Reclaiming Human Rights: The Right to Food and the Role of Organic Agriculture

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Abstract

New approaches need to be taken to securing the right to food for the millions of people around the world suffering from hunger and its social, economic and environmental consequences. Governments have an obligation to guarantee the right to food as expressed in international human rights law, yet the reality of hunger statistics shows that this is not being achieved. In the face of the increasing corporatisation of food and property and the de-politicisation of hunger, it is doubtful in some contexts that a reliance on the State is the best solution to securing food rights. New perspectives on food rights recognise the role that rural food producers around the world—who ironically often face some of the greatest barriers to achieving food security—are playing in securing their right to food. Worldwide, food producers are embracing various forms of sustainable production methods such as organic farming, alternative marketing channels, and solidarity networks, and thereby gaining control over how and what they produce. These struggles present both a challenge to the conventional food system and a creative solution to hunger and its consequences. This article explores the concept of creative leadership through a case study of Cambodian small-scale farmers who are turning to organic agriculture to better their livelihoods, and finds that organic agriculture is a creative approach to securing the right to food for small-scale farmers in Cambodia.

Introduction

The 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is an opportunity to critically examine a concept that is fundamental to our understandings of social justice. This paper focuses on one specific example of a human right that is particularly important in the current global climate of scarce natural resources—the right to food. As one of the set of social, economic and cultural rights, the right to food has been less widely taken on board than civil and political rights.[1] When discussion and written commitment has taken place, the voices of those who are denied this right have oftentimes been ignored; yet, if changes are to be made so that people may secure their rights, people's views on how their rights have been violated and solutions they propose should arguably inform discussions.

Drawing on in-depth interviews and focus groups with producers, traders and development workers in Cambodia, this study highlights the need for a re-examination of how the right to food can be secured, and the benefits of creative solutions led by civil society. In contrast to much of the research into alternative food systems that has been undertaken in countries of the North, the research presented here focuses on organic farmers in Cambodia, one of the poorest countries in the world,[2] where 91% of those who are considered poor reside in rural areas.[3] Findings reveal that organic agriculture can be an effective approach to securing the right to food for small-scale farmers in Cambodia.

The Right to Food: Where are we going wrong?

Why, sixty years after the Declaration was signed, are there still millions of people around the world to whom the right to food is denied? While production methods and rising population may be blamed, critics have demonstrated that hunger is often a systemic political problem of

1 **W.B. Eide and U. Kracht.** *Food and Human Rights in Development. Volume 1: Legal and Institutional Dimensions and Selected Topics* (Antwerp/Oxford: Intersentia, 2005).

2 **Cambodia is ranked as a Least Developed Country; 133rd out of 177 countries in the United Nations** Human Development Index (UNDP, 2005).

3 **World Bank.** *Cambodia: Halving Poverty by 2015? Poverty Assessment 2006* (Phnom Penh: World Bank, 2006). p.45.

access to food rather than quantity of production.[4] As the process of globalisation has transferred power into the hands of corporations, which in many cases ignore or even directly violate social and economic rights,[5] it is ever more difficult for governments to uphold these rights for their citizens. Rhetoric over the potential for new biotechnology initiatives to increase food security for poor and vulnerable producers by raising productivity shows the yawning gap between human rights discourse and implementation. Although some reports, such as the FAO's 2005 investigation into the viability of Genetically Modified Organisms (GMO) technology for poor producers, show that poor producers are able to access and benefit from this technology in some areas, the increasing privatisation of GMO development and research, and the question of property rights mean that in practice this technology is the domain of rich countries.[6] It is difficult to promote a discourse of human rights when the rights of transnational corporations are upheld over the rights of disenfranchised people. Sociologist Dr. Egla Martinez-Salazar (2008) notes that when we talk of human rights we need to ask: whose human rights are protected? Whose human rights are ignored and denied? Rulings that grant the right to intellectual property over the ability of people to save seed from crops must be questioned in this context.

The Search for Alternatives

Many movements around the world are challenging the conventional global food system. One is organic agriculture, a system of production which combines traditional farming knowledge with modern scientific understandings of crop rotation, composting, green manure, multiple cropping and other techniques to create a system that relies on minimal outside inputs to keep up soil fertility.[7] The International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM), the world's leading

4 **M. Altieri and P. Rosset.** *Ten Reasons Why Biotechnology Will Not Reduce Food Security, Protect the Environment, or Reduce Poverty in the Developing World.* In R. Sherlock and J. Morrey (eds.), *Ethical Issues in Biotechnology* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002).

5 **W.B. Eide and U. Kracht.** *Food and Human Rights in Development. Volume 1: Legal and Institutional Dimensions and Selected Topics* (Antwerp/Oxford: Intersentia, 2005).

6 **D. Byerlee and K. Fischer. "Accessing modern science: policy and institutional options for agricultural** biotechnology in developing countries" *World Development*, (30: 2001) pp. 931–48.

7 **N. Lampkin.** *Organic Farming* (UK: Old Pond, 2002).

international organic umbrella organisation, continues to evolve its concept of organic agriculture, which it defines as "environmentally, socially, and economically sound production of food and fibres."[8] A growing number of reports argue that organic agriculture can be a vehicle for poverty reduction as well as repairing environmental degradation,[9] and empirical research confirms a definite link between organic agriculture, food security and poverty reduction.[10] While these studies focused on farm-level research, a comparative paper published in 2007 compiled yield data from 293 studies, and found that organic methods could produce enough food on a global per capita basis to sustain the current human population, and potentially an even larger population, without increasing the agricultural land base.[11]

However, other studies show the potential for the organic movement to become a form of "eco-colonialism"[12] by forcing farmers to grow particular crops and use methods defined by stringent certification schemes developed by and for the conditions in countries of the North, with little to no notice taken of the needs of other countries.[13] Critics also point out that organic agriculture has the potential to either increase or undermine family food security depending on how it is promoted; if the high-value export potential is pushed without acknowledging the primary need for food security, organic systems may undermine the livelihoods of farmers.[14]

The conflicting literature reviewed here shows that there remains a research gap in understanding the human benefits (or otherwise) of conversion to organics, and it is likely that different contexts and

8 IFOAM. *What is Organic Agriculture* (2000). www.ifoam.org (accessed 18/11/2006). p.1.

9 N. Parrott and J. Wright. "Influencing Attitudes of Public Institutions Towards Organic Agriculture as a Means of Promoting Food Security" *IFOAM Conference on Organic Agriculture and Food Security* (2007); J. Kotschi "Alter Organic—Local Agendas for Organic Agriculture in Rural Development" *AGRECOL* (2003).

10 IFAD. *The adoption of organic agriculture among small farmers in Latin America and the Caribbean: Thematic Evaluation* (Rome: IFAD, 2003); H. Araya and S. Edwards. *Successes in Sustainable Agriculture: Experiences from Tigray, Ethiopia* (Third World Network, 2005).

11 C. Badgley, J. Moghtader, E.Quintero, E.Zakem, M. J. Chappell, K. Aviles-Vasquez, et al."Organic Agriculture and the Global Food Supply" *Renewable Agriculture and Food Systems* (22 (2) (2007). p.86.

12 Eco-colonialism, or eco-imperialism, is said to occur when environmentalists place the wellbeing of the environment or the market over the wellbeing of humans, particularly people in developing countries (Driessen, 2003).

13 L. Gomez, L. Tovar and C. Gomez. Desafios de la Agricultural Organica. (Mexico DF, Mundi-Prensa, 1999).

14 J. Kotschi. "Alter Organic—Local Agendas for Organic Agriculture in Rural Development" AGRECOL (2003).

the focus of the organics initiative in question will have different consequences for human development and food security. Therefore, descriptions of local case studies are vital if organic agriculture is to be used as a widespread strategy for poverty reduction. This paper now turns to a description of research undertaken recently in Cambodia.

Research Methods and Context

Responding to the need for more holistic approaches to studies in alternative food systems that go beyond the reductionist scientific paradigm and acknowledge the political issues confronting food systems,[15] this study followed an interpretive approach based on in-depth interviews and focus groups with organic farmers from seven Cambodian communities. The seven case study villages were chosen in order to capture a variety of agricultural and infrastructure conditions and wealth levels, as well as to cover a range of organic initiatives led by different civil society organisations (CSOs) and constituting different crops (rice, vegetables and fruit), trade (local markets, urban, export) and quality control methods (non-certified, peer-certified and third-party certified for export).

Cambodia was chosen as a country case study because of the inability of the current political system to secure the right to food for much of the population. With 91% of those in poverty living in rural areas, hunger is still largely a rural phenomenon, and therefore rural-based solutions are arguably needed.[16] Rural food producers in Cambodia face several barriers to securing their right to food; according to an UNCTAD report,[17] these include: falling yields, declining terms of trade, uncertain property rights, limited access to markets, strict phyto-sanitary requirements under World Trade Organisation (WTO) trade rules, lack of government support and rising land prices associated with the booming tourist industry.

In response to the forces described above, growing movements of

15 P. Kristiansen and C. Merfield. "Overview of Organic Agriculture" In P. Kristiansen, A. Taji and J. Reganold (Eds.), *Organic Agriculture: A Global Perspective* (Collingwood, Australia: CSIRO, 2006).

16 S. Setboonsarng. *Organic Agriculture, Poverty Reduction and the MDGs* (2006).

17 UNCTAD. *Country Case Study on Environmental Requirements, Market access/entry and Export Competitiveness for Horticultural Produce from Cambodia*. Paper presented at the sub-regional workshop on environmental regulation (Bangkok, 29 September–1 October, 2004).

rural people in Cambodia are creating initiatives that aim to improve their livelihoods on their own terms. The vibrancy within this movement was shown at a recent eco-agriculture demonstration in Siem Reap, when more than 400 farmers and supporters marched through the city.[18] The organic agriculture initiatives studied focused on several activities, including: collecting and disseminating knowledge of natural fertiliser and pest control methods such as composting using household and animal waste, and encouraging seed selection practice and efficient land use through growing vegetable crops in the rice off-season; creating networks with farmers at the local level, through group-managed savings funds, seed-saving groups and collective producer stalls, through to national and international networks; creating new value chains for organic produce in domestic urban centres and for export to Europe; and advocating for policy change at local and central government levels.

Impacts of the Organic Initiatives on the Right to Food

Farmers' dialogues revealed many impacts of the organics initiatives ranging from increased knowledge to better community ties, and all 57 farmers interviewed reported that in general their lives were better after joining the organics initiatives. This essay, while acknowledging that many of these broader impacts are relevant to securing the right to food, will, for the sake of brevity, focus on three areas: food security, control of resources and reach of the initiatives.

Impacts on Food Security

Research participants were asked whether they were able to feed their family throughout the year, and what type of food they consumed before and after joining the organics initiatives. All farmers reported that they were more food secure since joining the organics initiatives. Twenty-three farmers said they did not have enough food previously and could now fully support their families for the entire year, while others still experienced periods of food shortage during the year. No difference was noted for farmers in certified initiatives, as even those were often able to receive price premiums for their certified produce (10-20%) generally saved approximately half their rice yield for eating, and sold only the surplus to lucrative markets. Most farmers reported greater nutritional diversity due to the ability to grow more vegetables for eating and from selling premium-priced and/or larger amounts of farm produce, which allowed families to buy more protein-rich food that they previously could not afford.

The most common reason given for the increased levels of food security was greater productivity; 45 farmers observed that the productivity of their farms had increased, while three had experienced decreased yields and others had noticed no change. Research participants felt that productivity increases were due to (in order from most to least mentioned): the use of compost, increased soil fertility, better seed selection and varieties, new pest and weed control techniques, the use of new rice-growing methods, ploughing in crop remains, improved knowledge, which allowed farmers to grow crops during the off-season, improved water resources (provided by the CSO) and improved access to other resources such as cows, and improved health, which allowed farmers to work more efficiently.

Impacts on control of resources

A feature of many farmers' dialogues was the concept of increased independence and security. Many people talked of increased control over their farming systems and livelihoods as they were no longer using synthetic inputs (fertiliser and pesticide), and were able to incur less debt:

> Before we had to give up half our harvest to pay for the pesticides we'd already bought on loan...but my yields were decreasing so I didn't know what else to do. Now I've cut my expenses right down. (Female rice/vegetable farmer)

> The most important thing is that now we are independent. I can support my family and I don't rely on anybody else, and don't owe anybody else. (Male rice/cashew farmer)

18 CEDAC. *Campaign to Promote Ecological Agriculture and Local Products, Siem Reap, 21 to 23 December 2006* (Siem Reap: CEDAC, 2007).

All farmers said they had increased their net income since joining the initiatives.[19] The most common reason given for this was lower input costs, followed by increased yields, diversity of crops, premium prices and reduction in medical fees due to better health. Even the four farmers who had experienced a drop in yields[20] reported higher incomes due to decreased spending on inputs.

Many people felt that their ability to negotiate terms of trade with buyers had improved due to organising into cooperative selling groups and organic certification. However, some farmers felt that they were still vulnerable long-term, due to insecure land tenure and a concern that government policy over GM technology (which currently does not allow release of GMO crops) may change and organic fields would become contaminated.

Reach of the initiatives

Of the 57 farmers interviewed for this study, ten identified as being amongst the poorest in their village, 29 classified themselves as "poor," and 18 as "middle class."[21] Poorer farmers were seen to be more able to adapt to organic farming, as they generally had smaller fields and were more likely to use less chemicals before conversion. However, in almost all cases, the organics initiatives attracted the *poor* people in the community rather than the *poorest* people. People who lacked resources such as fertile land, manure, seeds and labour were often unable to capture the benefits of the initiatives. All but one farmer I talked with, and all focus groups, said that a lack of resources was one of the main problems they faced in organic farming. Many people felt that farmers with poor access to water resources could not farm well organically, and therefore a number of organic projects targeted farmers with good access to water resources. This strategy has obvious implications for human

19 Net income is understood here as revenue minus expenses such as fertiliser, seed, and irrigation costs. It is important to note that from a Western point of view, this concept of net income may be misleading as it does not take into account labour costs. However, most farmers felt that labour costs were not an important aspect because they relied primarily on family labour, and said that they generally could not find paid off-farm employment, so any extra farm labour was not felt to be displacing other income opportunities.

20 These were all farmers new to the initiative, whose systems were still in the conversion stage.

21 These measures were all comparative; most households commonly define poverty by the amount of time they are not able to supply themselves with rice, the type of house owned (e.g. the wealthy have houses with tiled roofs), land size, and number of livestock (Echo, 2002).

rights, as the most vulnerable people may be denied the opportunity to benefit. Some initiatives, conversely, specifically targeted people most in need by making small plots available on high-quality land near to water resources for villagers with no land of their own.

Conclusion: A role for organic agriculture?

The results of this study support evidence from Parott and Wright[22] and others that show the potential for organic agriculture to increase food security amongst small-scale farmers. The focus on family food security amongst all farmers in this study is particularly interesting in the context of critical literature which questions the food security impacts of trade-based organics initiatives;[23] as found in this context, food security increased for farmers regardless of whether they were trade-based or subsistence-based. While the impacts of the organics initiatives were overwhelmingly positive, there was a feeling amongst some participants that external threats such as potential changes in government policy and land tenure insecurity were unaffected by the initiatives. This points to a place for increased focus on building strong networks for political advocacy.

As global natural resources become scarcer, the human population continues to grow, and power is further displaced away from local people, the issues with which this essay grapples will become ever more important. Although focused on only a small area of the world, this paper shows that there are alternatives to dominant agricultural paradigms and these may provide for a more sustainable future. One of these alternatives, organic agriculture, is shown here to have positive impacts on food security and control of resources in the Cambodian context. These findings provide a challenge for more farmers, development organisations and governments to investigate organic agriculture as a development strategy and to put more resources into developing guidelines for organic agriculture initiatives in different contexts. In a world where productive

22 N. Parrott and J. Wright. "Influencing Attitudes of Public Institutions Towards Organic Agriculture as a Means of Promoting Food Security" *IFOAM Conference on Organic Agriculture and Food Security* (2007).

23 O. Mertz, R. Wadley and A. Christensen. "Local land use strategies in a globalising world: Subsistence farming, cash crops and income diversification" *Agricultural Systems* (89 2005). pp. 205–215.

land is dwindling and large companies are claiming more and more control over the people who farm the land, organic agriculture initiatives represent a creative form of leadership that has the potential to connect rural people, urban consumers, development agencies, and policy makers, and to work towards securing a vital human right—the right to food—for people around the globe.

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