

Brief report of Media workshop on Food Sovereignty
Held on July 5th, 2011 at Kolkata Press Club

Background of the workshop

Food Sovereignty Network South Asia (FSNSA) is actively working in the field of promotion of Food sovereignty and right to food in various South Asian countries. Food sovereignty is closely associated with good governance, and full realization of human rights, for which it is fundamental to sensitize larger Civil Society including media persons about various aspects of existing international human rights instruments, for example, right to food, Voluntary Guidelines on Right to Food, Guidelines adopted in International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural development, MDG 1 etc. All these instruments are directly linked with right to land and livelihoods too, which is becoming increasingly important for poor actors in our South Asian countries.

There are different policies and programmes to address poverty and hunger scenario in various South Asian countries. We believe it is possible to identify several good practices and policies from among these nations and it is important to circulate/share those experiences with other countries, for possible replication of such good practices, which will strengthen basic pillars of our democracy. It is needless to mention here that media can play a vital role regarding sharing such experiences across the countries and advocating for more pro-people and pro-poor policy reforms.

In accordance with the above mentioned objectives, FSNSA in collaboration with Kolkata Press Club organized a regional Media workshop on 5th July, 2011 at Kolkata.

Leading media persons from Nepal, Bangladesh and various Indian states meaningfully participated in this workshop. Apart from this, prominent Civil Society organizations from India that are actively working in the field of promotion of right to food and food sovereignty also joined this workshop.

The workshop was inaugurated by Shri Biplab Halim. He cordially welcomed the participants who in spite of their busy schedule have traveled long distances to take part in this workshop.

In his introductory speech Shri Halim said the World Food Summit, held in 1996, declared that ideal food security will be achieved when all people will have access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food, encompassing both the physical availability and the economic access. The global commitments made in the Rome Declaration at the World Food Summit in 1996, in particular to halve the number of hungry in the world no later than 2015, were further renewed in 2002 Rome Summit. He further went on to add that, disparity of wealth and land ownership is not a new phenomenon. Over 963 million people do not have enough to eat and majority of them live in South Asia. Land grabbing is occurring on a scale and at a rate faster than ever known before. Shri Halim further drew attention to NSSO survey that says 11.2% rural people go hungry every night and said the main causes of poverty in South Asia are rooted in its history which has promoted a structure of socio, economic and cultural discriminations and which is creating poverty. Poverty situation has been worsened by neo-liberal policies and programmes which are imposed on poor and developing states by powerful global actors. Poor actors, peasants, fishers, forest dwellers, pastoralists, rural women who are producers of food, often go hungry in our countries because they do not have access to land, water, forest or alternative income opportunities. Problems of hunger, malnutrition and disease afflict the poorest in society and the poorest people have less access to health, education and other services. The poorest are also

typically marginalized from society and have little representation or voice in public and political debates, making it even harder to escape poverty. “These issues deserve our attention and for that reason we thought one interactive session with the media might be helpful”, said Shri Biplab Halim.

This was followed by self introduction of the participants.

Shri Debabrata Bandhyapadhyay, former bureaucrat and presently Trinamool MP and land expert, spoke about two types of land threats - land slaughter and land robbery. What happened at Singur was land robbery, since highly fertile multi-cropping land was given at throwaway prices to a private firm. Land slaughter happens when fertility and productiveness of soil is destroyed by activities like chemical intensive agriculture, shrimp culture and other industries at the behest of MNCs/TNCs. He elaborated this point with a particular example of brick fields. Brick fields are playing mayhem on the fertility of land in West Bengal as it scours the top layers of the soil totally tearing it off its productivity. The same land, losing its fertile nature, is then sold out at throwaway prices.

As an alternative to the use of top soil layers for brick manufacturing, Bandopadhyay suggested shifting to the manufacturing of fly-ash bricks. He feels huge amounts of fly-ash that are generated by thermal power plants can be utilized for brick manufacturing. Another option is shifting of these brick kilns at the banks of dried-up rivers and alluvial soil of these rivers can be utilized for manufacturing bricks.

Speaking at the seminar on food sovereignty with select journalists from India, Bangladesh and Nepal, Bandhyapadhyay also expressed strong opinion against contract farming which he believes is gradually destroying food security and food sovereignty of the nation and is eventually leading to subjugation of individual peasantry.

Mocking the proposal of second green revolution, Shri Bandhyapadhyay said, “High intensity fertilizers and genetically modified seeds do not mean a green revolution. What is required now is intensive research to develop indigenous organic farming. We need such policies which reduce use of chemical fertilizer, reduce dependence on corporate agriculture and strengthen community initiatives to produce organic fertilizers.” Shri Bandhyapadhyay informed the participants that all his major recommendations and observations that he shared in the workshop will be reflected in the proposed Land Bill.

Speaking about what role Media should play, Shri Bandhyapadhyay said, “Media plays a crucial role in influencing public opinion; promoting democracy and good governance; influencing people’s behaviour; and supporting people-oriented policies. Media should highlight true causes of farmers’ suicide. Media highlights industrial losses that occur when a strike takes place but when 22000 BT cotton farmers committed suicide in Vidharba that did not catch the attention of media. Media should make people aware about the ill impact of genetically modified seeds.”

This was followed by a presentation on hunger scenario in India by Dr.Ujjaini Halim. Dr.Halim said, “Food is essential to life. Food not only provides the basic sustenance for physical survival and nutrition for healthy human existence; food is also a key element of people’s culture. The world now produces enough food to feed everyone, and yet millions of people, including six million children under the age of five, die each year as a result of hunger and chronic malnutrition.”

Speaking about Food Sovereignty Dr.Halim said, “Food sovereignty is the power of people and their communities to assert and realize the right to food and produce food and fight the power of corporations and other forces that destroy the people’s food production systems and deny them food and life.” She clearly differentiated between food security and food sovereignty by saying, “Food security means to the availability and access to sufficient safe food, whereas food sovereignty involves both ownership and the rights of local people to define local food systems, without first being subject to international market concerns. ”

Dr.Halim also spoke about ensuring women’s access to productive resources; protecting women’s capacity and knowledge such as seed conservation, animal husbandry and the like as well as promoting and protecting indigenous peoples’ rights to ancestral domain and self-determination to their own production and food distribution systems and culture.

Speaking about media’s role, Dr. Halim said, ‘This workshop has been organized to sensitize media persons on issues pertaining to food security and food sovereignty. We want media to bring to light social issues that directly affect the lives of our people. Having said this I must add that Indian media deserve appreciation as well. It has played a constructive role in making struggles of peoples on various rights based issues (e.g.Singur, Nandigram, POSCO, Noida land grabbing) public and is regularly keeping us updated on crucial matters like Singur Land Acquisition Act , proposed Land acquisition Bill in India, Lokpal Bill, Right to Food bill and so on.’

Following this presentation the House was open for discussion and the participants shared their diverse opinions on what role a conscientious and responsible media should play in order to ensure food security.

Media definitely plays a very instrumental role in our lives. It has connected the whole world and transformed it into a village where people are embraced with the smallest news of each and every corner of the world. But now days its commercialization has made their awareness motive take a backseat. Each and every news is being exaggerated for increasing their TRP. As Mr.Arunava Patra of NEWS TIME says, “Now we all need breaking news therefore electronic media can’t sell slow news”. He even went to the extent of comparing Media with reality show and further added that Media is not at all solution to problems; Civil Society must start the movement and Media can highlight the campaigns.

Mr.Sohail Ahmed of Doordarshan too shared a similar view when he said, “Media has a huge responsibility of conveying the truth and relevant information to the common man. But somewhere this seems to be taking a back seat for media people as they are focusing more on commercialization. Now days, hot news which can help in increasing the TRP rates of the channel becomes the priority for them. But there are still some ethical people in media who are struggling to maintain the real purpose of it. Sensible and responsible Media can play a comprehensive role in influencing public opinion as well as policy makers”.

Media is not just confined to informing us about the world happenings and serving a means to connect with people, in fact it also affects our thinking patterns as well. The way we think and perceive various issues about the world is also shaped up by media. Campaign such as Teach India and Jaago Grahak Jaago helps in spreading awareness about human rights and duties. This is why Mr.Anurag Dey of INS felt it was the principal duty of media to remain accountable for their actions. He went on to add that, “Media access to public information and their ability to accurately transmit such information for the benefit of the public is a pre-requisite for national

development. Media need to be free and independent, have the capacity to reflect diverse views, and the ability to report on various subjects, while remaining accountable.”

Participants from Nepal were of the opinion that Media’s role could be negative for the society if they were selective, bias, sensational, and inclined to propaganda and media vices. For the media to effectively play their role in national development, they must be free and independent. Free press is a crucial factor in the performance of the media.

“In Nepal political issues get more attention than social issues. Media only looks for those news that have in them both sensational and saleable quotient”, said Mr.Binod Ghimire, a senior journalist working for Kathmandu Post.

Mr. Hari Parajuli, a senior representative of ANPFa (All Nepal Peasants’ Federation) said, “Anpfa’s very strong influence made it possible to include food sovereignty in our interim constitution. However several problems are cropping up while trying to finalize interim constitution because of the dilemma between neo-liberal thoughts and left ideologies. Nepalese Congress is taking dubious position and trying to jeopardize social/economic issues.” Mr.Parajuli further said, “Earlier Nepal was a food surplus country, Indian green revolution badly affected Nepal’s farming, and now Nepal has turned to be a food deficit country.”

Shri Guru Kalyan Mahapatra of a leading Oriya daily rightly said, “From food security to food sovereignty, we need to bother about our future generations. We have to know the ground reality like POSCO. Media can also highlight the positive achievements of the government. However it is important for Media to be more down to earth and have the knack of knowing the ground realities.”

“Media can serve some news with statistics; people really rely on media because it is a quick access to information. The need of the hour is to hold our states and other global actors accountable in terms of rights and creates pressure on these actors to listen to peoples aspirations and to ensure inclusive governance at grassroots and in this regard Media can play a crucial role”, said Ms.Hasina Akhter of Bangladesh.

Mr. Premananda Ghosh, President of Kolkata Press Club thanked all participants for joining this interesting discussion. He said media can play a positive role because they are always in contact with people at grassroots level as well as with policymakers.

Shri Ghosh further said in a country like India where 40% people live in abject poverty and where gender discrimination is rife, food security enhancement is also a responsibility for media. He cited the example of great poet, Rabindranath Tagore who is often called the pioneer of rural development. Tagore sent his son to Illinois University for learning agriculture so that upon his return to India he can productively contribute to ensure food security of his countrymen. Shri Ghosh drew attention to the fact that food security is all of our concern and our education should help people to access food.

There was a round of discussion regarding future plan of action moderated by Dr.Halim. The participants agreed on the subsequent plan of action.

- Similar meetings could be organized at all levels including district and community level to sensitize media persons. It is imperative to hold sustained discussions on food sovereignty among media

- Exchange visit to other South Asian countries for media persons could be organized to study the ground realities of other countries
- Continue sensitization of media persons about Food Sovereignty
- Interaction with local media, villagers and Gram Panchayat at rural areas
- Platform for information sharing on Food Sovereignty at South Asia level
- Strengthen Civil society – Media cooperation and link up peoples issue with media, where applicable involve media in peoples' campaign for rights
- Interaction with senior media personalities for effective advocacy and lobby
- Creation of e-group of the participants of the media workshop. FSNSA can take the responsibility to form e-group.
- Take initiative to develop a good network of concerned journalists at South Asia level

It was announced by FSNSA that a field visit would be organized the next day and many media persons registered their names for the visit. ¹

The workshop came to a close with concluding remarks and Vote of Thanks by Shri Biplab Halim.

¹ It may be mentioned here that the field visit was successfully organized the next day.