



## Partnerships for Sustainable Livelihoods in the Fight for Food Security

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*ABSTRACT* Binayak Rajbhandari looks at why, despite all the promises, we are not making more progress towards sustaining the livelihoods of the poor. He draws on the success stories of alternative innovations at the micro level to suggest that there can be a positive response to today's failures to ensure food security.

*KEYWORDS* agroecology; genetic modifications; poverty; women farmers; World Food Summit

### Introduction

Already five years have passed after the date the governments of all the nations had agreed to cut world hunger by half in 20 years. If we close our eyes and calmly review our achievements in regard to reducing hunger then we will be 'endowed' with disappointment. We will find that the magnitude and severity of hunger, malnutrition and food insecurity remain a major concern of humankind even today. We will find that there are still about 800 million people who are facing hunger each morning. And over 140,000 people die from diseases related to hunger each week. Who are these undernourished people fighting with hunger in this world? Where, why and in what conditions are they struggling for their survival? What are the roles played by different food production systems and different development paradigms, and why are those people marginalized from having food? Why are we not making more progress towards reducing hunger and poverty? What constitutes the major threat to the developing countries' food security and to the sustainability of the common people's and ultra-poor's livelihoods? Should they dream about and struggle for an alternative world with social justice or continue their struggle only for their survival? What might be the apparent features of that pro-poor world? These are the issues every one who is in favour of social justice and human rights should think over.

The undernourished people fighting with hunger are the people without protective shelter or houses. These are the people without any access to education and health care facilities. These are the people without any access to employment. These are the people who do not have any access to natural productive resources or economic resources. These are the people who have been most exploited socially, culturally, economically and politically. In short, these are the people who have been deprived of their basic human rights. It is clear to every educated person today who these people of the South are. The hungry and malnourished people are fighting for survival and not for any political or economic power. They are struggling with the situation they are put into by the discriminatory socio-economic norms, structures and the discriminatory political institutions and policies. In other words, the discriminatory socio-political structures and policies have compelled them to fight for their survival. All the governments of the world and all the member states of the United Nations know about the worsening situations the hungry have been facing. They have also expressed their written commitments in favour of these people, but those commitments are never translated into practice, even in the so-called 'democratic' or 'people's democratic' nations, and hunger has been killing men, women and children in the South. Why? They die because they have been excluded from the social process, because to them the right to be human has been denied. To them it did not and does not really matter what is the fad of the time in terms of causality framework in the academia or in the international community: protein deficiency, calorie deficiency, insufficient food production, inadequate access, lack of health and family care, poverty, etc. (Valente, 2000).

### **Natural resources management against hunger and poverty**

Agriculture has been the major human intervention for natural resource management aimed at achieving food and livelihood security of humankind. During the late 1960s the 'Green Revolution', based on intensive chemical farming systems, significantly increased food production in the world, but the ultra-poor or the marginalized

landless people could not enjoy the benefit. The environmental pollution, soil structure degradation, and depletion of the plant genetic resources (PGRs) caused by the intensive chemical farming system have posed new challenges and serious threats to the sustainability of livelihoods of the small farmers and farm labourers in the South. That system has increased the small farmers' dependence on exotic inputs and assistance, making them more vulnerable to external economic shocks. Optional to that food production system, various other alternative systems of natural resources management and food production have been implemented in various parts of the world, but their coverage and focus are relatively scanty. The landless, marginalized and ultra-poor groups of people are not reached by these initiatives either. Lack of access to production resources, information and technology has led to further marginalization and starvation.

A number of development approaches have been developed and implemented both in the past and present, but the marginalized groups and ethnic minorities – deprived of access to information, knowledge, technology, production resources and employment – have remained hungry or malnourished. For the last decade, new concepts of sustainable development (SD); sustainable agriculture and rural development (SARD) (which is variously termed as: agroecology, bio-intensive farming, permaculture, organic farming, etc.); gender and development; etc. have been put forward and implemented in various parts of the globe. The main thrust of these innovations is to benefit the small farmers, women, ethnic minorities, and the ultra-poor while simultaneously conserving soil, PGRs, biodiversity and protecting the environment and basic human rights of the people. WOREC, Nepal has achieved some success in empowering and mobilizing local CBOs, small farmers' groups and their resources to implement and evaluate bio-intensive farming system approach against hunger and poverty (Rajbhandari, 2001).

### **Success stories**

The bio-intensive farming (BIF) system is not a new approach and has been practised traditionally for a

long time. It is based on the principle of agroecology. It is environmentally friendly and promotes use of organic manure; phyto-pesticides; scientific crop rotations; mixed- or inter-cropping; higher cropping intensity; conservation and utilization of local PGRs/varieties with better performances; and soil conservation. At WOREC, we have moulded the BIF system approach within the framework of SARD (Rajbhandari, 2000).

In East Africa, a biological push-pull system approach of pest management has resulted in outstanding performance. The push-pull system is an ideal option as it builds on existing resources, does not create dependency, is manageable by small farmers and does not pose a threat to the ecosystems. It is estimated that full adoption of the innovation by small farmers in East Africa will increase food production sufficiently to feed six to eight million more people. However, this system is of little interest to profit-oriented private companies, as it does not require any external input. And it is this very fact that may be the biggest obstacle to its dissemination (Nielsen, 2001). For sustaining production of food crops, the fight against harmful organisms is essential, and it is therefore imperative to develop appropriate and environmentally-friendly technologies accessible to small farmers. Such biological options that do not make use of genetic modifications (GM) are traditionally being practised in various parts of the South. These options are based on natural crop protection approaches that make use of the diversity found in nature itself. Some institutions are already investigating and promoting these non-chemical and non-GM options, providing excellent and competitive alternatives and advantages for pest management (Osorio, 2001; Rajbhandari, 2000).

An inventory made in Peru indicated the existence of more than 300 plant species – both native and imported – that are useful for the management of harmful insect populations (Osorio, 2001). Biological control represents a concrete alternative to the use of GM crops, because it saves and strengthens the ecological balance that existed before the use of agrochemicals. It is an alternative against the terminator logic or GM options of hegemonic corporate power. It diminishes the dependency of local farmers on external

inputs and reduces their vulnerability to economic shocks. This is one of the determinants for the achievement of sustainable livelihoods and food security by people in the South.

Such success stories of alternative innovations at the micro-level are there, but whether the people who are fighting against hunger and being deprived of rights to nutrition, resources and employment are reached by these innovations should be a concern of both the governments and CSGs. Eradication of poverty (and hunger) can be achieved if the poor become entrepreneurs and realize that they can emerge from poverty only by their own innovations. Poverty will only increase if people do not try to invent, innovate, find new alliances and forms of organization (Nzamujo, 1999). Governments and UN agencies need to focus on these issues comprehensively, timely and critically from the perspective of the marginalized and nature conservation. More support and budget allocations are imperative to extensively disseminate and implement these innovations.

### **Strengthening the global network of civil society groups for an alternative world?**

It seems that we are not making more progress towards reducing hunger and poverty basically because governments are not translating their commitments to address the root causes of hunger, poverty and subordination. In other words, the governments of the South are not planning for their people and nations independently. They are apparently facing some sort of strong economic and political pressures or imposed international regulations, which are not in the interest of the ultra-poor, women, small farmers, small/cottage industries and their labourers and owners. These include economic regulations, structural adjustment policies, trade regulations, open market economic policies and privatization of public service sectors, which are the features of 'anti-poor globalization'. The word 'globalization' may look in itself ideal, like the concept of 'pro-poor communism'. But the variations in the geo-ecological, geo-political, cultural and religious features across the various countries of the world do not permit

imposition of the same model and concept of globalization.

Furthermore, the concepts, logic and international regulations based on extreme or non-renewable exploitation of natural resources (cropland, PGRs, biodiversity, mines, etc.) and the genetic modifications of natural organisms to produce and commercialize artificial GM products, seed and organisms are against nature, common people and human civilization. This constitutes the major threat to the developing countries' food security and to the sustainability of the common people's and small farmers' livelihoods. Therefore, there can be no partnership between the terminator logic that destroys nature's renewability and regeneration, and the commitment to continuity of life and conservation of nature. There can be no partnership between a logic of death on which Monsanto bases its expanding empire and the logic of life on which women farmers in the South base their partnership with the Earth to provide food security to their families and communities (Shiva, 1999).

The history of human civilization of the last five decades has shown that the present politico-economic structures and policies can not fulfil the needs and protect the human rights of the marginalized people and ultra-poor who are struggling for their survival. They have to move forward to change

such discriminatory laws, policies, regulations and orders. They should unite into their independent civil society groups (CSGs) and move for social justice. It is then the CSGs' responsibility to plan for the empowerment and mobilization of the starving and marginalized ultra-poor groups. It is the sole responsibility of CSGs, including NGOs, to move forward to form global networks of civil society groups in order to address the issues and protect the human rights of the ultra-poor, marginalized and exploited groups of people.

Since the 1996 World Food Summit, civil society groups/organizations of all types (NGOs, civil society organizations, community-based organizations, producers' organizations, farmers' organizations, consumers' organizations, etc.) have been demanding the creation of an International Forum where all stakeholders, directly and indirectly involved with food and nutrition security issues, should participate and try to effectively confront existing conflicts, and point to possible policy alternatives. In the Global NGO Forum on Food Security, held in Rome in 1996, this 'space for public discussion' received the name of New Roman Forum (NRF). This Forum would bring together governments, academia, researchers, all branches of civil society, farmers, business representatives and all UN and Bretton Woods organizations dealing with the issue (Valente, 2000).

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