

**World Development Report 2008: Agriculture for Development  
“WDR2008 Civil Society Consultation”  
Hotel Holiday Inn On King, Toronto, Canada  
25-26 January 2007**

**Reaction Paper on the Draft WDR2008 Report –  
An Asian NGO Perspective<sup>1</sup>**

## **Introduction**

Good morning. I would like to thank the organizers for this kind invitation to present my views on the First Team Draft of the World Development Report 2008 with the theme “*Agriculture for Development*”. My inputs have been drawn primarily from the experiences and research studies of my organization, the Asian NGO Coalition or ANGOC. They have been enriched by a number of consensus documents emanating from processes participated by many Asian NGOs and CSOs in preparation to various international summits and regional conferences. A third source is the initial consolidation of pre-meeting comments submitted by the participants to the organizers.

As a starting point, the theme of WDR2008 reflects the importance and prominence of agriculture. Many international summits and conferences though have declared the urgency to save agriculture from its demise, however, it is disappointing that the situation has aggravated as if we have not learned from our lessons. The issue is not that we need a new kind of agriculture but it is whether we have done something to rectify the past mistakes. Beyond policy changes, the restructuring of global governance and institutional reforms are needed in our organizations so that commitments are translated into actions

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<sup>1</sup> Presented by Nathaniel Don Marquez, Asian NGO Coalition for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ANGOC). ANGOC is a regional association of 21 national and regional networks of non-governmental organizations from 11 countries from South, Southeast and East Asia actively engaged in food security, agrarian reform, sustainable agriculture and rural development activities. Its member-networks have an effective reach of some 3,000 NGOs throughout the region. The complexity of Asian realities and the diversity of NGOs highlight the need for development leadership to service the poor of Asia – providing for a forum for articulation of their needs and aspirations as well as expression of Asian values and perspectives.

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leading to a renewed interest in agriculture and a return to the basic objective of food security. Unless there is no fundamental shift in the framework or paradigm in which agriculture is currently operated, then agriculture will lead to the dissolution of small farming households.

The WDR2008 should also be flexible to include experiences of CSOs in promoting agricultural development. While their documentation will not follow the rigidity of scientific research, I think their experiences can further enrich the points raised in the ensuing discussions.

Agricultural development has come to mean increasing productivity alone. To speak of agriculture however, is to speak of farmers. For as Tony Quizon puts it, *“development is not about money, it is about people.”* By definition, farmers include resource poor cultivators, pastoralists, fisherfolk, indigenous peoples, women and agricultural laborers. Agriculture is beyond merely an instrument for development, for millions of poor farmers, it is a way of life. Hence, for farmers, it is addressing the needs of the persons rather than merely the productivity of the farm. It is addressing food security and self-sufficiency as the main ticket to survival of a nation as growth is addressed. It is assuring equity instead of mere national economic growth beneficial to and controlled by a few at the expense of the majority.

Beyond the five functions of agriculture as stated in the draft report, the cultural aspect and/or function of agriculture is not included. Indeed, agriculture is the bedrock of human civilization. For as long as food security and agricultural productivity continue to be measured by money and markets, it will continue to pull young people away from agricultural life. As Fr. Francis Lucas rightly observes, small farmers feel that farming is a condemnation of poverty, destitution and death. The poor are isolated; they are remote from centers of power and government. They remain largely unorganized, and lack of power. Their access to land, water, technology and other services is tenuous at best. They are the first victims of calamities and political upheavals. Rather than sustaining life, the current global competition for agriculture might mean the extinction of small farmers and farming.

To further contextualize the points I will raise, allow me to provide a glimpse of Asia. The region is home to roughly three-fourths of the total number of poor people in the world. Forty-four percent are in South Asia while 24% are in East Asia. South Asia remains one of the poorest regions – with one out of three South Asians lacking access to improved sanitation, one out of four hungry, one out of five children out of primary school and one of every ten children dying before the age of five.

Poverty in Asia is basically a rural problem, as in all major countries in the region, between 80-90 percent of the poor live in rural areas. The headcount ratio is also significantly higher for rural areas in all of these countries. This is a mirror

reflection of the global situation where approximately 75% of the absolute poor in developing countries live in rural areas (CIDA, 2002).

Poverty is the result – not of scarcity, but of maldistribution of resources and power. Compounding the woes is that the small food producers – – who remain most vulnerable to hunger and poverty, is landlessness or limited access to productive land. In most rural areas, land remains as a major source/determinant of wealth; it is a symbol of prestige and a means to power. The Asian region has 75% of the world's farming households, about 80% of them are small-scale farmers and producers, and majority of them are resource-poor.

Rapidly, these land based tenancy arrangements are being replaced though by a new form of technological tenancy, that is farmers have become increasingly dependent on agro-chemical and seed companies for their harvests. Under such new technology, it does not allow farmers to re-plant the hybrid seeds that they saved from their previous harvest – as has been their long, traditional practice.

The current crisis of agriculture and farming communities stems from three major trends which exacerbate poverty and inequity: *first*, the promotion of Green Revolution technology without regard for its social and ecological consequences; *second*, the surrender of agriculture policies and farming communities to strategies aimed at rapid urban industrialization; and *third*, indiscriminate liberalization policies which allow the entry and dominance of extremely powerful multinational agribusinesses.

As to the first trend, while the increase of production from the Green Revolution has benefited developed countries and favorable regions of developing countries, these yield increases unfortunately have not reached the rural poor. Green Revolution requires substantial external inputs such as chemical fertilizers and pesticides. While the technology provided yield increases at the start, it was not sustainable in the long term. NGOs criticized the narrow approach of relying mainly on Green Revolution technologies as they are assessed to be environmentally unsustainable and discriminatory to resource poor farmers. As the Asian region exhibits a high population density, with a generally high person-to-farmland ratio, such high-intensive farming practices should be stopped.

The new agricultural technologies ignore the complexities of rural life, as well as the cultural and social differences among communities. Indigenous agricultural practices and knowledge that were developed over many generations have given way to the simplified, standardized techniques of the GR. The strong sense of values that underpinned traditional agriculture have been overthrown by an individualistic, cut-throat competitiveness, and a production system that is alienated from the community. This has caused a breakdown in the social fabric of communities.

With regard to rapid industrialization, it is often seen as the objective of a growth-led development. Current government policies emphasize meeting urbanization needs and relegate agriculture to the position of support sector. Voices of concern have been raised about the growing bias against agriculture in favor of industrialization, which is thought to be inherent to economic transformation. Agriculture is viewed merely as a support sector for industry.

There is thus an evident lack of emphasis on strengthening producers' organizations, and their concerns like agrarian reform and access to resources. A major case in point is legislation in relation to land tenure and redistribution. While land and tenurial reforms have been enacted in many countries, implementation of these remain fraught with problems. Many policies have failed to make an impact at the local level due to political opposition by vested interests, often in collusion with corrupt officials in government. This situation is complicated by the increasing privatization of the commons, which in turn has become a major source of land and resource conflicts.

As to the liberalization of agriculture, such phenomenon has resulted to trade relations between the big players from the North and the small Southern players even more lopsided, giving the lie to the illusion of an even playing field with regards to trade. As Vandana Shiva noted, the theory of comparative advantage is fallacious when applied to food security in the context of globalization on five reasons: i) it works when capital is nationally rooted and does not have free mobility across national borders, ii) when it is more profitable to grow flower than foodgrains, comparative advantage lead to a decline in food production globally, iii) while it may be financially efficient, such system can be ecologically inefficient, iv) prices can be manipulated by transnational corporations that have monopoly control on food and grain trade, and v) corporations rather than countries export and import in free trade, and what is efficient for corporations need not be efficient for the countries in which they operate.

Undoubtedly, countries of the South are severely disadvantaged. While their agricultural subsidies are scrapped, and their agricultural trade is liberalized, heavy subsidization of agriculture continues in the North. This leads to massive displacement of agricultural producers, particularly staple food producers, who comprise the bulk of farmers in developing countries. The lure of growing more lucrative luxury crops and non-food items over staple crops increasingly threatens domestic food security. The inclusion of agriculture in the Agreement on Agriculture under the WTO had intensified the dependence of small producers on the external market for production inputs and consequently the already heavy reliance on food imports due to the shifting of land and resources away from food crop production towards export oriented cash crop production. The flooding of local markets with cheap imported (and dumped) food also discourages local production.

The Agreement on Agriculture under the WTO aimed to facilitate the process towards a freer flow of agricultural products among countries. Governments committed to remove quotas, subsidies and tariffs over a period of time. Unfortunately, the current agreement and how it is implemented favored the developed countries to the detriment of developing countries. Agriculture in developed countries continues to be heavily subsidized allowing them to market their products at cheaper price. Moreover, trade barriers are still in place restricting the flow of agricultural products especially those coming from developing countries.

The current trade agreement also encompasses a far broader range of issues beyond export and import of agricultural products such as the trade-related intellectual property rights (TRIPs). With TRIPs and the development in genetic engineering, it is now easier to claim ownership on agricultural and natural resources, including traditional practices and indigenous knowledge. Even seeds that have been propagated by farmers for hundreds of years are now threatened of being privatized.

As the experience in Asia indicates, food security can not be ensured by entrusting agriculture, food production and trade to global markets. Markets have not been the best allocator of resources. Pulled by profit, they even thrive in periods of crisis. Many periods of famine across Asia were marked not by empty granaries, but by the growing ranks of hungry people unable to afford them.

The other imperative is that land, water, biodiversity and intellectual practices should also be under the democratic control of those who produce food. In the run-up to the World Food Summit in April 1996, about 101 NGOs from Asia-Pacific raised the following fundamental principles in reviving agriculture and attaining food security:

- It must be built on a vision centered on the integrity of the local farming communities and food security and sufficiency of the national community; and
- It must be implemented via strategies that promote social equity, ecological sustainability, people's empowerment and gender balance

The NGO participants in 1996 define such vision for agriculture as building household food security on the basis of reducing "food kilometers." As such, the overriding principle in food self-sufficiency must be pursued at the smallest unit level where possible. Agricultural trade policies should thus be judged according to whether or not it enhances food security. Foreign trade should not supplant national production.

**With regard to the strategies, these may include, but not limited to the following:**

*First*, undertake genuine agrarian reforms that consolidate ownership, control and management of resources by small farmers. Access to land brings livelihood, achieves sustainable management of resources, reduces social tensions and conflicts over natural resources, and improves overall peace. Tillers- and user-rights should precede other property rights. There is a need to institute clear guarantees of rights of women to land and resources.

With regard to market assisted land reforms, a broad section of CSOs has come to believe that: a) markets are insufficient instruments in the highly unequal societies, where there is no level-playing field; b) market transactions themselves are not reform especially when sales are based on prevailing market rates; and c) as it relies mainly on negotiation between the rich landowners and poor farmers, the price determination as imbedded to market power, lies with the landowner.

In relation to land administration projects, CSOs have been pointing that land administration is not reform, nor should land administration replace agrarian reform. In fact, land administration provide fertile ground for corruption and political patronage whether in allocating rights, agreeing to change of land use or legitimizing historical injustices such as land grabbing or eviction of tenants and occupants. Land titling is not the only means for securing land rights. Customary land systems have long existed, and have been proven to be resilient in many parts of Asia.

*Second*, the concept of sustainable agriculture and agricultural support systems must be central to the idea of ensuring food for all, particularly for the vulnerable groups. While productivity is an important goal, stability and sustainability of the farming system are equally important. Studies have proven that SA is an effective strategy to reduce poverty. In a recent study conducted by Jules Pretty of the University of Sussex in England and his colleagues, they conclude that crops yields of farms in developing countries that used SA rose nearly 80% in four years. These findings are similarly experienced in our work on sustainable agriculture. There is a need hence to upscale existing initiatives on SA. Agricultural investments should be directed towards compliance with best practice of food safety and ecological impact, with a strict process of periodic environmental impact assessments.

*Third*, recognize and reward farmers as the main source of intellectual innovation in agriculture, and as caretakers of biodiversity for food and pharmaceuticals.

Recognize all ex-situ collections as common global property resources. The system of intellectual property rights must be decentralized and taken away from private control. Investments in research and development should support small agricultural systems and not transnational control of agriculture. As a starting point, the research agenda of agricultural research institutions should focus on reducing poverty situation of farmers.

*Fourth*, the impact of disasters has to do with the increasing vulnerability of communities to food security and further plunges them to the poverty ladder. As Fr. Francis Lucas wryly notes, “perhaps the greatest terrorist today is disaster.” Governments must recognize and build local capacities to facilitate recovery from, and mitigate the effects of disasters. Investments in disaster mitigation and preparedness of households are still the most cost-effective use of emergency assistance. This includes for instance progressive risk and hazard mapping done in a participatory manner.

*Fifth*, create and ensure enabling policy environments that recognize, and build upon the rights and capacities of farmers. Farmers should be organized, and their interests should be prioritized in the food production process.

*Finally*, institute universal recognition of the right to food as the right to life. Survival should take precedence over all other imperatives, including the right to profit, corporate opportunism and advantage. Again I go back to my introductory remark that the key to the implementation of these strategies is the need to change in global governance and institutional reforms of different organizations or mechanisms dealing with agriculture. The WDR2008 mentioned a declining trend in agriculture. This situation is understandable if the world is broke but if governments can invest billions of dollars in nuclear weapons, then we begin to question the sense of priority of these governments.

Ensuring household food security is the best antidote to grassroots communities subjected to the forces of globalization. Do we want to move out or to “kill” agriculture? In the end, the ultimate test will be the extent to which food systems are democratized, and poor people are given back their dignity and true powers over their lands, resources and livelihoods.

Thank you.

Sources:     ANGOC Policy Discussion Paper on Agrarian Reform and Access  
                  to Land  
  
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                  ANGOC, 200-Village Project: Household Survey Report  
  
                  Prospects for Marketing and Promotion of Organic Products  
  
                  ANGOC-AJPN, Enhancing Capacities on Sustainable Agriculture  
                  for Poverty Reduction