

A View on Sustainable Development in Agriculture: the experience of the peasant movements in Sri Lanka

Presented by:

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Introduction

Issues of sustainable agriculture, survival of small scale peasant farmers, eradication of hunger and poverty, threats to global environment and ecological survival, facing challenges of Globalization and new trends in global trade have become closely inter linked in today's world.

What is attempted in this presentation is to express the views that have emerged through the experiences of the peasant movements in Sri Lanka regarding the role and contribution that small scale peasant agriculture could make towards facing most of these interrelated challenges.

The relevance of the approaches proposed in Sri Lanka under the specific conditions and requirements in the country, towards working out solutions to the more global challenges in the wider context would also be examined.

According to Samir Amin and other analysts the present form of neo – liberal economic reforms of global scale threatens the very survival of about half the world's population who are largely small scale rural farmers or peasants.

The attempts made to reduce poverty using plans and strategies of global powers of capital have not succeeded and are likely to increase poverty and hunger in the world. The promises made by the World Powers to reduce hunger and poverty such as the MDGs (Millennium Development Goals) are not only unacceptable to all those who are poor and hungry today but have already proved to be unachievable.

The plans pushed by global capital to capture, take control over world's natural resources and enslave the whole of human kind for the purpose of unceasing and limitless accumulation of capital obviously threaten the very survival of both.

Although most of these have been obvious realities well known for quite some time and although there is a growing resistance to these destructive processes globally, the structures that have been created to continue these processes keep many of our societies imprisoned preventing the growth of a vision, a strategy and a program for an effective, radical change in the direction of solving the above combination of problems.

In this context, those who are completely excluded and rejected from the present systems such as the Globalized Market and those who are excluded from the present structures of political decision making (political power) are compelled and are better placed to create completely new ways of survival. They are placed in a situation where their own approaches and the visions emerging from their efforts have the potential for creating alternatives that can contribute towards a global resistance and a global alternative.

The effort made here is to identify the key elements of such an alternative approach, a vision and strategy and also some of the conceptual changes that are emerging in the process of such an alternative. What is discussed is based on the context and specific conditions and needs in Sri

Lanka. Therefore, some of the views presented here may not be applicable to other contexts. However an examination of some of the basic concepts about their wider applicability may be useful.

Our experiences and learning from the growing movements of peasants, the rural poor in other parts of the world have begun to convince us that some of these have much wider applicability and relevance.

Sri Lanka's context for rethinking on the approach to agriculture

Sri Lanka, a country that has had tremendous natural, cultural and historical advantages (advantages in historical indigenous knowledge and experience) in sustainable agriculture or what we would like to describe as "regenerative agriculture" has been subjected to a process of change, largely imposed from outside, over centuries, particularly since the period of colonial rule.

These changes have been brought about throughout the world and not been limited to agriculture alone but have involved all other aspects of life.

In the recent years, particularly during the last 30 years, the changes that have been introduced and have been accepted by most of society as necessary process of modernization or process of trying to fit into the modernizing world (described as necessary changes to fit into the realities of the world) have now created a situation where the very survival of a large section of society and resource base for survival is threatened.

Not Sustainability but Regeneration

In the search and struggle for survival of those who are so threatened the realization gradually emerging is that the way we deal with nature and its resources should be one where nature's potential to regenerate itself should be revived and recovered.

Therefore, what we need is not mere "sustainability" with mere reduction or removal of some aspects of human activity, production, consumption and dealing with nature's resources that makes the present forms unsustainable. What we need is a process of regenerating the potential that nature provides and could provide for, better survival of human and all other forms of life.

History of survival and improvement using nature's potential and human creativity

Sri Lanka has good sunlight through out the year and two seasons of rain that provides more than enough water. It also is very rich and diverse in plant and animal life. When the country had sufficient forest cover in the central hills where there was maximum rainfall, the forests prevented erosion and conserved the rich top soil. The process of birth, growth, production and reproduction provided food, nutrition, enrichment of human, animal and plant life. Death and decay enhanced by rich microbial activity and other processes of increasing soil fertility through the contribution of earth worms etc. enriched regeneration.

The patterns of land use and the forms of agriculture carried out then had to be necessarily in harmony and with natural regeneration. There are tremendous examples of such technology and cultural aspects of agriculture, production and consumption that had evolved out of this necessity. This presentation does not provide sufficient space to go into these aspects of not only sustainability but protection and enhancement of regeneration.

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Some of the important elements that can be summarized are

1. Adaptation of a deep understanding of the rainfall patterns and changes in weather conditions in planting crops and harvesting.
2. Such knowledge of seasonal changes was also used to avoid pest damages.
3. Crop diversity, multiple cropping was utilized as means of food security, protection of soil fertility and of reducing crop losses due to changes in weather conditions.
4. Sharing of food, seeds, labour and knowledge of plants, seeds, technology and the richness of cultural aspects.
5. Religious attitudes and beliefs provided a useful background for sustaining the regenerative potential. Eg: Greed and accumulation were seen as negative values.
6. A very rich understanding of the use of plants for health, nutrition, fodder and fertility of soil assisted in use of nature's contribution to life and also the understanding of the need to sustain regeneration.

One specific feature in the history of agriculture in Sri Lanka which prevails even today is the advantage provided by small scale agriculture. Small scale agriculture allows greater understanding, closer relationship and greater attention given to land by the farmer.

Agriculture in this context necessitated and provided space for the farmer to be creative. "Land" and nature's resources, then provided for life and protected life. Therefore, this source of life, whether land, water or animal was respected and treated with care. The elements that assisted and ensured these means of survival were respected, venerated or treated as "God". Therefore, keeping these elements pleased, expressing gratitude for what is given was an essential element in the whole process of dealing with nature.

Such collaboration between nature and the human and also collaboration and sharing of seeds, knowledge, labour and food among people enriched and protected both.

Destruction and threats today and the necessity for a complete reversal

I do not intend to go into details of how this process was destroyed. Instead I will mention some of the serious threats that makes a reversal absolutely necessary.

1. Emphasis given to domestic food security during the period before colonial rule was revived by the post independence governments. However the approaches adopted were not guided by the need to recover nature's full potential.

Neither did these approaches help the development and utilization of the creative potential of the farmer nor did they enhance the potential of land and ecology to contribute fully and in a sustainable manner.

The effects of Green Revolution technology is destroying ecology and making farmers dependent of external inputs and making farmers dependent of external inputs and external expertise and advice are well known.

Threat of Neo Liberal Reforms

The neo liberal reforms in agriculture threatens livelihoods of millions of farmers and will destroy the ecological potential for providing livelihoods and other needs of life beyond any acceptable limits.

1. Land ownership reforms proposed by the World Bank intends to create large scale migration from rural to urban areas.
 2. Water privatization and transferable water rights intend to get rural farmers to sell away their water entitlements.
 3. Thrust for increased exports in agriculture threatens domestic food production.
- The best way to explain the alternative that we promote in ecological agriculture is to explain what happens and what could happen in a small home garden.

What happens in my home garden (will be described)

This is a way of solving much of the food and nutritional needs of most village communities at 'no cost'.

It is a way in which a host of other problems could be solved in any part of the country, under any agro – ecological zones in the country.

The added results and outcomes would be.

1. Improvement in food availability
2. Improvement in food nutrition
3. Improvement in healthy food (non - chemical)
4. Soil improvement – reduction of need for external fertilizer
5. Improvement in retention of water, quality and quantity of water improved
6. Reduction in drought, flood and erosion losses
7. Health improvement, prevention of diseases caused by chemical contamination of water, food and environment
8. Increasing potential for livelihoods a solution to the problem of unemployment
9. Better use of indigenous knowledge in agriculture and health
10. A more culturally acceptable approach
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There is a growing worldwide trend today in this direction.

Some examples are,

1. World farmers movement such as Via Campesina has introduced the concept of 'Food Sovereignty' as opposed to 'food security'.
2. Large movements such as MST in Brazil has decided to give priority to ecological agriculture by small scale farmers during the coming year.
3. Studies and research done in Asia, Africa and Latin America by the University of Essex, Green Peace, UK and Bread for the World, Germany has shown that small scale ecological agriculture is a rapidly growing phenomenon in the three continents, Asia, Africa and Latin America. This survey is done in 1992.

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4. Growing resistance against Genetically Modified food and against WTO policies show that the world has to move in a direction completely different from the present.

To the World Bank: you claim to have been standing against poverty for sixty years, but you have not managed to reduce poverty, only succeeding in increasing inequality. We have experience working with people to establish and maintain home gardens on plots of between 20 perches and 1 acre at an average cost of about Rs. 2,500. This includes around 25 fruit trees like limes, papaya, jackfruit and so on, plus a variety of vegetables, medicinal plants and spices, which provides a diversity of nutritious food at no further cost, making a tremendous contribution to the reduction of malnutrition, a problem by which you have recently admitted to being baffled. You would only have to cancel one of your projects to provide such home gardens to all of the more than two million poor families in Sri Lanka. There are several options, but we suggest starting by abandoning your land titling project and your attempts to push the government to issue freehold titles to farmers to get them to sell their land and move into slums. They can do much better if only they are left to themselves.

The benefits of this approach are in fact much broader. If each family were to plant the seeds of the fruits they consume, say an average of ten seeds a week, about a third of them would eventually grow into plants. That would mean more than 350 million new trees every year throughout the country. The consequent improvement in soil fertility and water retention would undo some of the damage caused by years of destruction through application of chemicals and erosion. You could enlist the help of CIC, whose entire assets could immediately be redirected from promoting poisons.

***Standing up to eradicate poverty –
By the Movement for National Land and Agricultural Reform***