

Pull-out supplement

theFocus



Local economy and subsistence stretched beyond capacity due to mass influx of migrant workers for cash crop plantation

Villagers resettled elsewhere, indigenous forests cleared, and wildlife habitats destroyed to make way for the new hydropower dam

Economic Land Concession for foreign company

Food security strategies in South and Southeast Asia:

Improving food security in a context of land grabbing?

In the 1960s and early 1970s, many countries in South and Southeast Asia were the focus of world attention due to their frequent occurrence of food shortages. These shortages were met by large amounts of food imported through food aid or similar programmes. Several pessimistic predictions were made about the future of food security in Asia on the basis of the severity of these shortages. For example, the Asian Development Bank's 1977 survey predicted increasing food grains deficits unless remedial measures were undertaken in most of these countries, and by the late 1970s, India was categorized as a lost cause, since there was no hope for it to increase its food supplies.

Annelies Zoomers

Food security strategies in South and Southeast Asia

DESPITE THESE GLOOMY EXPECTATIONS, most of the populous countries of Asia were able to achieve significantly higher growth in domestic food production after the mid 1970s. Thanks to the Asian Green Revolution, by the mid 1980s most countries had recorded significant increases in their food production through the widespread adoption of new seed-fertilizer technology, and had considerably improved their performance in providing food to their people. However, a number of problems remained: the per capita availability of food grains (domestic production + imports) – or more specifically, the per capita food and calorie availability – remained inadequate in most of the countries. In addition, many countries were unable to find an appropriate solution to the problem of wide year-to-year fluctuations in their food output, and – despite rapid economic growth and higher growth rates in food production – many countries were unable to provide a large number of poor people with access to food.

Current problems

This section of The Newsletter, brought to you by the IIAS, provides an update on the food security debate in the context of Asia, by focusing on current trends in Indonesia, Vietnam, Cambodia and China. The FAO estimates that of the world's 925 million undernourished people, 62% are in Asia and the Pacific, where some 578 million people are suffering from chronic hunger, especially in Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia and Pakistan. Countries like China and India, which are home to 40% of the undernourished, have very little suitable land and clean water for growing additional food commodities (FAO/WFP, 2010). According to a recent report on the MDGs, people in Afghanistan, China, Bangladesh, North Korea, India, Indonesia, Kazakstan, Nepal, Pakistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan suffer from hunger in various forms (Mukherjee, 2008). Climate change is also having a negative impact on food security due to drought and the incidence of extreme weather conditions, making agriculture a more risky business and leading to all kinds of expected and unexpected effects (plagues etc.) that have negative implications for productivity.

Although population growth rates are slowing down in most Asian countries, the per capita demand for food grains in such countries as China, Malaysia and Indonesia is increasing very rapidly as a result of higher incomes. Hence, despite notable acceleration in the growth rates of domestic production, food imports have become an important source of increasing the availability of food. China currently imports 15-18 million tonnes of food grains annually; the figure for Malaysia and Indonesia is 2 million tonnes each. Given the expected growth in consumption in the rapidly growing Asian countries, the surpluses originating in the region will not be sufficient to meet import demands.

Rapidly rising food prices are making food imports increasingly expensive for food importing countries, and rising import and domestic prices of food grains are likely to adversely affect the poor and vulnerable sections in these countries. Increasing numbers of urban poor are food insecure due to their lack of purchasing power. In most Asian countries, the per capita availability of food and nutrition continues to remain far below the required levels.

Food security strategies today

Today, decades after the Asian Green Revolution and despite rapid economic growth, food security is again high on the political agenda. In his opening speech at the 18th ASEAN Summit in Jakarta in May 2011, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono of Indonesia called for clear and concrete cooperation among ASEAN member countries to secure food supplies for their peoples.² He suggested the immediate implementation of the ASEAN Integrated Food Security Framework, which emphasizes food security and emergency/shortage relief, sustainable food trade development, an integrated food security information system, and agricultural innovation. However, solving the food problem is in many cases incompatible with other priorities. Current research in Indonesia, Vietnam, Cambodia, China, the Gulf states and Central Asia shows an enormous variety in food securing strategies, and the possibilities for finding regional solutions are limited, also because of the lack of coherent policies and competing agendas.

When characterizing countries on the basis of their food security strategies, it is interesting to make a distinction between three groups, each of which has different strategies that will slowly materialize into new, internal and external political relations.

The first category includes the capital-rich, resource-poor countries that are investing in offshore farming in Africa, Latin America and Asia. Countries like China, India, Japan and the Gulf states (as well as e.g. Brazil, South Africa and Mauritius) are actively searching for land in order to guarantee the food security of their national populations, and are buying and/or leasing large areas of land overseas. The most important host countries that are receiving large-scale farm investments are Cambodia, Laos, Ethiopia, the Philippines, Madagascar, Mozambique, Tanzania and Sudan.

The second category is composed of countries that are putting major efforts into becoming agro-hubs for certain commodities in order to achieve food security and to create a stable source of income. For example, Indonesia and Malaysia (co-financed by, for example, South Korea and Saudi Arabia) are making major investments in becoming world leaders in oil palm production, while Vietnam and Thailand are trying to become world leaders in rice, rubber, fish, etc. Such countries use domestic and foreign investments to strengthen food production in their own territories and to establish agro-hubs or develop corridors.

The third category comprises countries whose main strategy is to sell or lease out land to foreign investors. The ensuing economic development might in the longer run contribute to food security by improving people's purchasing power. Examples of such countries are Laos (investments in rice, rubber and coffee by Thailand, Vietnam, Mongolia and Gulf states), Cambodia (investments in rice, rubber and tourism development by Gulf states, Singapore and Vietnam), and the Philippines (investments in rice, corn, sugar, fish and dam construction by China, Gulf states and South Korea). Myanmar, Bangladesh and Pakistan also fall within this category. Interestingly enough, while 'selling' the land to foreign investors, national governments sometimes play an active role in facilitating outmigration and stimulating the inflow of remittances, and in strengthening linkages with the diaspora. Large numbers of people mainly from Bangladesh and Pakistan, but also from India and Indonesia, work abroad, for example in the Gulf or Malaysia. Stimulating outmigration (or exporting labour, as in the case of the Philippines) can also be seen as a food security strategy.

Forced displacement of local population

Sold

Deforested land

New rubber plantation

stimulation of oil palm production led not only to deforestation, but also to the spread of oil palms to environmentally more vulnerable peat land areas and to an inflow of migrants that far exceeds the carrying capacities of the local economy (Burgers & Susanti, this issue). In West Kalimantan, the area devoted to oil palm has grown from 500,000 to over 3.2 million hectares since the 1990s (an area six times as large as Bali) and caused a sharp increase in the number of land conflicts: about 400 communities in Indonesia are now involved in such conflicts, while the figure for West Kalimantan alone is more than 50. Foreign companies are also interested in investing in reforestation projects in the context of the Clean Development Mechanism.

Conclusion: ways forward

Within Asia, food security strategies are very diverse and the situation is extremely heterogeneous: some countries play important roles as the drivers, while others are the hosts of large-scale investments in farmland for the production of food and biofuels. What many countries have in common, however, is that massive urbanization (as an autonomous process) and huge investments in infrastructure, tourism and/or dam construction are responsible for land use change at the expense of agricultural lands.

Despite the major efforts that many Asian countries are making to increase food security through investments, offshore farming, agro-hubs, etc., increasing numbers of displaced persons will move to and settle in vulnerable areas, where they will be more susceptible to climate change and local food security will deteriorate. More attention needs to be paid to both this human dimension and the environmental aspect, as heavy mono-cropping will impose a heavy burden on the environment, as happened during the Asian Green Revolution in the 1970s.

More attention must also be paid to the future implications of climate change. In Asia, 40% of the population lives within 60 km of the coast, and it is estimated that some 332 million people living in low-lying coastal zones will be threatened by flooding or tropical storms. The number of environmental refugees is estimated at 10 million (Black, 2001); made homeless not only by flooding, but also by scarcity of resources and desertification. This will lead to large-scale, though probably gradual population displacements and new demands for land (Castles, 2002).

If food security is to be guaranteed in the long run, governments must protect the rights of local groups, ensure policy coherence (i.e. align food and fuel policies) and implement responsible land-use planning. Governments throughout the world should also remember that food security will become a great challenge not only for Asia, but for all of us.

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Notes

- 1 <http://isidev.nic.in/pdf/fdst.PDF>
- 2 <http://www.apnfs.net>

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Displacement and enclosure

As only three years have passed since the start of the most recent food crisis, it is too early to arrive at any conclusions. However, food security is increasingly at risk in all three categories of countries. The striving for economic growth and foreign investments is increasingly accompanied by development-induced displacement, namely the forced displacement of the local population. The World Bank estimates that in 2000, some 10 million people were displaced in China, India, Thailand and Cambodia as a result of economic growth (Cernea, 2000). Although countries like China might manage to secure food by buying and/or leasing land in, for example, Africa, Latin America or Kazakstan (Ho & Hoffman, this issue), such investments can be at the expense of local food security. Within China, large numbers people are displaced due to rapid urbanization or dam construction (in order to respond to China's growing need for fresh water, electricity and flood control). For instance, the building of the Three Gorges Dam resulted in the forced migration of 2 million people. Sullivan (2007) speaks of 'a war' between the Chinese state and the local society, whose food security is threatened.

In Cambodia, some indigenous groups have become enclosed by rubber plantations as a result of government policies focused on attracting foreign investment, and are thus losing access to forest areas and local food and livelihood security (Vuthy & van Westen, this issue). In Vietnam, the expansion of acacia plantations and the protection of forests have restricted people's access to woodland, while the construction of hydropower dams to meet the rapidly increasing energy needs often leads to the displacement or resettlement of local groups in more marginal lands with access to less land or woodland (Pham Huu, Tran Nam & van Westen, this issue). In Indonesia, the government's