

From the pesticide trap to GMO-dependency. Experiences of small farmers in the south and their demands for the future.

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Agriculture is still the cornerstone of the Philippine economy. It contributes 20 percent to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the Philippines and agriculture-based industries account for another 10 percent of the GDP. Forty percent of the employed Filipinos rely on agriculture to earn a living while many others are working in agriculture-related industries and services. We can describe Philippine agriculture as export-oriented, import-dependent and foreign-dominated. Moreover, it is characterized by backward methods and relations of production.

We call it export-oriented because during the Spanish and American colonization, Philippine agriculture was re-oriented toward the export markets. Since then, the Philippines supplies the industrialized countries, especially the United States, with the agricultural products they need. Our country does not have any basic industries. Therefore agriculture is import-dependent as it has to import most farm inputs, tools and machines. This makes agriculture heavily dependent on foreign transnational and multinational corporations (TNCs and MNCs). For example, 9 out of 13 big pesticide companies in the Philippines are foreign firms including Monsanto, Dow, Novartis, Aventis and Bayer. They control 85 percent of the market. Even the few Filipino pesticide companies have to import almost all materials. They merely process the imported raw materials and package the finished products.

As Philippine agriculture is dependent on imports and oriented toward export, it is not surprising that Philippine agriculture is dominated by foreign corporations. On the one hand, big TNCs like Cargill, Bayer, AgrEvo, DOW and DuPont supply seeds, fertilizer, pesticides, tools and machines. On the other hand, TNCs like Nestlé, Dole and Del Monte are dominating the processing and trade of food and agricultural products. Some TNCs also engage in agricultural production and own or control vast tracts of land.

Methods and relations of production are backward. Majority of Philippine farmers still till the land like their forefathers did. They use simple tools like plow, sickle, harrow, cutlass etc. and draught animals like carabaos. Mechanization is limited and in many places almost non-existent. Most farms are very small, only 2.1 hectares on the average. Moreover, majority of the farmers do not own the lands they till and are bound by feudal and semi-feudal relations of exploitation as tenants, farmworkers, or lease-holders etc..

The major problem of farmers is landlessness. According to government data, out of every 100 farmers, 21 are agricultural workers, 28 are unpaid family workers, 26 are under some form of tenancy relation and only 25 own land. In short, more than 7 out of 10 farmers do not own the land they till. On the other hand, only a few families are controlling vast tracts of lands. Sixty percent of the agricultural lands are owned by 13 percent of the landowners. The biggest landlords, only 9,500 people, own more than 20

percent of all agricultural land.

1. The pesticide trap in the Philippines

Small farmers began to use pesticides intensively in the early 1970s. In 1973, the Marcos regime ushered in the era of the Green Revolution in the Philippines with his Masagana 99 program for rice and similar programs for corn and vegetables. This program had to spruce up the bogus land reform program he had launched in 1972, shortly after declaring martial law.

While his so-called land reform program was supposed to give the farmers the illusion of agrarian justice, Marcos' enthusiastic support for the Green Revolution had to project the image of modernization of the Philippines' backward agriculture. In reality, both programs were a means for Marcos and his cronies to consolidate their power in the countryside as well as an opportunity for TNCs to take advantage of the dictatorship to advance their business interests.

Masagana 99 provided credit opportunities for small rice farmers on the condition that they would plant government-recommended high-yielding varieties (HYVs) and purchase fertilizer and pesticides. As only ten varieties were on the program's list, the program was successful in eradicating indigenous rice varieties and destroying the Philippine biodiversity. By 1982, 93 percent of irrigated lowlands were planted to Green Revolution varieties.

By linking credit with compulsory membership in the barrio farmers' association (Samahang Nayan), Marcos strengthened his political power in the countryside. Making fertilizer and pesticide purchases mandatory was an effective means of consolidating the feudal characteristics of rural society in the Philippines. The feudal and semi-feudal exploitation of the landlords, rural bankers, traders and merchant- usurers pushed the peasants more deeply in the quagmire of perennial indebtedness.

Not only the local potentates were benefiting from this policy. Agrochemical TNCs raked in the profits as pesticide imports were growing fivefold in only six years. It is therefore not surprising that Marcos' agricultural policy was enthusiastically supported by the World Bank and its affiliates. The World Bank increased its lending for agriculture from 6 percent of the total bank lending in fiscal years 1948-1960, to 24 percent in 1973-1974. The World Bank and the Asian Development Bank opened a credit line for irrigation projects – indispensable for the success of Marcos' Green Revolution – in 1973 and provided a total of more than \$1 billion until 1984. These and other agricultural input loans had to prop up Marcos' TNC-friendly agricultural policies.

To support the Green Revolution, the Fertilizer and Pesticide Authority (FPA) was created in 1977. It served – and still serves -- as an instrument of the agrochemical industry that provided the first three administrators of this government agency. Although changes have been made in the leadership and "Integrated Pest Management" became one of its catchphrases, the FPA is still a vehicle for the pesticide industry. For example, FPA's training programs on the safe use of pesticides are conducted in collaboration with the Crop Protection Association of the Philippines (CPAP), an association of agrochemical companies.

Also the Philippines-based International Rice Research Institute (IRRI), established by the Rockefeller and the Ford Foundation in 1960, has been instrumental in the Green Revolution. Its research and the HYVs it developed were essential for Marcos' Masagana 99 program. Recently, IRRI's promotion of direct seeding strategies gave a new boost to herbicide use in Asia.

Expectedly, IRRI relies on financing from pesticide producing countries. The institute is said to collaborate with major pesticide manufacturers like Ciba-Geigy (now Novartis) and, as was recently exposed by PAN-AP, Monsanto. It is noteworthy that IRRI has also been hounded by complaints it has failed to sufficiently protect its workers from chemical poisoning. Even if there would be proof, however, the institute may not be sued, according to a 1979 presidential decree signed by Dictator Marcos granting it immunity.

2. Small farmers at the losing end

While the local elite and foreign companies benefited from the "Green Revolution," the small farmers were at the losing end. They were trapped by feudal and semi-feudal exploitative relations with big landlords - compradors and their country's neo-colonial dependence on the industrialized world.

Rice farmers -- most of whom are poor, landless farmers -- are the single biggest users of pesticides in the country. They employed more than 6,000 metric tons of pesticides in 1992 and highly toxic organophosphates (OPs) and some organochlorines (OCs) and carbamates, remain in widespread use. Philippine rice farmers, who lack adequate equipment or protective gear, are therefore exposed to considerable health hazards.

The effects of pesticide use on the environment also had tremendous impact on the small farmers. Before the widespread application of agrochemicals, their rice farms also provided them with fish, snails and other viands for free. The Green Revolution, however, put an abrupt end to this kind of self-sufficiency.

To make matters even worse, the correlation between pesticide use and productivity of the Philippines' major crops is very low. Already during the 70s, the farmers experienced that the expensive "miracle" seeds with their associated farm inputs did not provide them the miraculous harvests they were promised. While productivity improved at a snail's pace, costs of farm inputs were escalating. Consequently, many farmers were slowly sinking in the quagmire of debt.

During the 1980s, the scientific community finally admitted that insecticide use is generally not economical in rice cultivation while the yield-enhancing effects of pesticides are very small. Insecticides were even shown to induce resurgence of some pests. Nevertheless, Philippine imports of pesticides were still soaring throughout the 90s while yields in rice have stagnated throughout the decade and corn productivity has risen only marginally. With the further liberalization of the economy under the WTO, importation of pesticides rose to \$53.66 million in 1997.

3. Increasing dependence – increasing poverty

Just like the “Green Revolution,” the advance of biotechnology in Philippine agriculture reflects the converging interests between the local landlords, the other factions of the elite and foreign TNCs. Many developments in biotechnology are explicitly aimed at increasing farmers’ dependence on seeds and other farm inputs.

The first generation of high-tech, proprietary seeds focused on herbicide tolerance and insect resistance, trapping the farmers in a package deal, even more compelling than the “Green Revolution” technology. Farmers have no other choice but to buy the proprietary pesticides from the same company that sold them the seeds.

“Terminator” technology goes one step further in creating dependence. “Terminator” seeds are engineered to lose their germinating capacity thereby disabling farmers to save seeds for replanting and forcing them to purchase new seeds every planting season. With “Traitor” or “Junkie” seeds, the “Gene Giants” want to hook the farmers on their obnoxious products without any choice at all. These seeds are physically dependent on repeated applications of the companies’ proprietary chemical junk.

Genetically altered seeds seriously threaten the livelihoods of 1.4 billion people who depend on farm-saved seeds and who produce almost 20 percent of the world’s food. They are driving the farmers’ dependence to the limit. The little freedom that was left after the “Green Revolution” disaster is taken away by the “Gene Giants.” The monopoly position of the TNCs will ensure that there is no escape. While their crops are hooked on expensive chemicals, farmers will be forced into addiction to credit -- at the expense of their freedom and the survival of their families.

Increasing corporate control on agriculture goes hand in hand with intensifying imperialist globalization, severely undermining the potential of our agrarian economy to feed the Filipino people and provide the farmers with an adequate income. The structural adjustment programs of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, for example, eroded the sovereignty of poor countries through the imposition of liberalization, privatization and deregulation. Comprehensive trade liberalization under the aegis of the World Trade Organization further destroyed the local economy and opened it up for the unbridled dumping of surplus products from the industrialized countries.

In the Philippines, this resulted in the aggravation of the basic weaknesses of our economy. The dependence on imports, orientation toward exports and foreign domination have only intensified. Food sovereignty, self-reliance and economic independence, on the other hand, have disappeared from the government’s agenda while its land reform program, which never honored the “principle of land to the tiller,” turned into a means to bring vast tracts of land under the control of landlords and TNCs.

4. Peasant struggle breeds sustainable development

KMP has been at the forefront of the struggle for genuine land reform and against imperialist globalization since its founding congress in 1986. In a semi-feudal country like ours, the peasantry’s foremost demand is genuine land reform, or the breakup of

the landlords' monopoly on land. As the landlord class generally has the same interests as the local and foreign capitalists, the farmers easily understand why the peasant struggle is also a fight against imperialist globalization and corporate domination.

Through education, local KMP chapters are able to raise the farmers' awareness about the pervasive and nefarious effects of increasing corporate control on the rural economy and on the very lives of them and their families. More importantly, they show the peasants that they are able to put up resistance and develop alternatives through their concerted efforts.

Militant farmers associations at the grassroots engage in struggles against the local landlords and despots while defying corporate control through the development of collective and sustainable agriculture, like conservation, exchange and development of farm-saved seeds and defense of agricultural lands devoted to food production. Through these alternatives they are able to increase their productivity and develop the genetic resources using technology that is controlled by the farmers themselves, instead of greedy corporations.

Provincial and regional chapters stage mobilizations against the bastions of corporate agriculture to expose their complicity in the destruction of the country's agrarian economy and food sovereignty. The anniversary of the International Rice Research Institute in Los Baños, Laguna, for example has been marked by massive protest rallies of farmers in the Southern Tagalog region who oppose the institute's role in the promotion of corporate controlled agriculture.

Led by peasant leaders of KMP-Mindanao, more than 1,000 organized farmers and peasant advocates entered an experimental lot planted to Monsanto's Bt corn in Tampakan, South Cotabato last August 29. They slashed, uprooted and trampled the mutant corn to show their anger against the companies that are threatening their very lives and livelihoods through the introduction of genetically engineered crops. The farmers made clear that they are not against scientific research as long as it respects basic humanitarian principles, really intends to benefit the people and conducted comprehensively in a controlled environment by independent and credible group of scientists. However, field tests of a technology that is controlled by big TNCs, and is not yet proven safe, is highly unacceptable.

These local struggles are supported and amplified through nationally coordinated campaigns. The issue of increasing corporate domination is never absent in the nationwide peasant campaigns for genuine agrarian reform during the months of October and June. Moreover, the national government agencies, which are unfortunately all too often in connivance with the transnational corporations, are regularly reminded about their obligations to the people through pickets or protest rallies.

The international campaign against corporate control on Asian agriculture moved into gear with the "People's Caravan 2000: Citizens on the Move for Land and Food without Poisons! People Resist Agrochemical TNCs!" The caravan crossed India and Bangladesh, while support activities were held in Japan, South Korea and Indonesia, before culminating in the Philippines. More than 10,000 participants – mostly peasants

– took part in three weeks of education sessions, information drives and protest activities. The caravan successfully denounced the crimes of the agrochemical industry while asserting that safe food is possible wherever the iron grip of the TNCs on agricultural production is loosened by the peasants' militant assertion of their rights.

During 2001, KMP also participated in other international initiatives that addressed corporate control on agriculture. The First International Assembly of the International League for People's Struggle (ILPS), a broad alliance of anti-imperialist organizations, adopted several resolutions that supported the call against TNC control on agriculture.

Currently, the most exciting development is undoubtedly the setting up of the International Alliance Against Agrochemical TNCs, which will sustain the momentum of the People's Caravan. The convenors of the alliance met last May 29 in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, to map out common plans in the struggle against agrochemical corporations. The plan of action includes the exchange of information, coordinated campaigns and a People's Tribunal that will include the testimonies of victims of these corporations. A Philippine chapter of the alliance, Resistance and Solidarity against Agrochemical TNCs (RESIST Agrochem TNCs), was launched last September 14.

In all these campaigns, the cooperation between peasant organizations and grassroots-oriented institutions and NGOs has been very important. They provide know-how and technical expertise while engaging in mutually beneficial exchanges of experiences with the farmers. When scientists, researchers and NGO workers are ready to put their knowledge and skills at the service of the farmers and other oppressed and exploited sectors, they can play a very significant role in the people's struggle.

Jahanara Begum, a woman farmer from Bangladesh, said during last year's People's Caravan: *"Transnational companies, they come, they go. They don't care about our health or our environment. No more, we've had enough! For our survival we have to commit ourselves to land and food without poisons!"*

Together with Jahanara and many other small farmers from allover the world, the Philippine peasantry is determined to break free from the shackles that are restraining them. They are reclaiming the ownership and control of the land they till, the seeds they sow and the crops they grow.

To be truly sustainable, agriculture has to be brought under the control of farmers, the very people who have developed and nurtured it for ages. We are encouraged by the support this struggle draws from other sectors of society. Together, we can lay the foundations of a fair and equitable rural economy that will bring prosperity to the farmers instead of the corporations and that will provide nutritious food in abundance to those in need.