

World Food Day 2010

Let the poor feed themselves!

The world is commemorating the WFD this year in a situation where the food situation in the world is precarious. The lessons we have to learn from the experiences in trying to feed the world are very important. This is not because of the successes but because of the failures. The world leaders have almost come to a situation in which they need to admit that their efforts so far in trying to solve world's hunger has failed and they are not in a position to find effective solutions.

In the year 2000, the world leaders met and decided to set up the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), when they promised that they would reduce world's hunger by half by year 2015. There were 840 million people then, who were going to bed hungry every day. They should then have realized that all these 840 million people would be dead when they reached this target. But they went ahead. Now the number of people who were hungry have not reduced although two thirds of the target period has elapsed, but it has increased to 1.2 billion. The discussions that were held at the world conference on Food Security to see what could be done by the year 2050, when the situation becomes much more serious, ended up in not working out any effective strategy.

So, the task of the people on food and on the Food Day should be to emphasize that the present leaders of the world are unable to find solutions to the problem of hunger. Some other strategy and some other agencies must undertake to find solutions to the problem of hunger. The world fails to solve hunger not because the world does not produce enough to feed all, not because the technical capacity to produce enough food is lacking. It is simply because food is produced not mainly to solve hunger but to make profits. The entire activity of



food production and marketing is largely dominated by big companies (TNCs) who are more concerned in making greater profits rather than feeding the hungry. Much of the land and other natural resources that are necessary to produce food are in the hands of big companies, they also have a strong control over seeds and inputs and also technologies utilized to produce food.

The recent crisis of price increases of food was caused due to food being used for production of bio fuels, more meat production leading to much food being produced to feed animals rather than to feed people and also due to large migration into cities making the populations in the cities compared with rural areas reaching 50 : 50. Another factor that is affecting food production is global warming resulting in climate change leading to lower yields. If you examine each of these reasons they are due to food production being controlled by profit motivated producers. The reasons for failure of world leaders to find effective solutions are due to the fact that they do not want to change this situation of allowing the big profit makers to have control and ownership

over food production, marketing and food producing resources of the world.

This situation can be changed only by taking over the task of feeding the hungry away from these profit making controllers in to the hands of those who are genuinely interested in solving hunger. Who are they? They are the hungry people of the world. How can they do it? If they do not have the capital presently needed to produce food, they have to think of strategies that do not depend on financial capital. Can the world think of a strategy that does not depend on financial capital to produce its food?

In solving this issue it is necessary to recognize that the type of agriculture that is prevalent today is very heavily input dependent. The ecological impacts of such external input dependent agriculture has been found to be drastic and very damaging. World scale studies that have been done recently such as the IAASTED (International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology) completed in April 2008 showed that the present day prevalent agriculture, though capable of producing much food and much diversity of food has committed two serious mistakes in ignoring the social aspects of agriculture and also the environmental aspects of it. This was a very important research that was done by 400 prominent scientists who studied this in a large number of countries, over a period of four years and it was finally accepted by nearly 60 countries of the world. There is an alternative approach advocated by very large farmers' movements such as Via Campesina (world peasants' movement) and very large movements of small and landless farmers such as MST in Brazil who are promoting small scale ecological agriculture by small farmers as a more effective way of solving the problem of hunger.

The major difference in this approach is to make use of nature's advantages such as maximizing the sunlight, improving the soil fertility by preventing erosion, by maximizing the benefits of microbial activity by adopting techniques that

maximize the presence of microbes in the soil and also utilizing methods of integrated pest management instead of chemical pest control, chemical weed control and use of chemical fertilizer etc. Utilizing mixed farming rather than mono-cropping is another technique. This approach is fast growing in many countries in spite of the massive propaganda by agribusiness TNCs to continue their previous techniques that only bring profits to the larger operators at the cost of making a lot of farmers poorer and also destroying their livelihoods while making more and more people hungry.

We have been able to contact some practices that are developed in India by people such as Mr. Subash Palleskar who has done many years of research in developing the technique that he describes as "Zero Budget Natural Farming". This strategy is now being adopted by around 4 million farmers in India.

It is a simple technique that utilizes the basic principle that farming is done free of charge by nature. The technique utilizes only a simple formula name "jeevamurtha" a mixture of deshi cow dung, cow urine, some sweetener such as jaggery or coconut water and some powdered cereal and a handful of soil from the neighborhood that contains microbes that are present in the said environment. A similar mixture named "Beejamurtha" is utilized to prepare seeds for germination. What is important is that this application requires no financial input and it utilizes natural farming totally.

On the whole what is important in feeding the hungry is to allow the people who are threatened with hunger to develop their own techniques of finding their food by going back to nature and benefits of natural farming. What is necessary is to remove the policy obstacles that are existing against this strategy. Already much has been achieved by way of techniques of natural farming. Sometimes these techniques are called organic farming, or ecological farming, it can also be named

regenerative agriculture since the proper techniques of natural farming will also help in restoring the ability of nature to regenerate itself.

Restoring the capacity of nature to regenerate itself is a need for survival of all human beings and all other life forms. From this point of view, this restoration of agriculture back into its natural process of regenerating nature is an essential requirement to ensure survival. This is being highlighted in the other crises such as the crisis of climate change and global warming too. Therefore these tasks that should be achieved in our techniques and policies of food production needs to be highlighted on the World Food Day.

In Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka the need for this transformation of agriculture is very high. There are many factors related to food and agriculture in Sri Lanka that can not be effectively solved without this transformation. In summary these needs are reducing the cost of food to the poor, reducing the present rates of malnutrition that has prevailed at unacceptably high levels for over twenty years not, which damages not only the physical growth of children but the development of their brains too. A study done by the Ministry of health, UNICEF and WHO in March 2010 showed that rate of malnutrition in the plantation children was as high as 40 %. Even in other agricultural districts it was higher than 20 %. Another serious issue that is found in relation to food in Sri Lanka is that much of the food that is available is unhealthy, chemically produced and chemically contaminated. Food marketing is entirely in the hands of private companies and artificially processed food is heavily promoted. Sri Lanka depends unnecessarily on imported food, imported seeds and imported agricultural inputs. Unless we change this pattern Sri Lanka's agriculture and food situation is doomed.

The potential for adopting ecological and natural farming in Sri Lanka is very high. We have enough sunlight through out

the year and also enough rainfall and water. Bio diversity and food diversity in Sri Lanka is very high and can be further improved too. The fact that we still have a very large population of small holder farmers can turn out to be an advantage. This is because small farms can adopt this type of ecological farming with great efficiency.

Although the government policies still give much priority to private sector agricultural control the people on their own have already done much by way of small scale ecological farming. In a survey conducted by MONLAR in early 2008 showed that there were around 538 organisations in the country that was promoting and practicing some form of ecological farming.

The present government has many programmes trying to address issues of rural poverty and food insecurity. They are "Api Wawamu Rata Nagamu" (Let's grow and build the Nation) programme which envisages building of 4 million home gardens intending to get each of the families to have their own home garden, Another Programme is "Gama Neguma", another is Gemi Diriya (supported by the world bank and so on). However, unfortunately none of these programmes have a clear vision and strategy of ecological agriculture. This failure is largely due to the heavy influence of private companies such as CIC, Preema and so on that utilizes the government to promote the type of farming that is beneficial to them to sell their inputs, seeds and technologies. What we need to do is to propagate the more effective alternatives that are very applicable and beneficial to Sri Lanka, to the farmers and also to consumers. This would be the best way of our preparing to face the future challenges of the country and also of the world.

**By Sarath Fernando
Movement for Land and Agricultural
Reform – Sri Lanka**

www.monlar.net
monlar@sltnet.lk