

Towards food sovereignty

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AgricuH

FOR three years now, a programme called the Green Economics and Globalization Initiative launched by an NGO, Shirkat Gah, has been working to create "economic literacy" among the people. The goal is to promote the concept of urban farming which can make a large number of people self-sufficient in food.

It is stated that a quarter acre of land can grow enough food to feed a family, while half an acre will give a surplus. And one acre of cultivated land can make a family affluent.

One may well ask why then are 50 per cent of the under-five children in Pakistan under-nourished? (Figure from Unicef's *State of the World's Children 2005*) That too when the government claims that 22 million hectares of land is under cultivation. The simple reason is that not every family has a quarter acre of land and not everyone is growing food. Worse still, given the government's World Bank driven policies, not everyone can afford adequate food and there are many people who still go to bed hungry at night.

The NGO has demonstrated that this dismal situation can be changed if there is more emphasis on food security and self-sufficiency. Its staff has used the little garden space in its office to grow vegetables using organic farming methods on an experimental basis.

The need for self-sufficiency in food should acquire an urgency now for another reason. This was explained lucidly by Devinder Sharma, chairperson of the Delhi-based Forum for Biotechnology and Food Security, who visited Pakistan last week as the keynote speaker at the fourth food sovereignty engagement of Shirkat Gah. He shed light on some of the grim scenarios that the Third World can expect to see in the coming years as the World Trade Organization's regime comes into force on January 1, 2005. He elucidated the deadly implications of the WTO agreement — especially the framework agreement on agriculture signed in July 2004 — for Third World farmers.

In the Philippines since 1995 traditional exports such as coconut, abaca and sugar have lost markets, corn production has suffered and the agricultural sector has lost 710,000 jobs. In Central America, a major coffee exporter, prices have fallen causing a loss of \$713 million in coffee revenues in 2001 and the axing of 170,000 jobs. Indonesia, one of the top 10 exporters of rice in 1995, is today the largest importer of rice. India, the biggest producer of vegetables, has had to double its vegetable imports.

Sharma was shocked at the lack of awareness in the official circles in Islamabad. He strongly pleads for the Third World countries to take a collective stand to protect their agriculture. There are two basic principles, he spells out, which the developing states should recognize. First, national food sovereignty is the right of every state which should be allowed to protect its agriculture and thereby job security, of its farming community. Secondly, quantitative restrictions should be allowed to enable Third World countries to protect their agriculture from the dumping of cheap subsidized imports from the West.

To pave the way for a sensible and humanist globalization, Sharma suggests that production systems based on environmentally devastating, ecologically unsound and economically unviable factors (as is the case with agriculture in Europe and America) should be phased out. Similarly, the removal of subsidies, that include the direct income subsidies given in the West to its farmers, should be linked with the removal of quantitative restrictions to ensure a level playing field for all.

It is time the gravity of the impending crisis were understood here. The multilateral agreement against hunger that Sharma so passionately pleads for should have the highest place on the agenda of our negotiators who attend the WTO meetings. We need to explicitly recognize that every human being has the right to food. Given the surplus of food in the world today, famine and starvation cannot be justified on any ground. The 840 million who go to bed hungry every night worldwide should not be doing so only if the governments were a bit more car-

in any third world country. With landowners being paid direct subsidies, many farmers in the West are millionaires.

Sharma identified some of the recipients of the hefty subsidies doled out by the western governments in the name of agriculture. In 2001, Ted Turner, the chief of the CNN, David Rockefeller and the Duke of Westminster were some of the distinguished beneficiaries. Corn growers in the US receive as much as \$20,000 a year while cotton farmers notch up \$3.9 billion a year in that country. In Europe, dairy farmers earn as much as five million euros for the export of milk.

With not enough resources in their kitty, Third World governments cannot pay direct subsidies to their farmers. Hence they have traditionally been helping agriculturists by subsidizing inputs such as water, fertilizers, seeds and pesticides. It is no coincidence, that through a complicated set of rules drawn up in the Framework Agreement, these very subsidies paid by the developing countries have been placed in the "amber box" which signifies payments that are "trade distorting" and must, therefore, be eliminated. The direct payments the western governments make to their farmers have been put in the "green box" and the "blue box" that will not be touched.

As a result of this semantic sophistry, the Third World, which has traditionally depended on agriculture to feed its people and provide employment to a huge chunk of its population, will become the dumping ground for agricultural products with prices pushed down artificially by western governments. This process has already begun as food production is falling in many countries which are losing revenues from food and cotton exports, rural unemployment is on the rise and urbanization is increasing at an unmanageable pace.

Devinder Sharma, who has done his homework well, gives examples from the developing

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Food security also has a strategic dimension which is hardly spoken about. Once our farmers are wiped out — as they inevitably will be if the WTO regime in its present form comes into effect — and we become wholly dependent on the West for food supplies, we will have to meet all its demands howsoever unreasonable and destructive they are for us. No nuclear weapons or armies of millions will be able to save us.

Food is the most potent weapon any country can ever possess. The West understands this very well. That is why it mollycoddles its farmers (as well as their cows) and is prepared to pay subsidies worth more than the world market price of the crop they produce. (In the US cotton growers received \$3.9 billion in subsidy payments for cotton which was sold for \$3 billion in 2001.)

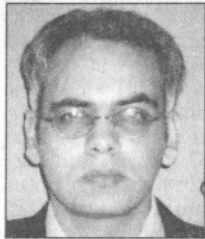
The Delhi Forum and Shirkat Gah are working towards a common goal of saving our farmers and our agriculture. Of course we have to grow cash crops and other crops for our industries. But there has to be a balance. There is need to improve our food sector by making it self-sufficient and sustainable, which the government's World Bank driven policies are failing to do.

It is not the pesticides, the chemical fertilizers, the high yield seeds or the genetically modified plants that we need. It is a return to the traditional farming methods of our ancestors that is the need of the day. In the West the health-conscious consumers are now turning to food produced by organic farming methods.

A project is on the cards to take organic farming at a minimal cost to the kachchi abadis of Karachi. There is an appeal for donors to come forward to help in this project — which should ultimately lead to the establishment of an agricultural school to teach organic farming methods to our cultivators. One hopes this appeal will not fall on deaf ears.

Assessing the corporate approach to farming

VIEW



SYED MOHAMMAD ALI

The enthusiasm now surrounding the idea of corporate farming is a reminder of the euphoria over the success in having attracted independent power producers to the country. It will be a good idea to pay heed to different views before implementing corporate farming policies

WHILE AGRICULTURE PLAYS A PROMINENT role in our national economy, the downward fluctuation in agricultural growth rate and the rising food import bill make evident the need for achieving greater efficiency. Yet identifying a course of action in this regard is neither easy nor safe from contentions.

Proponents of corporate farming in the country

believe that corporate involvement alone can attract the much-needed investment and technology to make the agricultural sector more efficient. Swayed by their arguments, the present government has decided to grant corporate farming the status of an industry, provide it access to industrial credit facilities and to forego revenues in the form of customs duties on agricultural machinery. To entice global agri-business corporations to cultivate large tracts of land, the federal government wants to abolish the upper limit on allotment of land on lease.

The Ministry of Food and Agriculture and the Board of Investment support this as does the Shariat Court. The Federal Land Commission, however, has opposed abolition of the upper limit on land holding stating that this will negate the very basis of land reforms in Pakistan. While the four provinces have yet to agree on a uniform policy regarding the allotment of land on lease for corporate agriculture farming, they have identified 6.67 million acres of land available for leasing to corporate farming concerns.

So the stage is set to encourage corporate agriculture in the country. Multinational concerns are also keenly awaiting finalisation of government policies. And why shouldn't they be keen? Dividends from Corporate Agriculture Farming (CAF) policy can be remitted and CAF is to be exempt from labour laws. This is clearly a policy designed with the convenience of investors in mind. They can undertake industrialised agriculture in a developing country with vast tracts of land that offer the chance for lucrative turnovers.

But what about the local farmers and the millions of landless peasants in the country? What will happen to them as CAF takes over? The withdrawal of subsidies and support prices, the imposition of general sales tax on fertilisers, and the increase in power tariffs have already pushed the farmers to the wall. There are fears that misplaced generosity towards investors will hurt the local implements

manufacturing industry. Moreover, the corporate farming investors equipped with latest machinery and capital will have an unbeatable competitive edge over local farmers. While big landlords can at least register a private limited company under CAF and transfer their land in its name, smaller farmers have little to gain from this approach to agriculture.

Activists in fact fear that implementation of CAF policy would result in massive eviction of indigenous communities presently living on state land. Parallels have been drawn between Pakistan and some 'banana republics' where corporate giants took over vast tracts of lands with the support of military regimes to grow bananas. To maximise their profits, they blatantly violated labour rights. While Pakistan may not become a banana republic that easily, transforming our agricultural sector into an export and profit making endeavour remains a difficult task.

Taking a myopic approach in this regard could endanger the country's food security and have unacceptable environmental costs. Besides making life even more difficult for subsistence farmers, by focusing on producing high-value cash crops rather than food crops, corporate farming would undermine the food security of the country. Moreover, multinational companies could exacerbate the environmental damage associated with modern agricultural practices. As it is, herbicides and insecticides are accumulating in ground and surface waters and waste products of poultry and livestock operations across the country are becoming unmanageable. Multinational operations can hardly be expected to improve the situation.

The Indus River System Authority, too, will have a tough time catering to the water needs of cultivable wasteland since this system can hardly meet the existing irrigational requirements of the provinces. It seems unlikely that corporate farms will bother with improving irrigation practices. It would be much easier for them instead to

harvest water from underground sources and contribute to its depletion.

The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, to which Pakistan is a signatory, supports the need for equitable distribution to promote food security and sustainable agricultural practices. The Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper for Pakistan also categorically ascribed to the idea of distributing state-owned land among the poor to help them out of vicious circle of poverty. Yet donor evaluation mechanisms seem to be either forgetting or ignoring the reality on the ground in endorsing the corporate farming policy initiatives.

Ultimately however it is the government's responsibility to think carefully about the real problems and requirements of agriculture sector and farming community. Land should not be passed off to business concerns just because the government has the right to own it. Networks of civil society organisations like the Sustainable Agriculture, and farmer groups like the Poor Farmers Movement, are instead demanding that besieged tenants and the landless poor be given the cultivable wasteland owned by the government.

Even if the policy makers think that they cannot afford to be so generous to the landless poor, they must at least realise the imperative of thinking of agricultural productivity in terms of the ground realities of our rural landscape and in terms of long-term sustainability issues instead of eying only the increases in foreign exchange reserves. The enthusiasm now surrounding the idea of corporate farming is a reminder of the euphoria over the success in having attracted independent power producers to the country. It will be a good idea to pay heed to different views before implementing corporate farming policies.

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