NLUA aims to protect agricultural lands from commercial uses, a major sticking point that has resulted in the difficulty of the bill getting passed in Congress.

TRADE LIBERALIZATION



People were given baskets to produce organic fertilizer as a measure to promote organic farming. Credit: CEJ.

One set of neoliberal policies refers to trade. Next to foreign investment, liberalization is how the trade of food and agricultural products, machinery and inputs is positioned to benefit the big producers and traders. In the process, trade liberalization has killed traditional knowledge and production systems and whatever chances for self-sufficiency and rural industrialization.

The Green Revolution program of the World Bank in the early-1970s first peddled so-called high-yield varieties presumably for higher productivity and income for the farmers, which are actually high-input varieties as they are heavily reliant on chemical fertilizers and pesticides. This made Asia-Pacific agriculture dominantly inorganic and enriched only the agrochemical and seed corporations. The Green Revolution also demolished many of the traditional varieties of the local farmers and their practice of seed keeping.

[21] https://www.ibon.org/oda-for-sdgs-partnerships-for-whom/

The focus countries have also lost in the process the ability to make their own inputs, whether organic or inorganic, as they had been made dependent on imported ones. The Philippines was one of the first countries to implement the Green Revolution under the martial rule of the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos. Since then, the emphasis has been primarily on the quantity rather than the whole process of production, as the Philippines narrates, which would have covered specifically the general welfare of the producers and the environment.

In Sri Lanka, the massive use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides prompted the government to cancel their importation under the Imports and Exports (Control) Regulations No. 07 of 2021. But, as already mentioned, the ban was lifted recently because of the pressure coming from the private traders who exploited the demands of some farmers who were made to appear unprepared for such abrupt transformation. The government has partially allowed the private sector to enable the farmers to buy from the open market.

Bans on certain pesticides are imposed in Sri Lanka from time to time. Although implementation is, at times, questionable, the government does take measures to control hazardous pesticides. Also, even if there are strict laws and fines on the use and sale of banned pesticides, farmers can still get these from vendors under different labels or without labels. Farmers also consult with the vendors on pest control instead of the agriculture officers and oftentimes end up mixing two to three chemicals to get intense results or applying chemicals in ineffective ways.

There are token bans as well as token recognition of organic farming. In the Philippines, for instance, the Organic Agriculture Act of 2010 aims to promote organic farming and establish a comprehensive organic agricultural program. For more than a decade, the main problem with the law was that only products certified under third-party certification could be labelled organic. This restricted small organic farmers who could not afford third-party certification. It also deprived them the right to label and market their own organic produce. After a decade of CSO lobbying, the law was finally amended to recognize the Participatory Guarantee System (PGS) as a credible and affordable way to certify organic products. Philippine agriculture remains 99% chemical farming to this day.

The importation of machinery is also a legacy of dependence on foreign inputs and technology, which is perpetuated by neoliberalism. In all focus countries, this is justified by the general aim of modernization of agriculture that is premised on mechanization and modern farming systems. These are explicit in the plans of Nepal, Palestine, and Philippines. In the Philippines, for instance, the Agricultural and Fisheries Modernization Act (AFMA) stipulates that the government aims to increase the production of high-value crops for export, minimize the role of government, and increase farm mechanization.

The final blow would come from the neoliberal policy of importation of food and agricultural products that has been institutionalized by the WTO. Necessary or not, the WTO has imposed trade liberalization on the traditional sector of agriculture and blasted open countries, especially the agricultural Asia-Pacific, to foreign food and agricultural products. The thing is, most of the food produced in the world is consumed where it is produced, making importation and the competition it introduces to local production really unwarranted.

In Indonesia, despite having a food estate program for export that presumably can also cover for local consumption (for why export when local consumption is scarce?), food imports continue, even during harvest season. Nepal notes, as already mentioned, the 60% rise in importation of paddy products despite an increase in crop production. The market also chooses to import other varieties of the same crop. In the case of paddy for instance, Basmati is imported in huge amounts even if domestic production of other paddy varieties already meets the domestic need. In Palestine, even if there is no explicit rule to import for the sake of trade liberalization, the country notes a perennial agricultural trade deficit.

The same is observed with the Philippines. The country has increasingly become a food import-dependent country, resulting in the worst agricultural trade deficit in decades. The final blow is when the government has finally succumbed to the long-time pressure of the WTO to tariffy the country's staple, rice, and subject it to full imports liberalization.

The government passed the Rice Tariffication Law in 2019, which eliminated the quantitative restrictions on rice imports and replaced these with low tariffs. As part of the neoliberal policy, the government also gave up its regulatory functions such as stocking and procurement and just let the traders take over. Immediately, the impact was felt on the all-time low buying price of farmers' paddy, which practically killed the production of millions of rice farmers.[22]

Launched in 2012, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement was signed in November 2020 between Asia Pacific member nations (except Timor Leste) and the region's trading partners, China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand. It is touted to be the largest global trading bloc that will cover a market of 2.2 billion people and US $26.2 trillion of global output.[23] The agreement was conceived to decrease, if not remove, a greater percentage of tariffs on imports among the signatory countries. In the Philippines, farmer groups are opposing its ratification.[24] The lack of consultation among affected sectors and stakeholders is a critical gap in the process of moving RCEP forward. The farmers group projects 75% of the country's 1,718 agricultural tariffs will be erased. The agreement also discourages quantitative restrictions on imports. They project conditions in the agriculture sector will become worse rather than improve with RCEP. With minimal increase in exports, greater dependence on traditional commodities and swelling imports, the country is already at a trade deficit. Trade analysts project that the RCEP will work against small-scale and peasant farming in the region by favoring industrial agriculture. [25] The RCEP took effect on January 1, 2022.

22 https://www.ibon.org/the-ill-logic-of-rice-liberalization/

23 https://www.cnbc.com/2020/11/16/rcep-15-asia-pacific-countries-including-china-sign-worlds-largest-trade-deal.html

24 https://www.philstar.com/business/2021/12/06/2146090/48-agri-groups-oppose-ratification-rcep-free-trade-deal

25 https://thediplomat.com/2017/10/5-hidden-costs-of-the-rcep-to-people-and-planet/

4 IS FOOD SOVEREIGNTY NATIONALLY RECOGNIZED?

As early as the 1990s, social movements have already defined the principles of food sovereignty as their direct response to the onslaught of neoliberalism. FS is rooted in the grassroots movements, precisely as it is an action-oriented realization of the gamut of people's rights. Common among the different articulations are the right to food (emphasizing on healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods) and the people's right to determine and control their food production systems.

La Via Campesina (LVC) adds that FS "puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations." [26] FS thus emphasizes the need for a democratic food system.

The People's Coalition on Food Sovereignty (PCFS) further articulates that FS is the power of the people and communities to assert and realize the rights to food and to produce food and to fight the power of the corporations and other forces that destroy the people's food production systems and deny them food and life. The culmination of the struggle is the full realization of people's democracy in all aspects including production and social relations and national policies and programs.[27]



A farmer, who is one of the leaders pushing for organic farming in Palestine, harvests crops from his farm. Credit: Sa'ad Dagher.

[26] https://viacampesina.org/en/food-sovereignty-a-manifesto-for-the-future-of-our-planet-la-via-campesina/

[27] https://foodsov.org/peoples-food-sovereignty/

FS is premised on major pillars, such as: the communities and people taking hold of decision-making on food production, distribution and consumption; people's access to land and other natural resources and credit, asserting the right to use and manage these; and the prioritization of local and national economies that is centered on the empowerment of the small producers. It establishes new social relations and formation that are free from oppression and inequality. The PCFS even aims to promote a globally binding convention both at the national and international levels.[28]

The correctness of FS is undeniable. In 2018, upon pressure from social movements, the United Nations adopted the Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other Working People in Rural Areas (UNDROP), which reiterates in Article 15.4:, "Peasants and other people working in rural areas have the right to determine their own food and agriculture systems, recognized by many States and regions as the right to food sovereignty. This includes the right to participate in decision-making processes on food and agriculture policy and the right to healthy and adequate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods that respect their cultures."[29]

On the other hand, LVC notes in its celebration of 25 years of FS collective construction, peasant agroecology (AE), which is fundamental in ensuring FS, is now recognized by FAO as central in the fight against global warming. "Current and previous Special Rapporteurs of the United Nations have endorsed FS as a simple but powerful idea that can transform the global food system favoring small-scale food producers.

Sustained campaigns by social movements have also resulted in several legal victories against corporations producing agro-toxins, chemical inputs and transgenic seeds," LVC statement notes.[30]

All these provide the basis and possibility for nations to give constitutional recognition to FS. However, the focus countries are not consistent in doing so, and at times just couch the language and implement the opposite. The states of the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Palestine do not have recognition or articulation of FS at this point. This is understandable for Palestine as it struggles under a colonial context, yet the possibility under such circumstances has been articulated by community-based organizations, such as Dalia.[28] But for the Philippines and Sri Lanka, both with vibrant people's movements, the lack of national or state recognition of FS poses a challenge.

On the other hand, pursuant to the Constitution, Nepal has passed the Right to Food and Food Sovereignty Act 2018. It is focused on arresting famine, state investment in technology, promotion of livelihood, promotion of local products, sustainable management of agricultural lands, and mitigation against impact of climate change. It recognizes the rights of farmers to participate in the process of policy formulation relating to food and to make choices of any occupation relating to food production and distribution, agricultural land, labor, seeds, technology, and tools; and to remain free from adverse impact of globalization or commercialization. What is crucial is implementation and the complementation of other existing laws, which to this day CSOs are still campaigning on.

28 https://viacampesina.org/en/food-sovereignty-a-manifesto-for-the-future-of-our-planet-la-via-campesina/

29 Ibid.

30 Abdalaziz Al-Salehi, Palestinian National Food Sovereignty in Light of the Colonial Context, Dalia, 2021

In Indonesia, the government reduces the idea of a food program into a market-oriented food estate and ignores policies that are closer to the concept of FS. The food estate has been started since the period of President Soeharto, when at least 1 million hectares of peat ecosystem in Kalimantan were damaged and cannot be fully restored to date. Under the term of president Susilo, the food estate project in Papua resulted in environmental damage and tenure conflicts with the indigenous peoples of Papua. Under president Jokowi, military cooperation with the agriculture ministry has intensified the conflict and has resulted in state losses. President Jokowi, during his second term, revived the food estate project at the same location used by the Soeharto administration.

What the focus countries have are food security programs in relation to the global goal of reducing hunger and as funded programs from international organizations. Nepal, for instance, monitors closely its achievement of sustainable development goal (SDG) No. 2 on hunger and has developed a multi-sector nutrition plan to speed up improvements in the nutrition profile of the Nepalese people. The plan focuses mainly on improving child and maternal nutrition. Other programs include Feed for Future Nepal, the Nepal Agriculture and Food Security Project, the Food and Nutrition Security Plan, and the Prime Minister Agriculture Modernization Project.

In the Philippines, the government crafts a National Food Policy (NFP) to achieve SDG2. Couching the UN language on food security, the NFP aims to

1) review and rationalize existing policies, rules, and regulations related to zero hunger;

2) ensure available and affordable food;

3) secure nutrition adequacy;

4) secure food accessibility and safety;

5) ensure sustainable food systems, food resiliency, and stability; and

6) ensure information, education, awareness, and people participation.

When read with the government's policies supporting high value crops, industrial scale plantations and importation, it becomes apparent that it is haphazard in supporting the agriculture sector and farmers, and in ultimately achieving "zero hunger."

In Sri Lanka, the food programs are almost like feeding programs, such as: two million households below poverty line are provided with 2,030-calorie requirement (Samurdhi); supplementary food provision for low-income mothers with children less than one year old (Thriposha); and 500,000 children in 6,440 schools with 600 to 800-calorie mean (school mid-day meal program). Also, in order to maintain food production and to prevent the use of agricultural lands for other uses, the government once issued a circular to use the abandoned paddy lands for other cultivations or other agriculture-related uses.

The government remains in the concept of food security in its recommendations. The Ministry of Agriculture still focuses on the combination of food production and trade, concerned with transparent trade policies and acquisition of new technology for food production and utilization. It does aim to encourage in-situ production of diverse traditional food crops, but its intervention remains vague.

The Sri Lankan Ministry of Agriculture implements a climate-smart nutritional sensitive home garden program to support farmers who are vulnerable to climate change, especially extreme climate events such as droughts and floods in identified hot spot areas in 11 districts, covering 18 sub-watersheds of 10 river basins. There is, however, no assessment yet of its impact on food security.

Overall, the focus countries continue to look at the food issue in the myopic sense of ensuring food security in whatever ways they can in the context of a liberalized and market environment instead of taking control of the food and production systems in the condition of sovereignty.

The food programs, much like the poverty programs in the neoliberal era, are impact projects that lack long-term and people empowering solutions. The next question therefore is whether the respective governments are even open to dialogues with the people's organizations and mass movements. This could be the seed for democracy and more space for more relevant assertion and realization of rights.

In Nepal, the government has dialogues and platforms for CSOs, NGOs, farmers' organizations, and other basic sectors. For instance, a seed summit was held to discuss community seed banks and their importance in Nepal. There is also a National Farmers Commission which coordinates policy implementation relating to the rights of farmers in Nepal. Various farmers associations work with the National Farmers Commission. The Ministry of Environment has formed a Climate Change Committee, to which the federation of NGOs are invited as permanent member. It has also formulated an operation committee for promoting community-based adaptation through integrated management of the agriculture, water, forest and biodiversity sector. CSOs are also invited as members.

Sri Lanka has a system that links farmers to the Department of Agriculture through village officials. The farmers get together in the 'farmers society' along with the village head *(Gramasewaka)*, Welfare Officer, Agriculture Research and Production Assistant, and Assistant Commissioner of Agrarian Development. The decisions taken in this society are then communicated at the Regional Agrarian Services Officer, then to the Divisional Agricultural Committee, which is composed of 5-6 Regional Agrarian Services Officers. The District Agricultural Committee is composed of the Divisional Secretariat, the Minister of Agriculture, the Regional Agrarian Services Officers, and the representative from the Department of Agriculture.

In preparing the Nationally Determined Contributions or the Climate Action Plans that include the agriculture sector, the Sri Lankan government gets inputs from CSOs, national level NGO representatives, private entities, developers, academics, and all other relevant stakeholders.

In the other focus countries, however, dialogues have been at best tokenistic if not for show, while governments continue to implement neoliberal globalization and anti-FS policies. In Indonesia, for instance, in the first term of President Jokowi (2015-2019), communication with CSOs and NGOs was relatively open. But in the second term (2019-present), communication is closed, and there is almost no dialogue, especially when the government has begun to propose the Job Creation Bill.

In the Philippines, the Duterte administration held the National Food Security Summit on 18-19 May 2021, which was supposed to be a multi-stakeholder dialogue to discuss the challenges and opportunities in the agriculture and fisheries sectors, but only big agribusiness corporations were there. The farmers and other direct producers were left out. The so-called dialogue aimed to gather ideas to craft a food security plan, but the Duterte administration has practically left out the direct producers. This is not to mention that the Duterte government has escalated red-tagging and killing of farmers and environment defenders.

5 INTERNATIONAL PLATFORMS

Many activists observe that FS and AE campaigns are better amplified in the international arena than in their respective countries. This is because, as illustrated above, individual states remain dominated by the neoliberal economic order and implement policies that run against FS and AE principles. They are also resistant or deaf to the demands of their own productive forces. In the last 20 years of FS struggles (and the most recent AE articulation), the pressure point has been more effective if local food and agricultural issues are brought to global and multilateral attention. Admittedly, these successes have also been precipitated by the explosion of the 2008 global financial crisis and the food crisis that followed – both only demonstrated the harsh impact of neoliberalism on the world's producers and consumers. An assessment of the international platforms as well as campaigns launched is thus helpful in moving FS and AE forward.

CSO RELATIONS WITH FAO

FAO is the main official body that may be engaged by CSOs on FS and AE issues, although food security remains its mandate. In fact, FAO continues to grapple with the integration of the concepts of FS and AE in food security.

The Committee on World Food Security (CFS) is the decision-making body for global governance of food security. It was founded in 1974, but went through a reform and increased its legitimacy in 2009 at the peak of the global food price crisis. The Secretariat of the CFS is composed of FAO, International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), and World Food Programme (WFP).[29]

[29] https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/15195Session%2012_Committee%20on%20World%20Food%20Security%20(CFS%20Brief)_May_2015.pdf



A home garden in Sri Lanka. Credit: CEJ.

The Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples' Mechanism (CSM) for relations with the CFS is the largest international space of CSOs working to eradicate food insecurity and malnutrition. It was founded in 2010 as an essential and autonomous part of the reformed CFS. The purpose of the CSM is to facilitate civil society participation and articulation into the policy processes of the CFS. It does not have formal members but only participating organizations, which belong to one of the following 11 constituencies: smallholder farmers, pastoralists, fisherfolk, indigenous peoples, agricultural and food workers, landless, women, youth, consumers, urban food insecure, and NGOs. It has 11 global and continental units, 17 subregional units, policy working groups, an advisory group, and a coordinating committee as its governing body.[31]

FAO also partners with the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty (IPC), a global network of CSOs and NGOs working on FS issues and programs. The IPC includes organizations representing small farmers, fishers, indigenous peoples, urban poor, and agricultural workers' trade unions. The focal contact in Asia-Pacific is LVC through the LVC South Asia Secretariat.[32]

In addition, for Asia-Pacific, in early 2010, an Ad Hoc Committee of Civil Society was also created during a CSO consultation in Manila that was supported by FAO. Its role would be to convene a Civil Society Consultation meeting every time prior to the Asia-Pacific Regional Conference (APRC). The focal contact for this is the Asian Partnership for the Development of Human Resources in Rural Areas (AsiaDHRRA).

The APRC of government ministers and delegates from more than 40 member countries in the region convenes every two years to provide guidance to FAO's global conference in Rome in June the following year.[33] The last one (35th APRC) was held in September 2020. Before each APRC, a self-organized Civil Society Consultation meeting is being held to gather key actors from different constituencies and countries to discuss issues pertinent to the region and specific agenda items from the CSO point of view. The CSOs also draw lessons from what has been done collectively in the region and subregions or thematically in view of the call of actions they have made in the previous biennial meeting.[34] The last one prior to the 35th APRC was held in January 2020. FAO's focal point for liaison with civil society in Asia and the Pacific is Caroline von Gayl, Partnership Officer, who is based in Bangkok.

AN ATTRITION OF CSO ENGAGEMENT?

Before the CSM in CFS, FAO's interaction with NGOs and CSOs was first energized in the World Food Summit in 1996 where some 500 NGOs/CSOs attended, while a parallel NGO/CSO Forum gathered 1,300 representatives from 80 countries. These consultations stimulated networking on FS, which continued to be active in the WFS follow-ups. This started the vibrant civil society participation in the World Food Summit: Five Years Later (WFS:fyl) in 2002.[35]

31 https://www.csm4cfs.org/what-is-the-csm/

32 https://www.fao.org/asiapacific/partners/civil-society/en/

33 https://www.fao.org/asiapacific/conference/en/

34 https://www.fao.org/asiapacific/partners/civil-society/ar/

35 https://www.fao.org/asiapacific/partners/civil-society/ar/

NGOs and CSOs began to include national and regional civil society networks and organizations representing farmers, indigenous peoples, fisherfolk, and agricultural workers, as well as global NGO networks interacting with FAO on themes like plant genetic resources, pesticide use, and sustainable agriculture. At a meeting held in conjunction with the March 2001 Session of the Committee on Agriculture, the organizations present decided to constitute an autonomous civil society mechanism that came to be known as the IPC, initially for the WFS:fyl but later retained for FS.[36]

The NGO/CSO Forum for Food Sovereignty took place in Rome on 8-13 June 2002, which was opened with a 20,000-strong people's march in the streets of Rome on the theme Land and Dignity. The forum adopted the final statement on Food Sovereignty: A Right for All and also formulated a detailed Action Agenda which was presented to FAO. The Action Agenda encouraged the FAO to study the proposals and jointly identify ways in which FAO and civil society could work together effectively beyond the WFS:fyl. The Action Agenda's overarching theme of food sovereignty was understood as "the right of peoples, communities and countries to define their own agricultural, labor, fishing, food and land policies which are ecologically, socially, economically and culturally appropriate to their unique circumstances."[37]

Two years later, in 2004, the regional consultation of Asia-Pacific countries in the run-up to FAO's APRC raised in its Beijing Declaration the urgent concern that the Action Agenda was not moving anywhere.[38]

The NGO/CSO representatives called for a Convention on Food Sovereignty in order to enshrine the principles of food sovereignty in international law and institute food sovereignty as the principal policy framework for addressing food and agriculture. It also urged FAO to establish mechanisms to provide leadership in moving towards more people-centered international conventions and trade agreements on food and agriculture.

In particular, the Beijing Declaration demanded that these leadership mechanisms should guarantee North-South respect and cooperation, ensure equality in dealing with natural resources, and reject all forms of privatization of life and the development of GMOs. It also called for the IPC process to be done and reflected through continuous consultative processes with NGO/CSO's meaningful participation at the central, regional and national levels.[39] All these substantive calls apparently proved to be too radical for the UN system, however, despite its claim of having an increasingly inclusive global governance. Here and this early, the contentious issues have already come to fore.

Fast forward to present, the Civil Society Consultation prior to the 35th APRC was attended by a dwindling number of 36 participants from 26 organizations. While the consultation was going on, a parallel consultation with private sector entities was also going on, which for the first time would have seats at the APRC session. Both CSOs and the private sector then would be invited as observers to make interventions during the conference. The private sector consultation and participation at the 35th APRC was encouraged by FAO Director-General Qu Dongyu who was elected in August 2019.[40]

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

38 https://www.fao.org/3/j2409e/j2409e06.htm#P2001_109275

39 Ibid.

40 https://www.fao.org/asiapacific/news/detail-events/en/c/1259071/

In the 35th APRC, the CSO representative summarized the views of CSOs, noting that COVID-19 highlighted the increased importance of local small-scale production and healthy and environmentally sound food systems. The CSO representative recommended the inclusion of small holders, family farmers, indigenous and vulnerable people, women and youth in all aspects of agricultural development. [41]

Twenty years later, CSO issues especially with regard to FS and AE, seem to have been thrown back to square one, or even farther than that, as the corporates have been made to sit beside the CSOs. There is also the urgent question to be summed up with regard to the strength and direction of CSO engagements in the FAO platforms.

UNFSS AS TIPPING POINT

The tipping point in civil society participation and the inclusiveness of official processes is the latest grand initiative of the UN, the Food Systems Summit (FSS). The FSS seeks to launch "bold new actions, solutions, and strategies to deliver progress on all 17 SDGs," each to rely on "healthier, more sustainable, and equitable food systems."[42]

The FSS promotes the following so-called action tracks: 1) Ensure access to safe and nutritious food for all;, 2) Shift to sustainable consumption patterns; 3) Boost nature-positive production; 4) Advance equitable livelihoods; and 5) Build resilience to vulnerabilities, shocks and stress.[43] Each serves as "spaces" for various stakeholders to exchange ideas, towards achieving the summit's corresponding five goals. The UN prepared the "discussion starters."

The FSS has been the tipping point for CSO engagement in food and agriculture issues, not so much because of the tiring rhetoric of the UN but because of how flagrant corporate capture of the entire process has been. The CSM has noted the lack of transparency, the undue corporate influence, the failure to have a rights-based, legitimate and inclusive multilateral policy process, even during preparations. The CSM wrote a protest letter to the UN Secretary General, signed by over 400 organizations, and another one addressed to the CFS chair on FSS in February 2021. Both are unanswered.[44]

The FSS is the project of the UN and the World Economic Forum (WEF) that was called for in 2019. The CSM observed that the FSS was not building on the legacy of inclusiveness of past World Food Summits, but instead was convened by a unilateral decision by the UN Secretary General shortly after he signed a partnership agreement with the WEF. The current president of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), Agnes Kalibata, was even appointed as Special Envoy thus confirming the undue influence of the corporate sector on the FSS. The CSM also noted that instead of recognizing governments as duty bearers and people as rights holders, the FSS promotes a new governance with a prominent role for the corporate sector, without taking into account the power imbalance, conflicts of interest, and the lack of accountability of these sectors. [45]

The UN called for a pre-summit in July 2021 to fine-tune its positions. CSM boycotted both the pre-summit and the summit proper and called for parallel events outside the official FSS. FS and AE struggles are further thrown backwards or worse, aside. At this point, too, the need to sum up CSO engagement over the last 20 years becomes ever more urgent.

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41 FAO, 2020. Thirty-fifth Session of the FAO Regional Conference for Asia and the Pacific, License: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0IGO

42 https://www.un.org/en/food-systems-summit

43 Ibid.

44 https://phmovement.org/phm-calls-for-member-countries-to-join-mobilisation-against-corporate-capture-of-un-food-systems-summit-21/

45 https://phmovement.org/phm-calls-for-member-countries-to-join-mobilisation-against-corporate-capture-of-un-food-systems-summit-21/

STILL REFINING THE DISCOURSE?



Pro Public researchers interview communities on food sovereignty in Nepal. Credit: Pro Public.

Often, any seeming political defeat on the part of international social activists calls for a step back to conceptualization or efforts to understand concepts to be able to articulate these to officials and policymakers and the broader masses. This line of work to this day remains a viable area for CSO engagement.

There has been slow progress in the FAO's recognition of FS and AE, as the organization still continues to internalize the concepts and articulate these within its current mandate. The pressure coming from proponents of neoliberalism seems to be overpowering the correctness of the social activists. This challenge calls for continued education and awareness-raising efforts from NGOs and CSOs.

To illustrate, a decade after WFS:fyl, in March 2012 in the XXXII Regional FAO Conference for Latin America and the Caribbean, one of the issues proposed for the agenda and agreed upon by the participants was that "FAO will organize a broad and dynamic debate with the participation of the civil society and academia to discuss the concept of food sovereignty, the meaning of which has been not been agreed upon by FAO Member States and the United Nations System." (FAO, 2012, paragraph 25)[46]

To this end, the FAO produced an ad hoc base document for discussion, differentiating food sovereignty from food security. Interestingly, the base document immediately recognizes the two main differences between the two concepts. To quote, "First, the concept of food security — adopted by FAO member states — is neutral in terms of the power relationships involved. It does not prejudge the concentration of economic power in the various links of the food chain and in international food trade, or the ownership of key means of production such as land or access to information. On the other hand, the concept of food sovereignty starts precisely by noting the asymmetry of power in the various markets involved and the various areas of power, such as in multilateral trade negotiations. It thus appeals to the stabilizing role that a democratic state can play if it considers food to be more than a mere commodity."[47]

[46] Gordillo, Gustavo and Obed Mendez Jeronimo. Food Security and Sovereignty (Base Document for Discussion), FAO, 2013

[47] Ibid.

Second is how food is produced. FAO cannot adopt a single or emphatic position regarding the different modes of food production because of its nature as an intergovernmental and multilateral organization. It does recognize three major technological standards in food production — namely industrial agriculture, based on the intensive use of fossil fuels; biological agriculture, which uses biomass and biotechnologies, of which GMOs are a part; and organic agriculture, which involves processes that require various forms of certification. In contrast, the concept of food sovereignty is clearly and primarily focused on non-industrial, small-scale agriculture and family farming, including animal husbandry, forestry, and fishing, preferably of an organic nature and mainly relating to AE.[48]

The only main concern of the base document is whether FS and AE concepts support shared regional positions to reduce malnutrition. It also echoes the concern that behind the concept of FS could be policies that restrict international trade, investment flows and patent recognition. As one Latin American official put it, "We should consider that these questions must have clear answers before any debate or adoption of the concept." Clearly, the official reaction is to prevent any reversal from the open trading and investment systems in the global economy.

The base document makes three major observations for consideration: 1) A set of social actors, due to their role in the food chain, have emerged in the setting of public agenda and policy design; they dispute the agricultural ministries as well as the FAO; 2) The convergence of volatile prices, climate change, energy crisis, and stresses on natural resources call for "flexible and resilient production models;" and 3) "New Agriculture" involves new institutions founded on the knowledge economy, decentralization of decisions, and emphasis on "designing comprehensive territory-based policies with broad social consensus."[49]

Undeniably, the three observations point to the reality that global economic planners are stuck with the fact that market players and large private capitalists in agri-food systems and value chains dictate the direction of food and agriculture.

These observations continue to open the options for states – whether to integrate FS to define the states' autonomous capacity or simply to have a policy choice to show bias for small-scale agriculture. In any case, FAO's food security mandate has remained the discursive anchor or holdfast. At best, the base document has only maintained a dual approach to adapting FS but based on the rich semantic of "broader freedom." And that is to include the "freedom" of the corporations and the private sector.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.

AE SHOULD NOT BE DETACHED FROM FS

On the other hand, the process of FAO's adoption of AE has been unusually fast. This is because of the glaring contradictions of large-scale intensive kinds of agriculture and the stark realities of climate change, biodiversity loss and global inequity.

The 1st International Symposium on Agroecology at FAO in Rome was held in 2014, with some experts discussing the benefits of AE across all regions. The efforts culminated in the 2nd Symposium on Agroecology in 2018, which strengthened FAO's commitment to agroecology, as civil society had a much stronger presence during the 2nd symposium. The discourse and language also shifted away from the focus on technologies during the 1st symposium towards a greater recognition of the agency of food producers, such as family farmers, small-scale producers, women and youth. The call for a legal and regulatory framework that respects, protects and fulfills farmers' rights and promotes access to productive resources also became prominent.[50]

The 2018 symposium also produced a Scaling up Agroecology Initiative that emphasizes the holistic nature of AE, expressed in FAO's 10 elements, namely diversity, co-creation and sharing of knowledge, synergies, efficiency, recycling, resilience, human and social values, culture and food traditions, responsible governance, and circular and solidarity economy.[51]

In 2019, the CFS launched the report of its High Level Panel of Experts (HLPE), *Agroecological and other innovative approaches for sustainable agriculture and food systems that enhance food security and nutrition.*

In the face of multiple ecological crises, the AE discourse started accommodating the connection of AE with FS, and there has been a "slightly increased openness in global policy spaces to considering the potential of agroecological approaches in addressing these challenges." the report notes.[52]

Further, the report requests the CFS to "consider the emerging importance of the concept of 'agency' and to add it as a fifth pillar of food security and nutrition to other pillars of 'availability,', 'access.' 'utilization.' and 'stability.' The fifth pillar ensures that the ordinary people would have the power to define and secure their own food security in their everyday lives.[53]

The 2016 HLPE report identified three operational principles in shaping transition to sustainable food systems, namely improving resource efficiency, strengthening resilience, and securing social equity/responsibility. The 2019 HLPE identified the potential of adding 'ecological footprints' as fourth principle. This is to show how consumption patterns affect what is being produced, and how "ecologically degradative and regenerative practices have impacts beyond those that occur through resource efficiency, since resource-efficient practices can still be degradative." [54]

Compared to the FS discourse, the AE discourse seems to have more chances of forward movement. Two major warnings, however, have to be heeded by CSOs – that it will not be dominated by technologists and experts and that it will not be dissociated from FS. A third warning is the possibility that AE is reduced to being simply a means to achieve the SDGs or to address the challenges of a changing climate, rather than being an end itself for improved lives in all aspects.

[50] Bruil, Janneke, et al. Strengthening FAO's commitment to agroecology, Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience, Coventry University, February 2019

[51] FAO, 2019. The 10 Elements of Agroecology, Guiding the Transition to Sustainable Food and Agricultural Systems, FAO

[52] https://www.iatp.org/blog/201906/new-un-report-agroecology-climate-food-security-and-human-rights

[53] Ibid.

[54] Ibid.

SDG SHOULD NOT BE END-ALL AND BE-ALL OF SOVEREIGNTY GOALS

The SDG thus is an inevitable platform of engagement for food and agriculture. FAO has a Strategic Framework that seeks to support the 2030 Agenda through the "transformation to more efficient, inclusive, resilient and sustainable agri-food systems." It focuses on SDG1 (No poverty), SDG2 (No hunger), and SDG10 (Reduced inequalities), as well as supporting the achievement of the broader SDG agenda.[55]

There are "four betters" that are the organizing principles of the strategic framework and which reflect the interconnected economic, social and environmental dimensions of agri-food systems. They also encourage systemic approach within all FAO interventions. There are four cross-cutting "accelerators", namely technology, innovation, data, and complements such as governance, human capital and institutions in all FAO's interventions. These are to accelerate impact while minimizing trade-offs. Finally, there are 20 program priority areas for each of the four betters.

"Better production" is meant to ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns through efficient and inclusive food and agriculture supply chains at all levels. Resilient and sustainable agri-food systems in light of climate change and environmental factors are key to this. The program's priority areas are: innovation for sustainable agriculture production, blue transformation, one health, small-scale producers' equitable access to resources, and digital agriculture.

"Better nutrition" is meant to end hunger, achieve food security, and attain improved nutrition in all its forms including promoting nutritious food and increasing access to healthy diets. The program's priority areas are healthy diets for all, nutrition for the most vulnerable, safe food for everyone, reducing food loss and waste, and transparent markets and trade.

"Better environment" is geared to protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial and marine ecosystems and combat climate change through more efficient, inclusive, resilient and sustainable agri-food systems. The program's priority areas are climate change mitigating and adapted agri-food systems, bioeconomy for sustainable food and agriculture, and biodiversity and ecosystem services for food and agriculture.

"Better life" is about promoting inclusive economic growth by reducing inequalities, such as urban-rural areas, rich-poor countries, and men-women. The program's priority areas are gender equality and rural women's empowerment, inclusive rural transformation, achieving sustainable urban food systems, agriculture and food emergencies, resilient agri-food systems, hand-in-hand (HIH) initiative, and scaling up investment.[56]

FAO has regional initiatives for Asia-Pacific to support the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Regional Initiative on Zero Hunger aims to support member nations adopt policies and institutional and technical capacity to eradicate hunger and malnutrition by strengthening nutrition-sensitive and climate-resilient sustainable agriculture and food systems.[57]

[55] FAO, 2021. Strategic Framework 2022-31, Forty-Second Session

[56] Ibid.

[57] https://www.fao.org/asiapacific/en/

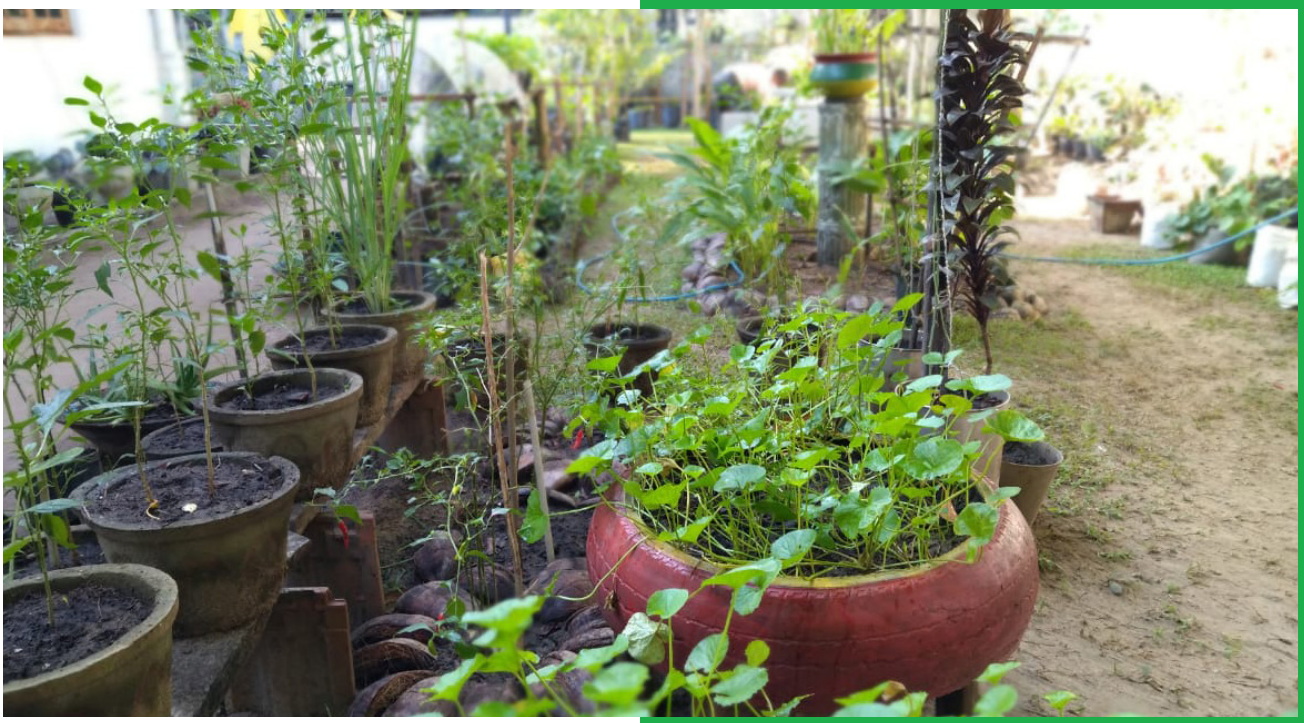
Regional Initiative on One Health aims to show the benefits of ensuring health for all to plant, animal, human and ecosystem health. These pertain to technical areas of animal health, food safety, phytosanitary and quarantine issues, and building resilience.

Regional Initiative on Blue Growth aims to support member nations achieve sustainable blue economies through the sustainable growth of aquaculture, capture fisheries, and conservation of marine and inland water ecosystems services and aquatic biodiversity. The regional initiative seeks to promote innovative production and management practices and improve governance.

Regional Initiative on Climate Change provides a comprehensive program of support for member countries to enhance climate action for agriculture.

Both the strategic framework and regional initiatives are viable areas for CSOs to engage in and challenge, at the levels of sectoral and multi-sectoral and national and international. Again, engagement should be coupled with vigilance that the SDG does not become the end-all-be-all of the food and agriculture advocacies while FS and AE are pushed to the background.

More importantly, the SDG should be guarded against corporate capture that is already happening with the various UN conferences and conventions, FSS and APRC included. But as indication of what is already happening, as FAO's regional representative noted in the 35th APRC, the addition of private sector voices is regarded to help FAO member countries and their policy makers "better define the actions needed to achieve the SDGs."[58]



A home garden in Sri Lanka. Credit: CEJ.

[58] FAO, 2020. Thirty-fifth Session of the FAO Regional Conference for Asia and the Pacific, op.cit.

A SOUR FOOTNOTE ON REGIONAL PLATFORMS

Despite the aforementioned regional initiatives and FAO's regionalization of discourses all throughout, there appears to be a dearth of regional platforms that deal with Asia-Pacific issues, much less FS and AE. Regional cooperation blocs can only go as far as formulating food security frameworks for years now. This may be mainly due to the reality that the advanced capitalist countries dictate a neoliberal discourse and the direction of multilateral cooperation, and only this can be extended to regional cooperation among underdeveloped nations.

Riding on the upheavals of the global food crisis in 2009, the ASEAN formulated the ASEAN Integrated Food Security (AIFS) Framework, and the Strategic Plans of Action (SPA) on Food Security for 2009-2013, and later, for 2015-2020. The aim of the AIFS is to ensure long-term food security and improve the livelihoods of farmers in ASEAN countries. The SPA on the other hand focuses on a strategic set of measures based on member countries' commitments.[59]

The AIFS has nine strategic thrusts of strengthening, namely 1) food security; 2) food market and trade; 3) food security information systems; 4) sustainable food production; 5) investment in food and agribusiness; 6) identification of emerging food security issues; 7) utilization of nutrition information; 8) identification of policies and governance mechanisms; and 9) development of nutrition enhancing food.[60] The activities for each thrust unfortunately remain within neoliberalism and within the narrow definition of food security that can be fulfilled simply by relying on international trade and investment.

Furthermore, in the same year, ASEAN endorsed a Multi-sectoral Framework on Climate Change and Food Security (AFCC) to address the strategic thrust # 6 of AIFS, the identification of emerging food security issues. The AFCC has four components, namely 1) food security; 2) sustainable food trade; 3) integrated food security information system; and 4) agricultural innovation.[61]

Nine years later, this time riding on the calls for resiliency of people and ecosystems as well as the momentum of the SDGs, ASEAN embarked anew on the development of a more comprehensive multi-sectoral strategic framework that builds on the existing AFCC. The AFCC Ad Hoc Steering Committee saw the need to adopt a common conceptual understanding to guide the development of AFCC's component No. 4 on agricultural innovation, specifically a roadmap for 2020 and beyond.[62]

In the 42nd meeting of the ASEAN ministers on agriculture and forestry on 21 October 2020, they adopted the extended SPA 2021-2025, now even deemed to contribute to the achievement of SDG #2 (hunger).[63] Still, the AIFS, along with other ASEAN frameworks, unfortunately remain not legally binding and are simple guidelines for member countries to take in consideration.

But apart from being 'soft' as a regional bloc, ASEAN has also adopted a conservative approach to engagement with CSOs. There is a CSO accreditation process in ASEAN that is tightly controlled and state-directed.[64] Despite having reformed the process in 2012 with the new guidelines, ASEAN has continued to direct the objectives that the CSOs can pursue. The process thus has remained top-down.

[59] ASEAN Integrated Food Security Framework and Strategic Plan of Action on Food Security in the ASEAN Region 2009-2013, Thailand, 1 March 2009

[60] Ibid.

[61] https://www.awg-sf.org/asean-multi-sectoral-framework-on-climate-change-agriculture-and-forestry-towards-food-security-afcc-2/

[62] ASEAN Multi-sectoral Framework for Climate Change: Agriculture and Forestry Towards Food and Nutrition Security and Achievement of SDGs (Proposed Integrated Framework for AFCC Component 4), Vietnam, 11 October 2018

[63] ASEAN Integrated Food Security Framework and Strategic Plan of Action on Food Security in the ASEAN Region 2021-2025, 42nd AMAF, 21 October 2020

[64] Tager, James. Engagement, Vision, Response, A Comparison of CSO Engagement and Tactics in Relation to the ASEAN Charter and the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration, Human Rights and Peace in Southeast Asia Series 5, n.d.

As a result, CSOs are forced to adopt a conservative stance for engagement. Civic space is limited for contributing to policy formulation. What is even more diffuse is the fact that ASEAN bodies adopt their own CSO engagement practices. For instance, there are for human rights issues, but none yet for food security and agriculture.

On the other hand, the lack of institutionalized modalities for CSO participation in ASEAN created the opportunity for a plethora of modalities to emerge, albeit diffusing cooperation even more. The main forum for civil society engagement with the ASEAN process is the ASEAN Civil Society Conference/ASEAN Peoples' Forum (ACSC/APF), which was established in 2005. It is an annual forum of CSOs from ASEAN member countries, which is held in parallel with the ASEAN Summit. The forum was organized by civil society in the country that held the ASEAN Chairmanship at that time. After a decade, in 2016, the ACSC/APF reviewed its engagement and noted that individual member countries have "consistently resisted and vacillated" with regard to civil society participation and engagement. It also scored the "prevailing silence and lack of attention and response to the observations and recommendations raised in all previous ACSC/APF Statements." Radical changes were proposed. [65]

In the 2021 annual forum held in Myanmar, the ACSC/APF had militarism, authoritarianism, and COVID-19 as themes, and the forum noted the failed promises and responses of the member states to such issues. The theme in 2022, which somehow indicates the continuing political struggles of CSOs to get recognized in the process, are the challenges of peoples democratic and social movements in Asia.[66]

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) may be in the same predicament as the ASEAN. While its Social Charter identifies specific areas of social concern, it does not include land issues. Yet, in its several summits, it recognizes the importance of agricultural development, the availability of land and land distribution, and food security.[67]

Still, it was even the FAO, and only recently, that initiated a project to develop the SAARC Food and Nutrition Security Framework (SFNSF) and a related Strategic Plan of Action, much like ASEAN's. The project also sought to strengthen the institutional mechanism and capacity of the SAARC Secretariat to develop, implement and coordinate regional programs for enhancing food and nutrition security.[68]

Like ASEAN, there is also a CSO accreditation process with SAARC. But it is not clear how CSOs are recognized, how they are being mobilized, how their inputs are officially considered, and whether collaboration has been successful indeed. It is also unclear if land, agriculture, or even food security issues under the FAO's latest project are being discussed.

[65] https://th.boell.org/en/2017/07/12/new-perspectives-civil-society-engagement-asean

[66] Information may be found on ACSC/APF Facebook page

[67] Land Issues in South Asia: Assessing SAARC, Land Watch Asia, ANGOC, Issue Brief 1, 2008

[68] https://www.fao.org/3/ca4574en/ca4574en.pdf

6 VIABLE ARENAS

A cursory survey of what regional and global CSOs are working and campaigning on provides ideas for local and regional CSOs to design their engagement in FS and AE. Aside from those carrying outright the issues of FS and AE, there are several CSOs and NGOs that have campaigned vigorously on the different pillars or aspects of FS and AE that are worth mentioning. It must be emphasized too that since the UNFSS tipping point, social movements have taken back the real struggles outside the official platforms and launched their own global campaigns.

REGIONAL ENGAGEMENTS

LVC celebrates its 25 years of envisioning and collective construction of FS. Having brought the paradigm of FS into international policy-making spaces, LVC has been joined by hundreds of other CSO networks and social movements to assert FS as a collective right. In its 25th year manifesto, it summarized, "The introduction of food sovereignty as a collective right changed how the world understood poverty and hunger."[69]

With the LVC on the lead of the struggles and campaigns, international activists saw the adoption of the UNDROP at the UN General Assembly. The bigger challenge now is how the different countries and communities will implement the UNDROP in their unique circumstances. The UNDROP is a relatively young document, but it is a living document and can be kept alive by various people's struggles in the different countries and regions. It is one important instrument that should be utilized for the assertion of FS and AE as people's rights and for the development of social movements.



Fishing is the livelihood for majority of the people living on the coastal belt of Sri Lanka. Credit: CEJ.

[69] https://viacampesina.org/en/food-sovereignty-a-manifesto-for-the-future-of-our-planet-la-via-campesina/

The Pesticide Action Network-Asia Pacific (PANAP), on the other hand, has direct AE campaign called Agroecology in Action.[70] Around October 16, global CSOs are campaigning on the World Food Day and carrying out various advocacies. PANAP has its 16 Days of Global Action on Agroecology that advances AE and people's FS. This culminates on October 16, marked as World Hunger Day. The main message is how neoliberal food systems contribute to the global health, climate, environmental and economic crises. Through its main advocacy, PANAP highlights the harsh effects of pesticide use and its growth under profit-driven food systems. Land grabbing, deforestation, and control of seed and genetic resources as well as the dominance of agrochemical corporations are also pinpointed as culprits for loss of biodiversity and traditional knowledge.

PCFS, on the other hand, is a network of grassroots groups of small food producers of peasant-farmer organizations and their support NGOs, which is working towards a People's Convention on Food Sovereignty.[71] It was first established as an Asian component of the global agri-trade network on People's Food Sovereignty in 2001, which eventually resulted in the collaboration of those involved in the People's Caravan 2004 and those who participated in the Asia Pacific People's Convention on Food Sovereignty in Dhaka, Bangladesh in 2004. PCFS is part of CSM for relations with CFS, representing the Southeast Asia constituency in the coordination committee.

Its recent global campaign, Global People's Summit (GPS) is the counterpoint to the non-inclusivity of the FSS, raising the call Siege the Summit: Reclaim our land, seeds, and rights! End neoliberal food systems now! The GPS is committed to exposing the unjust, unequal, unhealthy and unsustainable food systems. It exposes and opposes the apparent surrender of global food governance to transnational corporations.

The GPS declaration signed by more than 500 organizations worldwide, puts forward four pillars of food systems transformation: 1) Food sovereignty and democracy at the core of food and agricultural policies; 2) Agroecology and sustainability in production, distribution, and consumption; 3) People's right to land, production, and resources; and 4) People's right to adequate, safe, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food.[72]

BY THE ORGANIZATIONS IN THE FOCUS COUNTRIES

The engagement of the respective organizations in the focus countries is varied, and this presents opportunities for advocacy and capacity development. Using components of FS and AE articulated by FoE-APac as message themes for monitoring response shows that there are success stories and unexplored avenues. (The components include the right to food, right to determine food systems, promotion of diverse and localized solutions, promotion of climate-resilient agriculture, protection of traditional knowledge, and rejection of corporate and false solutions including trade and investment policies.)

[70] Information may be found in their website https://panap.net

[71] Information may be found in their website www.foodsov.org

[72] Information may be found in their campaign website www.hungry4change.org

WALHI (Indonesia), on the right to food, focuses on connecting the official food policy with the concept of people's management areas, community access rights to land, and the community as subjects who protect the environment. Position papers on FS, the food crisis and the food estates are produced in this regard.

WALHI is also involved in policy advocacy on the implementation of Law 41/2009 Sustainable Food Agricultural Land Protection, which has at least mentioned FS 12 times in its 77 articles. It is also engaged in policies related to agroforestry, agrarian reform, and the recognition of indigenous peoples.

The organization is quite active in social media – it has 55.8K followers on its website, 157.6K on Twitter; and 65.6K on Facebook, and 4.84K YouTube channel subscribers. It reports not only a huge number of following but also significant numbers of impressions and engagements, not even counting the regional offices of WALHI in 28 provinces. Its regional and international engagements are through Friends of the Earth.

On the right to determine and control food systems, WALHI is focusing on cooperatives and the reduction of power, control and extent of corporate concessions in mining and monoculture plantations. It has produced the study on gender justice in this regard. WALHI also held a people's conference of local communities and indigenous peoples who have been fighting for their livelihood sources, for recognition, and protection from threats of claims either from corporations or from the state itself.

On the promotion of diverse and localized agricultural solutions, WALHI is active in the advocacy of people's management areas, agroforestry, and AE. It has an educational infographic on peatlands.

On the promotion of climate-resilient agriculture, WALHI focuses on the climate crisis. It has produced the book *Java Collapse From Forced Labor* to *Lapindo Mudflow*, which presents case studies that show that the development and expansion of regional infrastructure projects have been at the expense of the health, welfare, safety and prosperity of the communities. In terms of policy advocacy, WALHI is engaged in the official *Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation Policy in the Middle-Term Regional Development (RPJMD) in Five Provinces in Indonesia.*

On the protection of traditional knowledge, WALHI promotes the *Ekonomi Nusantara* or archipelago economy that partially uses a degrowth approach and departs from the practice of local indigenous peoples at the grassroots level. A book resource and two films have been produced for this campaign. In the policy arena, WALHI advocates for state recognition of indigenous peoples territories. For short-term goals, which are part of the recognition process, WALHI encourages the formation of the Indonesian Social Forestry Management Association, which is a joint forum formed by 51 Forest Farmer Groups spread across 17 provinces.

Finally, on the rejection of corporate and false solutions including trade and investment policies, key messages are against carbon trading and carbon offsets, neoliberalism, and food estates. The organization facilitated indigenous peoples' organizations, farmers' unions, CSOs, traditional communities, farmers, laborers, human rights defenders, and environmental activists to put forward an open letter to the Indonesian president and the European Union. It is regarding the impact of oil palm plantation such as forest destruction, land grabbing, human rights violations, corruption, and environmental disasters.

It also came up with position papers on the oil palm bill, for a just and sovereign energy transition for climate justice, and urging corporate and state accountability for ecocide crimes, calling for a legally binding treaty on business and human rights. These are supported by research books as well as lessons from 10 case studies of the Indonesian palm oil sector and on dirty practices in the timber industries. With regard to policy advocacy on this theme, the message is to oppose policies in the energy sector that offer false solutions, such as nuclear as new energy, increase in coal production, addition of coal power plants, expansion of palm oil concessions in the name of biofuels, and expansion of timber concessions in the name of energy.

Pro Public (Nepal) provides support to various national and multisectoral CSOs and people's organizations that are working on land rights, right to food, food security, food sovereignty, and other basic human rights. It also identifies with farmers' federations, cooperatives and unions in pursuit of participation in policymaking . The identified issues for advocacy are: tenancy, support for farmers' production, guarantee for farmers' prices, farmers' control over seeds, farmers' access to loans and surety, land ownership for women and Dalit, lack of fair market, importation from India and other cheap imports, and lack of subsidy.

On the right to food, Pro Public worked with the collective advocacy of community-based organizations, which ensured the enactment of the Right to Food and Food Sovereignty Act 2018. The campaign to have the Act's implementing rules and regulation is ongoing. Pro Public also supported the sit-in protest of sugarcane farmers for recovery of their outstanding payments from the sugar mill owners and also to ensure a minimum base price for the sugarcane.

On the right to determine own food systems, Pro Public is adding on the general advocacy of making the Act truly operational and notes that the campaign has to be strengthened further.

On the protection of traditional knowledge, Pro Public plans to run a campaign in two districts to preserve the traditional knowledge on use and conservation of seed. It continues to support campaigns and protests against techno-fixes and unscientific solutions, such as GMOs, "seed without yield", and the like.

A 2010 Supreme Court landmark judgment on a petition filed by Pro Public not only ensured the right to food as a human right, it also established that the state should ensure availability of support services such as seeds, fertilizers, and irrigation; regulate market and pricing; and provide enough food to ensure food security.[73]

PENGON (Palestine) is the network that has full articulation of the assertion of the difference of the concept of food sovereignty from the concept of food security and how FS can be operationalized in the context of Israeli occupation. It presents various community direct actions to assert AE and propagate the principles in action. Because of its situation, PENGON puts premium on international advocacy to stop the violations against Palestine's environment. It publishes research materials, including its recently launched newsletter.

LRC (Philippines) deals with all the FS and AE themes aforementioned, also as part of the organization's mandate on the respective themes. The right to food is part of the FS work with FOE International. The organization links the right to determine food systems with its work on the right to self-determination. On the promotion of diverse and localized solutions, LRC links its work on support for indigenous knowledge systems and practices. On the promotion of climate-resilient agriculture, work is part of LRC's climate justice campaign. The protection of traditional knowledge is linked with LRC's indigenous rights campaign.

For these campaign messages, LRC has produced one documentary on the *sulagad*, the worldview of the indigenous *Teduray and Lambangian*, and an infomercial on food sovereignty for a just recovery from COVID-19.

[73] http://escrj.southasianrights.org/judgment/53

Also, it has produced a research book on a coffee plantation in indigenous land. The organization is also engaged in direct action and promotion of best practices through TJG-Sulagad practice and TAMASCO collective upland rice farming.

For all the themes, LRC has also launched its webinar series *IKR: Nature Matters* and produced episodes to tackle various issues. In the international advocacy, LRC is part of FOE International's campaign on FS and on the rejection of corporate and false solutions, particularly the *real zero target, not net zero*.

CEJ (Sri Lanka) is effective in its legal and policy campaigns, and makes these more effective through media engagement. It has an ongoing campaign to protect fisherman's rights that may be violated by a port city project. It has taken on the case to protect the right to clean water in relation to the Venigros factory that manufactures rubber gloves and allied products for export. The company was releasing toxic chemicals into the environment and groundwater. CEJ was demanding the factory's closure, and the company agreed to relocate. CEJ also filed a fundamental rights case bearing number 168/21 to protect fisherman's rights that were violated by the X press pearl ship disaster.

The organization has also filed a case bearing number CA WRT 476/21 pleading to suspend the importation of organic fertilizer from China, which is found to be contaminated with harmful organisms. CEJ claims that organic fertilizer from any country cannot be imported under any circumstance. It filed an urgent motion on 25 October 2021 to prevent the imported fertilizer from entering the country. On 11 November 2021, the Court of Appeals ordered the attorney general to extract a court decision that the stock of about 96,000 tons of rejected organic fertilizer on board the Chinese ship would not be unloaded in the country.

On 8 December 2021, Deputy Solicitor General Nirmalan Wigneswaran who appeared on behalf of the Minister of Agriculture, informed the court that the government would not allow the controversial load of fertilizers to be unloaded. The Chinese vessel left Sri Lanka's maritime space.

With regard to the promotion of diverse and localized agricultural solutions and also as its direct action, CEJ has the Community Revolving Loan Fund (CRLF), a mechanism to promote home gardening to fulfil domestic food needs using organic farming. There are around 30 village groups currently practicing this mechanism.

On climate-smart agriculture, CEJ conducted a study under PILF for the ARIA project in Sri Lanka. On the protection of traditional knowledge, it has published a leaflet containing information on benefits of some local rice varieties.

On the rejection of corporate and false solutions, CEJ has had several success stories from its media and government engagement. It has had a media briefing on World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought, produced materials to resist palm oil cultivation, co-organized the 'tree ordination' to protect small farmers at Rideemaliyadda, gathering several Buddhist monks, environmentalist groups, and local people. At least, 1,500 people attended a protest march on 65,000 acres slated for deforestation to give way to a sugar factory. CEJ, along with other petitioners, filed the Fundamental Rights Case on 11 October 2018 against the use of sugarcane only for cultivating lands in the Maha Oya Special Zone, Maha Oya, Rideemaliyadda and Padiyathalawa District Secretariats for the use of the Sugar-Renewable Energy and Cow Milk Development Project (Bibila).



7 RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper is not meant to be a summing up of advocacy and capacity, although several successes may be noted for replication and duplication and gaps may be identified for filling in. It suffices that the focus countries have identified the basic problems confronting food and agriculture as well as the barriers to the articulation of FS and AE. It is also an opportunity to identify common as well as divergent problems in order to improve regional cooperation in advocacy and engagements.

- Based on the defined problems, apart from direct FS and AE campaigns, campaign messages may also be divided into land struggles, environmental problems including climate crisis, trade and investment liberalization including corporate control, and other cross-cutting rights-based issues in food and agriculture. The COVID-19 pandemic provides an angle or even a platform for the reiteration of just calls on these multiple themes.

- The call for social justice, particularly the just and free distribution of land to the tillers, remains the most viable arena for advocacy in pursuit of FS and AE. All focus countries have identified this as well, therefore efforts should be linked with farmers' groups that advocate for genuine agrarian reforms. The various neoliberal schemes and projects that subvert whatever gains communities have made in asserting their collective rights to land should be exposed and vehemently opposed. Land and resource grabs and the numerous conflicts and human rights violations that these entail should be confronted with active advocacies on the ground, on the national as well as international levels. After all, the working definition of FS and AE is truly about assertion and people's direct action. The advantage of the organizations in the focus countries is their acumen in presenting legal arguments and taking the grassroots campaigns on the policy level and within the purview of existing laws.

Women farmers harvest rice from their sulagad farm in Maguindanao, Philippines. Credit: LRC.

- The end to chemical farming is indeed a long trek. But all the organizations in the focus countries, in one way or the other, have long history (as far back as the Green Revolution) of resisting the imposition of hybrid varieties, including GMOs, and the use of inorganic pesticides and fertilizers. The message is clear that such prolonged use does not only degrade the ecosystems but also diminishes traditional knowledge and practices such as seed banking and farmers' decision to make their own organic inputs. There is also the need to point this resistance to the giant agrochemical and seed corporations as well to make the message even clearer and the advocacy, sharper.
- The climate crisis is also an all-encompassing engagement. There is the need to focus on vulnerability as brought about by neoliberal policies, whether directly or indirectly impacting on ecosystems services. Oftentimes, the advocacy is already on the effects of global warming, i.e. drought, flooding, sea-level rise or dying out of certain species and varieties. This approach may unwittingly and falsely seek adaptation solutions that focus on resiliency rather than making corporations, states and neoliberal policies to account for the devastation.
- The organizations of all focus countries are currently engaging in fishery issues as well. This is timely as neoliberal proponents, led by the World Bank and even by the United Nations, are pushing for a 'blue economy.' This is envisioned to diversify the uses and exploitation of marine and fishery resources from traditional fishery to tourism, maritime transport, offshore 'renewable energy,' aquaculture, seabed extractive activities, and marine biotechnology and bioprospecting. In short, for more intensive exploitation for profit. While current struggles are geared towards community-based management and conservation, research can also be focused on government plans with regard to the blue economy in order to make advocacy plans on it.
- Meanwhile, there is also the growing need to look into other destructive industries beyond corporate plantations or commercial fisheries (and other agriculture-fishery related industries) that destroy the ecosystems and threaten agricultural production and food security as well as farmers' control. Other dirty industries include mining, infrastructure projects, building of ports and dams, extraction and production of fossil fuels for energy, and the like.
- Trade and investment liberalization is the key issue that contradicts FS and AE. In more than 40 years of these policies, it is getting clearer all the time that no amount of 'greenwashing' or couching the language of sustainability can take back the national sovereignty that has been snatched over time. Reversal from these policies should be in order. This may be done, as the organizations of the focus countries have shown, through filing of lawsuits, vigorous policy advocacy, media engagement, and the key element of grassroots mobilizations. Each advocacy form is always accompanied with viable alternatives not only to the policies but to show practices from the grassroots that can truly promote FS and AE.
- The call for gender justice should be an all-encompassing campaign, not only in order to understand gender gaps and campaign for gender equitable policies and programs. More importantly, it should be to emphasize that the exploitation of women food and agricultural producers is at the core of neoliberalism and the lack of food sovereignty. In different contexts, the barrier to asserting food sovereignty is usually an undemocratic state that assumes that the patriarchal concept of food security is enough for addressing hunger. This patriarchy extends to the farm and household. By exposing these strong messages, women can add a quite potent voice at the forefront of FS and AE struggles.

All organizations in the focus countries may be fully aware of the gender inequalities in their respective contexts, considering even that the role and place of women in food and agriculture is huge (if not dominant) in Asia-Pacific. Gender-specific as well as integrated (i.e. rights to food and determine food systems, protection of knowledge, rejection of corporation solutions, and others) campaigns may be launched in this regard. Building women's organizations, best practices and federations will be a natural consequence.

- The national recognition of FS and AE is still a long way to go, even for focus countries that seemingly have already adopted the language. Research, education campaigns, and direct actions such as demo farms, land cultivation, coastal resource management, among other community-based actions should be replicated on a nationwide scale. For CSOs, the effort to explain the concepts in popular language and in many popular forms can be a consistent effort. The continuous engagement in hunger and food security policies is also a good platform in promoting the real policy solutions of FS and AE, as CSOs expose the inadequacy of the concept of food security (and even SDG2) in addressing the real causes of hunger and poverty. Seeking or even demanding dialogues with government and officials is key to this engagement.
- Many of the issues, as previously mentioned, are best amplified in international struggles. As already discussed, the official mechanisms and CSO participation may need some assessment and consideration before CSOs can plan ahead again. This is especially in terms of articulation and striking the right balance between the 'inside' and 'outside' forms of struggles and advocacies.

For the 'inside' work, there has to be some resolution regarding CSO relations with official mechanisms and how to truly gain something out of these, which is useful for social movements. For the 'outside' work, there appears to be genuine and vigorous efforts by CSO networks in launching global and broad-based campaigns on sustainable and democratic food systems. Planning may be done along the line of people's summits and the like to juxtapose these vis-à-vis the corporate capture of official platforms. With regard to articulation, it appears that research, education and awareness-raising remain to be one of the viable areas of work.

At any rate, the FSS debates, SDG challenges and monitoring of effectiveness of implementation, and COVID-19 and its environmental health premises should be short-term to medium-term engagements. Still, most urgent planning may be done around the recognition and operationalization of the UNDROP. Advocacy should be both national and regional. Exchange of monitoring and experiences is a fruitful area of work.

- CSO engagement with regional policy and cooperation bodies such as ASEAN and SAARC (to name those that are relevant to the focus countries, except Palestine), is less successful. Nonetheless, campaigns around their Charters, frameworks and dealings with CSOs (or lack thereof) are necessary. There are two ways for organizations in the focus countries to engage these platforms: 1) research-advocacy on their frameworks on food security and agriculture, to include impact studies from the grassroots as evidence and 2) continuous demand for the institutionalization of modalities for CSO participation, but should include 'outside' or 'parallel' work to add pressure for recognition. In both ways, media and social media campaigns are important as the individual member states act more promptly when publicly and internationally called out.

- In terms of capacity, the organizations in the focus countries are best in policy and legislative advocacy and most successful in engaging in 'lawfare' on the same level with their respective governments. There may be undemocratic or even authoritarian governments, but the pretense of civic space is best taken advantage of by the organizations by arguing for correct policies and laws. A research agenda should constantly support policy advocacy, and outputs are best published, popularized, and distributed widely.

- The production of information, education and communication (IEC) materials may be enhanced by utilizing infographics and other illustrated or graphic artworks as well as videos, audio products such as podcasts, and other current multimedia. This is to increase the popularization of FS and AE issues and to put them in formats that are easily uploaded in social media and are shareable.

- With regard to traditional media, whether print or broadcast, around two of the organizations in the focus countries are actively engaged in media work, and this may be improved by all the other organizations. Media work comes useful not only in policy advocacy but also in amplifying sensitive issues that are otherwise not tackled by the states. Events that are culture-appropriate and attractive to the broad audience may be planned and done regularly as well, and the media can help promote these events to the public.

- Always, advocacies should culminate in mobilizations, demonstrations, pickets or rallies to expose issues, bad policies and irregularities and to manifest the legitimate demands and alternatives that may be undertaken. Finally, direct actions such as land occupation and cultivation, promotion of best practices in AE and FS assertion, demo farms, seed banking, organic inputs manufacturing, food processing, among so many things that the grassroots sectors are doing in asserting their rights to food and to determine their own food systems, should be brought to national consciousness. After all, these areas will only be viable for advocacy and engagement, both nationally and regionally, if CSOs are directly linked with the grassroots movements.

Friends of the Earth
Asia Pacific



Processing of sago as a food staple of the Mentawai Indigenous People in West Sumatra, Indonesia. Credit: WALHI.

Food Sovereignty in the Asia Pacific: National Stories, Regional Aspirations