



UBINIG (Policy Research for Development Alternative)

Submitted to

HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL'S UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW ON BANGLADESH

Introduction

UBINIG (Policy Research for Development Alternative), a policy research and advocacy organization in Bangladesh working with and advocating for the farming communities to achieve food and nutritional security submits this information on Bangladesh under the General Guidelines for submission of information for Universal Periodic Review. The report has been prepared with consultation with the representatives of Nayakrishi Andolon (New Agricultural Movement), a farmers' movement to produce safe and nutritious food and protect environment, ecology, biodiversity and the genetic resources in order to enable international community and Bangladesh to facilitate the implementation of right of the people to remain free from hunger and enjoy right to adequate food. UBINIG is also a member of Bangladesh Food Safety Network (BFSN), formed under the aegis of the Food Safety Project of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

Bangladesh is a State Party to the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). Under Art.11 of the ICESCR, the States Parties are obliged to guarantee the right of the people to be free from hunger and the right to adequate food. The right to adequate food is realised when every man, woman and child, alone or in community with others, has physical and economic access at all times to adequate food or means for its procurement. Article 11 implies the following:

1. Bangladesh has obligation to respect existing access to adequate food and therefore refrain from taking policies that can have detrimental effect on environment, ecology and biodiversity since it can undermine the natural and indigenous capacity of the community to produce food. It also requires Bangladesh not to take any measures that result in preventing access to food.
2. Bangladesh has obligation to protect the people by taking measures so that enterprises or individuals do not deprive individuals or communities of their access to adequate food.
3. Obligation to fulfill the objective means that Bangladesh must pro-actively engage in activities intended to strengthen people's access to and utilisation of resources and means to ensure their livelihood, including food and seed security. Furthermore, wherever an individual or group is unable, for reasons beyond their control, to enjoy the right to adequate food by the means at their disposal, States have the obligation to fulfill (provide) this right directly.

Human Rights to adequate food and nutrition and the right to produce food are rights derived from international obligations and commitments. UBINIG has been raising concerns with regard to above aspects as well as advocating for overcoming the failures of the government to ensure adequate food and nutrition as the 'rights' of the citizens. The report is based on the field observation, documentation and research for the last three years and experiences gained through working directly with the farming communities.

UBINIG and Nayakrishi Andolon's works with over 300,000 farming families in about 19 districts for more than 20 years show that to ensure the right to food at the community level government must adopt policy that can strengthen the command and control of the farming communities over food production and maintain and strengthen farmer's seed system. Unfortunately, government's policy has undermined the capacity of the farming community (especially those of women) in favour of commercial enterprises and multinational corporations. In order to achieve food sovereignty at farmers' level, government requires a consistent policy to promote sustainable agriculture. On the contrary, the government's policy is more towards industrialising of food production which destroys the foundation of agriculture, often through introduction of technologies that causes irreversible damage to environment, ecology and biodiversity.

Making food production dependent on external inputs and market establishes the control of few companies (mostly multinational) over production and distribution chain of food, seed and other agricultural inputs. This was our main concern expressed in our report sent to the first cycle of Universal Periodic Review in 2009. In this second review session we would like not only to reiterate the same but also like to express our concern that government without opting for a balanced and sustainable agriculture and policy to ensure access, availability of food and protect the citizens, it is promoting unsafe technologies such as hybrid, GMO and varieties of seeds that are not indigenous to Bangladesh.

Food is a basic human right and plays a crucial role in the agro- based economy of Bangladesh. The first and foremost responsibility of the state is to ensure an uninterrupted supply of food to all people at all times. According to article 15(a) of the Constitution of Bangladesh it shall be a fundamental responsibility of the state to provide its citizens with food. It is also the obligation of the Government of Bangladesh to ensure the right to social security to public assistance in cases of undeserved want arising from unemployment, illnesses or disablement, or suffered by widows or orphans or in old age, or in other circumstances (Article 15 (d)). According to Article 18(1), States shall regard the raising of the level of nutrition and improvement of public health.

In Bangladesh, agriculture is the single largest producing sector of the economy comprising about 21% (as of 2010) of the country's GDP and employing around 48% of the total labour force. More than 55% of the total surface area is used for agriculture and 58% of holdings are in farming occupation in Bangladesh. The small-scale farmers (holding land between 0.05 – 2.49 acres) comprise 84.27%¹ of the total farming community. Any effort to increase food security will require enhancing the capacity of the small scale farmers. Women's role in agriculture is very significant in the context of overwhelming presence of the small farm holding families. Women are the providers of food for the family. Approximately half the population in Bangladesh lives in poverty. Food expenditure accounted for nearly 54 percent of total consumption expenditures.

2. Human Rights Concern on Food & Food Production

The introduction of Green Revolution technology in mid 1960s with seeds of the so-called High yielding Varieties (HYVs) and hybrids in 1990s have been used replacing the farmers knowledge based and ecologically appropriate seeds. The corporate seeds came as package of technologies such as power tillers and tractors, irrigation, chemical fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides. The farmers were compelled to borrow from money lenders, micro credit NGOs, bank and other sources. The net return from investment in crop production in most cases, become a losing concern. Ultimately many farmers ran into debt, became share croppers or wage labourers. General consequence is hunger and food insecurity.

As farming became more input oriented and less profitable in terms of price, the number of farmers reduced drastically from 86% to 50% of the total households. The dependence on market supply of imported food increased. Farmers' right to produce was violated by the lack of price support for food production. On the other hand, non-food items such as tobacco cultivation has been intensified at the cost of food crops like pulse, oil seeds, tubers, vegetables, spices, and cereals. Access to food has been severely violated by such acts.

a. Syndicate control of agriculture production and marketing

Market dominated agricultural production has been pushing the small farmers at the mercy of the big merchants, intermediaries, hoarder and money lenders. Crops like potato, tomato, garlic, onion, jute, etc. are left in the field without harvesting because the cost of harvesting is not met by sale proceeds. Market prices of the agricultural products are generally pulled down artificially. The big merchants, their agents, the warehouse owners, through monopoly and syndicate, buy such items, store in their warehouse and then raise the price as they like. The common consumers are subjected at the mercy of the big merchants.

¹ Statistical Pocket Book Bangladesh 2010, BBS, GOB, February 2011

b. Vulnerability of biodiversity and genetic resources

Bangladesh has signed, ratified, accepted to CITES, World Heritage Convention, Ramsar convention, Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), Climate change convention and Convention to Combat Desertification. Weak compliance to these treaties is a violation to fulfil the obligation to strengthen people's access to and utilisation of resources and means to ensure their livelihood, including food and seed security.

c. Impact of agrochemicals on environment

The environmental impact of agro chemicals is often greater than what is intended by those who use them. Pesticides, herbicides and other chemicals reach a destination other than the target, including biospheres, air, waters, soil and food. Some agrochemicals contribute to global warming and the depletion of the ozone layer. Agrochemicals can enter human body through inhalation, dust and vapour, through oral exposure and by direct contact with skin. Pesticides and chemicals sprayed on fruits and vegetables act as poisons, directly. They also secrete into soils and ground water and also end up in drinking water. They pollute the air. The farmers and their family members are exposed to agro chemical through direct contact. This prevents peoples from having safe and nutritious food and therefore to remain healthy.

d. Reduction of biodiversity and genetic variability

Systematic reduction of genetic diversity of rice occurred due to over emphasis on HYV rice developed by the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) and commercially imported hybrid seeds. The genetic base of rice has been narrowed down to razor thin vulnerable situation. The extension of hybrid rice has always been done undemocratically under all forms of government. Started in 1998, the land under hybrid rice cultivation was under military-backed government in 2008 in more than 0.8 million hectares was the highest. In 2010, under a democratic government it was reduced but government promotion did not stop. These hybrids brought many diseases, including bacterial leaf blight and bacterial leaf streak. Moreover, the hybrid did not perform better than the HYV varieties like BRRI 28 and 29 and many of the local varieties. Yet, the farmers were compelled to buy the hybrid seeds from the companies at much higher price.

Bangladesh has been the abode of 5000 angiosperm species. Of them 160 species are used as crops. The major crops are rice, wheat, jute, pulses, oil seeds, minor cereals, sugar crops, fruit plants, vegetables, root tubers, spices, forest trees, beverage crops, flowers, medicinal plants, aromatic plants and other wild plants including uncultivated vegetables and medicinal herbs. Threat to biodiversity poses a threat to food security of people.

e. Farmers' ownership of seed is taken away

Traditionally seed and associated knowledge have been inherited from generation to generation. In the name of supplying 'quality seed' to the farmers, the Seed Ordinance in 1977 has been amended twice, once in 1997 and again in 2005. The amendments have been made for smooth operation of the seed business of the companies. The multiplication and distribution of the farmers' varieties have been discouraged in favour of extension and marketing of the hybrids and other seeds registered and certified on account of the companies. Farmers have been deprived of their traditional heritage and also the rich variability of crops and associated knowledge has been eroded fast.

f. Seed company and NGOs deceiving the farmers

Seed companies and NGOs are supplying inappropriate seed varieties among the farmers. The farmers incur heavy loss due to crops failure. The examples are with hybrid tomato seed supplied by Syngenta in 2011 in Godagari upazila, Rajshahi district. There was loss of rice crop in Hybrid Jhalak dhan, marketed by Energy Pack in different districts in 2012. There was loss of crop due to hybrid rice seed Aloron and Jagoron supplied among the farmers by BRAC in 1998. Unfortunately the farmers never received compensation.

g. Unethical introduction of NERICA rice

NERICA (New Rice for Africa) is being introduced in Bangladesh without any need for it. The Bangladesh Agriculture Development Corporation (BADC) has distributed 300 tons of seed among 37,000 farmers in 83 Upazilas in 30 districts in 2012 as an 'experimental' effort. The purpose of the experiment was not spelled out clearly by the government. It does not even meet the criteria of any scientific experiment. Rather, it appeared as a test of imposition of the variety on the farmers. Some obligatory steps for introduction and release of a rice genotype into Bangladesh for cultivation on large scale at farmers' levels were violated in this case. The farmers experienced serious problems by growing NERICA with false promises and information. They were told the field duration is only 90 -100 days and that it flowers in 60 days of sowing. It did not take place in reality. On the contrary the paddy field was heavily infested by weeds. UBINIG research revealed that there was not a single plot of NERICA where there was any match of the promised and expected yield of paddy. The farmers were not compensated for the incurred loss. The interest of the multinational companies has been served at the cost of the poor farmers. Farmers' right to have proper information was severely violated and they had to suffer food shortage because of such experiments.

h. Unethical Publicity for Bt-brinjal

Brinjal is among the common vegetable for the people of the country. However, government is taking measures to introduce genetically modified brinjal, known as Bt. Brinjal, which is posing a great threat to the wide varieties of local brinjals. Publicity of Bt-brinjal is going on in Bangladesh despite resistance against its introduction in other countries. Bt- brinjal project is promoted by International Service for the Acquisition of Agro-biotech Application (ISAAA), and seed companies like MAHYCO of India and MONSANTO. The Bangladesh Agriculture Research Institute (BARI) at Gazipur has been conducting this research under ABSP II of the USAid. Although Bt. Brinjal failed to get clearance from the Ministry of Environment in India, it is publicised for cultivation by the Ministry of Agriculture in Bangladesh.

UBINIG researchers learnt through discussion with the scientists of Regional Agriculture Research Centre that Bt-brinjal is now grown in its Ishwardi centre with supply of seedlings from Gazipur. The scientists themselves are apprehensive of the crop. They had cut the fruits into pieces and buried under the soil, because, they do not know whether it is safe to eat or not. While there is no shortage for local varieties of brinjal in Bangladesh, such introduction is highly questionable. Lot of harms was done to the consumers by application of pesticides on hybrid brinjals. Now the introduction of Bt brinjal is causing more threat to people in terms of availability of safe food.

i. Imbalanced crop production & prices

There is a political strategy of lowering the price of rice, but there is no control over other items including pulses, edible oil, fruits, vegetables, spices, fish, meat, milk etc. Food production plan does not include fodder. Rice straw is the most important feed of cattle, but dwarf rice variety has caused short supply of straw, thereby there has been a gradual decline of cattle population. Consequently, there has been a reduction of local production of milk and meat. Poultry raising at the household level has also been discouraged. Indiscriminate use of pesticide has caused threat to household poultry keeping resulting in lack of nutritious food at household level. Commercial fish culture has displaced fishing communities and depleted local fish varieties.

Rice is produced in more than 80% of the cultivable land. With continuous presence of rice in the field there is a heavy built up population of the pest, pathogens and weeds. Heavy dose of pesticides and herbicides are used which in turn have effect in human food chain, make food unsafe and impose disease prevalence in humankind. The cultivation of rice has been extended in all types of land at the cost of other crops like pulse, oilseeds, vegetables, spices, fruits etc. Unregulated tobacco cultivation in winter food crop land has caused severe threat to food security in many districts of the country. There is no control by the Ministry of Agriculture over tobacco companies.

5. Recommendations

1. Legal provision should be created through enactment of appropriate laws and regulations to ensure the people's right to remain free from hunger and right to have access to adequate, safe and nutritious food.
 2. Supporting decentralized participatory research on biodiversity based ecological agriculture and dissemination of knowledge on the best practices through farmer's organizations, networks, and projects to enhance community's capacity to produce their own food.
 3. Maintenance of environment and bio-diverse ecosystem for sustainable productivity.
 4. Honour farmers' right especially of women as seed savers and dependable food providers.
 5. Cattle raising, poultry keeping and fishing must be encouraged as source of food.
 6. A food control system consisting of administration, implementation and analytical service coupling with a national food control authority should be established. Food inspection should ensure that all sorts of food are produced, processed, stored and distributed in compliance with rules.
 7. Guidelines should be issued on Good Agricultural Practices and Good Manufacturing Practices (GMPs) for all foods including all crops and fruits.
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