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Building Networks of Food Sovereignty in South and Southeast Asia

Sarah Wright, University of Newcastle, Australia

Introduction

A meeting in Bandung in Indonesia, in December 2006 brought together 35 representatives from farmers' organizations and farmers movements from across South and Southeast Asia. The conference, 'Asian Conference on Farmers Rights and Food Sovereignty', was convened by No Patents on Life - Asia (NPOL Asia) and the Asian Peasant Coalition (APC). The invited organizations were largely nationally-based networks of farmers' networks, or peoples' organizations, with some southern support agencies such as the Third World Network and the Pesticide Action Network, Asia Pacific. The participants were there to strengthen their critiques of the current globalized system of food production, to share information on peasant initiatives from different countries in the region, and to develop possibilities for action.

Bandung, of course, is a significant location in the history of the creation of alternative Southern networks. In 1955, the Bandung conference saw newly independent states meet to build an African-Asian alliance hosted by then President Soekarno, a meeting that saw the birth of the non-aligned movement. This 2006 meeting had similar aspirations to change. Though certainly not as newsworthy as the 1955 conference, not convened by heads of state but rather by farmer leaders and support NGOs, the vision of this group meeting to discuss food sovereignty, was similarly aimed at imagining and creating new networks, new configurations of power and new forms of practice in opposition to dominant structures. Indeed, the emphasis on farmer leaders and on place-based networks rather than politicians or national figures reflects the kind of geographies and the kinds of emphases prioritized by the movement.

Much like the concept of food sovereignty itself, the Asian Conference on Farmers Rights and Food Sovereignty and the participant organizations themselves, had a dual focus on analyzing/critiquing dominant systems, and in discussing existing initiatives. Fundamental to the platform of the conference and the position of the organizations represented, is that the work and knowledges of farmers must be recognized: their efforts in breeding seeds, developing appropriate agricultural systems, creating and

sustaining communities and in providing food, must be acknowledged and supported.

Much of the discussion around food and food production, whether within academia, in mainstream media discourse or in critical accounts, focuses on the overwhelmingly negative impacts of an encroaching and all-consuming capitalist system. While I in no way want to diminish the importance of these analyses, what they *can* do is contribute to a debilitating and disempowering construction of a world within which alternatives are marginalized and scripted as close to impossible. Yet the food sovereignty movement and the organizations represented in Bandung explicitly work against the debilitating mantra of TINA (there is no alternative) pointing out not only are there a large number of already existing so-called alternatives, but that these represent the realities of life for billions. The organizations represented at the conference alone have over 20 million members from Bangladesh, India, Malaysia, Nepal, Philippines, Indonesia, Pakistan, Mongolia, Vietnam, and Cambodia.

The importance of displacing capitalocentric accounts of the economy, and of food and agricultural systems more specifically, is increasingly recognized within the social sciences (see for example Community Economies Collective 2001; Gibson-Graham 1996, 2006; Leyshon, Lee, and Williams 2003). While it is crucial to continue building critiques that focus on the imbalances, exclusions and oppressive effects of a globalized neo-liberal system of food, it is also important to recognize the important work that *is* being done, to pay attention to the ways that farmers, social movements, indeed all kinds of people in all kinds of ways, create and defend alternatives. In geography, for example, the work of JK Gibson Graham (Gibson-Graham 1996, 2006; Hughes 2005) and others point out that far from being homogenous and all-encompassing, the economy is in fact a diverse space, full of existing alternatives, of people and organizations that have carved out spaces of non-capitalism, underpinned by different kinds of values and supported by different forms of exchange.

In agrofood studies, research has also increasingly turned to recognizing alternative food networks and short supply chains (Renting, Marsden and Banks 2003). Yet to date, much of the work in this area has focused on countries of the north, in particular Europe, the US and Canada. Here the literature expresses concern about the viability

of these systems, and their ability to meet social justice concerns (for example, if organic or 'quality' produce is available only to middle and upper class consumers). While these concerns are indeed pertinent, there is a certain lack of resonance with the actions of farmers' movements within the Global South. Certainly, there is a lot to learn from the experiences of farmers in the majority world. It is here that many of the strongest critiques and the most vibrant alternatives can be found.

It is within this context that I turn to the question of food sovereignty. Certainly as a movement, a framework for understanding sustainable agricultural systems and as a platform for action, food sovereignty has much to offer. Food sovereignty calls for new geographies of food production and consumption that are centered around small-scale, locally based food networks underpinned by principles of autonomy and farmers rights. In calling for food sovereignty, social movements are calling for a respatialization of food systems and a reconfiguring of power relations associated with the production, consumption and distribution of food.

Unlike many platforms associated with alternative agricultural networks, food sovereignty is neither premised on a defensive localism or on a middle class concern for 'quality' produce. Although food sovereignty does prioritize place based agricultural systems, its concern is also with networks and exchange. Clearly the building of a pan-Asian network through the Bandung meeting and other international conferences centered on food sovereignty such as Forum for Food Sovereignty in Selingue Mali in 2007 show that food sovereignty is foremost about re-imagining networks and about creating a different kind of networked space at once grounded in the most place-based soils of any farm, and at the same time differently global.

At its core, though, food sovereignty is rooted in practice and I think this is an area that is relatively thin in terms of the current work on food sovereignty. The concept paper of the Bandung conference Farmers Rights and Food Sovereignty elaborates this point with a strong focus on recognizing the long-term contributions of farming communities and of recognizing the actually-existing realities of this work. The paper says:

Farmers movements in Asia have long been saving, exchanging and

improving seeds and animal breeds, doing farmer-led research, continuously struggling for genuine agrarian reform, aspiring towards food sovereignty and autonomy of communities - and are intensifying these efforts and strengthening their movements. These are farmers' rights in practice, upheld by rural communities in situ.

In line with this focus, I'll turn now to two farmers movements involved in the network to talk a bit about how they understand farmers' rights and food sovereignty.

MASIPAG

So firstly, MASIPAG. MASIPAG is a Filipino network of small farmers with a membership of over 30,000 farming families throughout the Philippines. The organization came about after a 1987 conference on the Green Revolution brought together Filipino farmers, peoples organizations, NGOs and scientists to discuss the problems associated with the increase in chemical-based, high input agriculture. Central to that original critique was the 'colonization' of the mind associated with the Green Revolution where solutions were seen as coming from 'experts.' Not only was the agrobiodiversity being lost, many farmers becoming increasingly indebted, agricultural increasingly capitalized and the environment damaged, but the knowledges and skills of Filipino farmers were in danger of being eroded.

As the organization states:

"farmers clamor to bring back the culture and agriculture that they almost lost - thus MASIPAG was born."

The organization now works in farmer-led agriculture 'to determine and develop our futures.' With the following as its core strategies:

- Bottom up approach (prioritizing community needs, problems and aspirations, supporting community initiatives, participatory decision making)
- Farmer-scientist partnership (planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation)
- Farmer-led research and training (through farmer-managed trial farms/seedbanks, training centers, experiment stations)
- Farmer-to-farmer mode of transfer (seed and technology diffusion)

- Advocacy (e.g. land reform, no patenting of life, GMO banning).

Recently an in-depth evaluation of the network was undertaken by the German organization MISEREOR by Dr. Lorenz Bachmann, Virgilio R. Aguilar, Dr. Romeo G. Teruel with some very positive results. The evaluation interviewed 300 farming families: 100 full organic, 80 in conversion without sugarcane, 20 in conversion with sugarcane and 100 reference farmers for control purposes. The average farm size was 1.5 hectares.

The study found that MASIPAG farmers employed more labour on average than the control group, used more communal labour schemes and had a considerably higher on-farm diversity. MASIPAG farmers attained the same average yield with reduced indebtedness and achieved higher food security outcomes. Clearly these results have multiple social, economic and environmental consequences and speak to the diverse possibilities associated with food sovereignty. For example, the increased labor speaks to the potential for multiplier effects within the communities, while the increased use of communal techniques speaks to a reworking of agricultural and economic practice.

Yet it also highlights some of the complexities associated with diverse economic geographies. For example, a significant portion of income for the farming families came from nonfarm sources including from remittances sent both from within the Philippines and beyond. This means farmers are indeed tied into economic circuits well beyond the short supply chains. Similarly, the ongoing issue with debt particularly in the poorest households, though reduced by the food sovereignty approach was not, unfortunately eliminated.

UBINIG and Nayakrishi Andolon

A second example is UBINIG and its partner organization Nayakrishi Andolon. UBINIG grew out of study circles held in Bangladesh in 1981 looking at development, poverty, population, gender and related issues. UBINIG now works with several different movements within Bangladesh including Nayakrishi Andolon. It is involved both with supporting small farmers as well as national, regional and international campaigns.

The group Nayakrishi Andolon (New Agriculture Movement) now involves over 170,000 farming families. The movement sees itself as going beyond sustainable agriculture per se to focus on regenerating and supporting the ways of life, economic strategies and social relations of rural communities.

The principles of Nayakrishi Andolon include using no pesticides and chemical fertilisers, managing pests through conservation, and constant regeneration of biodiversity at the household and community level. The movement supports community seed wealth centres in many locations to recover traditional varieties and support the development of new varieties. The movement uses a whole-of-farm approach calculating total production and income from the whole system rather than a single crop.

This has led to good food security outcomes for farmers who are less reliant upon inputs and have been able to stabilise yields leading to an increase in cash incomes and an overall increase in farm yields. As with MASIPAG, the focus is not only on 'recovering' knowledges but supporting farmer innovation by recognising and building upon existing knowledges while also drawing, where appropriate from other knowledge frameworks.

Conclusions

The emphasis on eschewing agrochemical inputs in favor of sustainable rice production and rejecting hybrid and genetically modified seeds to focus on breeding, saving and swapping seed in both these examples and the many other organizations represented at the Bandung meeting means shortening supply chains and radically transforming the geographies of production and consumption through a food sovereignty approach (Renting, Marsden, and Banks 2003). As the farmer members grow rice and other food for own consumption, and then for sale directly to kin and neighbors and only then for wider markets, consumption and production are linked more tightly. Consumers and producers are brought closer through a place based agricultural approach. They are also linked to each other and to the environment through the shared health impacts of changing economic practice. The choice to grow organically is experienced as a health benefit both for the workers (in the production

of rice without synthetic chemicals) and by a closely overlapping group of consumers. It is also experienced by the environment in ways that will hopefully recirculate in beneficial ways to the residents of the town (by cleaner water for example).

Certainly, the globalizing agricultural system has had intense impacts on farmers and farming communities who face increasing costs for inputs, decreasing prices and ever-expanding vulnerabilities. Yet there are many instances of farmers and farmer movements carving out different kinds of spaces, different forms of agriculture underpinned by different kinds of norms. And in doing so successfully - both in terms of food security outcomes, increasing viability of local economic systems and increasing agrodiversity. Food sovereignty means recognizing the work that has been and is being done, and acknowledging farmer agency and farmer knowledges as farming communities continue to create hard won, viable and vital alternative agricultural and economic systems.

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