

Enact Right to Food Act, Rise Up against Corporate Food System

In the context of the UN Food Systems Summit 2021 - Expressing Solidarity with Pre-summit Events Initiated by CSM

Position paper of Right to Food Bangladesh



State of Food in Bangladesh

The agricultural sector has been considered as an important regulator in eradicating hunger and poverty in Bangladesh since time immemorial. After independence, the country's rice production has more than tripled to more than three and a half crore tonnes. Bangladesh is now at the door to be self-reliant for producing fish and eggs as the key source of protein. Though the volume of daily calory intake and average protein intake have been increased regularly from the decade of 1970, Bangladesh faces a number of critical challenges to ensure food and nutrition security for more than 16 crore people. Some of them are as follows: increase of population growth and income discrimination, lack of laborers due to migration, adverse impact of the climate change and barriers to get safe and nutritious food. The COVID-19 pandemic has put all these in a bigger challenge. According to the World Bank, the number of people in Bangladesh at risk of falling below the poverty line has increased by about 55 percent. On the other hand, around 2 crore 45 lakh people have become poor in the country due to COVID-19. (PPRC and BIGD, 2020). Adding the newly poor people,, the total number of poor people is now 6.5 to 7 crore. Poverty is directly linked to the food insecurity. Poor families are deprived from essential nutritions and health services due to lack of their ability. Although they succeed in consuming some amount of food, the foods that are on their food list fail to meet the demand for quality and micronutrients.

Significant policies of the Government of Bangladesh to ensure food security include the National Food and Nutrition Policy 2020, National Nutrition Policy 2015, National School Feeding Policy, National Food Security Act, 2nd National Plan of Action for Nutrition (NPAN-2), Bangladesh First Country Investment Plan: Agriculture, Food Security and Nutrition (CIP 1), Bangladesh Secont Country Investment Plan: Nutrition-Sensitive Food System (CIP-2), 7th and 8th Five-Year Plan and a number of social security programs related laws and regulations. Although these policies and plans are in place for ensuring food and nutritional security and eradicating poverty, their benefits are not being met due to lack of proper implementation. All government food assistance programs are under existing social safety nets programs. The projects are mostly undertaken on a part-time, seasonal or short term basis in the disaster post-disaster period. The amount paid as allowance is not enough. The selection process of beneficiary under these programs is also improper. Moreover, there are irregularities and misuse in distribution level. , The progress is not satisfactory in line with the goal of National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) adopted in 2015. Due to the slow pace of implementation, even at the time of the global epidemic, the vulnerable people suffering from the scourge of poverty are not getting much benefit from it.

Impact of Corporate Trad on the Food System

Agriculture and biodiversity of Bangladesh are the ruthless victims of the seed politics by the multinational companies. After the approval of BT (Basilar Thuringensis) brinjal cultivation, now the field trial of GM (Genetically Modified) potato is ongoing in Bangladesh. The process of introducing GM golden rice, tomato and cotton is underway. In other words, Bangladesh is now becoming a fertile ground for GM trade by the multinational agro corporations. Under the name of 'BT brinjal projects' during 2005 to 2014, Monsanto snatched nine brinjal varieties from Bangladesh. As per the tripartite contract among Bangladesh Agricultural Research Institute (BARI), India's Maharashtra Hybrid Seed Company Limited (MAHICO) on behalf of US multinational seed company Monsanto and Satguru Management Consultant Private Limited in 2005, it is explicitly written that Monsanto-MAHICO has the intellectual property rights of this BT brinjal seed (clause 1.19) and BARI should purchase it from this company (clause 1.6). The contract also indicates that company can cancel the contract if the reservation of corporate and intellectual property rights of BT brinjal seed and technology is violated (clause 9.2 C). As a result, the US-India companies Monsanto-MAHICO will be the owner of the BT brinjal seed of Bangladesh.. As a result, there is a risk of losing the natural process of conservation and reproduction of native seeds. Thus, biodiversity, plants, animals, microorganisms, cereals to genes of Bangladesh, south asia and low-income countries of the world have been grabbing by the corporate aggression. Multinational companies in global economy invest a lot for realization of intellectual property rights on these resources in order to control over the knowledge structure of traditionally rich agriculture and forest resources of local community. In recent years, investment of large capital in agriculture and production of commercial agriculture have been increasing. The objective of the GAT (General Agreement on Trade and Tariff) and GATS (General Agreement on Trade in Services) of World Trade Organization (WTO) is to liberalize the agriculture sector in global perspective.. Also reducing subsidies to increase domestic agricultural production and taking off state barriers to trade to turn it into a market for agricultural products of multinational corporations.

Peoples' Pre-Summit as Opposed to the Food System Summit (FSS)

'No hunger' is the second goal among the 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) adopted in 2015 following the policy 'No one is left behind'. In September 2019, the United Nation declared next decade as the Decade of Action by reviewing the progress of SDGs and strengthening its programs. As part of the Decade of Action, United Nation has convened a Food Systems Summit in 2021. There are five Action Tracks for the FSS i.e., 1) Ensure access to safe and nutritious food for all, 2) Shift to sustainable consumption patterns, 3) Boost nature-positive production, 4) Advance equitable livelihoods, 5) Build resilience to vulnerabilities, shocks and stress.

On the other hand, the CSM (Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples' Mechanism-CSM for relations with the Committee on World Food Security-CFS), the largest international space of civil society organizations (CSOs) established in 2010 and working to eradicate food insecurity and malnutrition argued that The FSS process is grounded neither in human and Peoples' rights nor in system change for justice; • It is dominated by corporate interests; • It aims at replacing (international) public institutions with multi-stakeholder platforms. It refers to the right to food in one of its action tracks¹ but this reference is marginal. The rights of women, Indigenous Peoples, workers, peasants, pastoralists, the landless, small-scale family farmers, fisherfolk, urban food insecure, consumers, youth and future generations are clearly not at the center of this Summit. The decision-making process of FSS is not transparent. It nominated some selective participants from civil society avoiding their existing platforms. Finally, there is marginal involvement of key UN bodies that ought to play a key role in the transformation of food systems, such as the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) and the International Labour Organisation (ILO). The conventional

value chain approach that has dominated agricultural policies over the past decades, which promotes industrial food systems behind a number of new agricultural technologies and continuing to foster the marginalization of small-scale producers, the exploitation of natural resources and the promotion of unhealthy and unsustainable diets- the FSS does not emphasize on these issues. The involvement of the World Economic Forum (WEF) since the early design of the process, the appointment of Ms. Agnes Kalibata, current President of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), and the extensive participation of large corporations and corporate initiatives in the FSS bodies and action tracks are all notable examples of how influential corporate actors are encroaching all aspects of the process. Thus, the consolidation of corporate power in the United Nations; 'preferential accesses' for transnational corporations undermining the mandate of the UN as well as its independence, impartiality and effectiveness in holding businesses to account and in which the corporate sector is at the core of the solutions needed. In the context of COVID 19, corporate capture of public institutions is deepening with the result of diverting public funds into the corporate sector in the forms of tax-breaks, public corporate bailouts, and financial supports. Further reduction of policy spaces to tackle multiple intersecting crises and promoting further liberalization by the summit. The issue of direct participation of the people in policy making is being eliminated by shifting international public institutions to multi-stakeholder platforms in the FSS. In this connection, CSM has called for a Peoples' Pre-Summit to send a message to the FSS including a number of programs during 25-27 July 2021.

Peoples' Counter Mobilization Centric Initiatives by the Right to Food Bangladesh

In addition to constitutional mandate in Bangladesh, the right to food security under the International Charter of Human Rights is a formal commitment of the state. Bangladesh signed the Vienna Declaration at the international human rights summit in 1993. Through this, the country is committed to implementing the UN declaration on right to participation in development in 1986.

In the overall context of the country, the state recognizes food as a basic necessity of the people, but because it is not considered as 'right', the measures taken for food security are usually charitable or service-oriented. That is why, the whole issue needs to be looked at in the light of a 'right based approach'. In this context, 'Right to Food Bangladesh' network started its journey including thousands of local, national and international civil society organizations by organizing 'South Asia Right to Food Conference' in 2015 with the demand of formulating a 'Right to Food Act' to ensure right to food and nutrition of all citizens of the country in presence of the honorable Prime Minister of Bangladesh. In solidarity with the CSM declared pre-summit as Peoples' Counter Mobilization considering the growing corporate dominance in Bangladesh as well as the globe, the RtF BD has been adopted a number of month-long campaign programs. These programs call for governments to make political commitments to recognize the right to food as a fundamental right for the 854 million women, men and children still suffering from extreme hunger around the world, and demand to take steps to enable every human being to have their own food with dignity. Now is the time to take the right to food out of the theoretical concept of philanthropy and human rights, to take practical actions and to transform it into appropriate results.

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