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Agricultural development and poverty reduction in India

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"De la terre à l'aliment, des valeurs aux règles"
Rencontres Lascaux - 28 & 29 juin 2010

AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT AND POVERTY REDUCTION IN INDIA *

RAJAGOPAL PV,
Chairman, Ekta Parishad

We are all together again this morning to see how we can pull our energies together to support people who are struggling. You were all moved when Aida Quilcue told her story. This is essential. International solidarity is essential in any struggle across the world. Each one of us needs to realize that it is going to be our role, our personal role, to support the struggles that Aida was describing. Ousmane Diallo raised a very interesting question. He was speaking about the arrogance of educated people (here, education is not seen as a liberating factor but as an insulting factor). Educated people behave in a way that will make all of us feel ashamed. In many countries, including India, many educated people have become competitive. They will use any technique to gain money and power. So, education is something that we need to reverse now. The question is whether the current education will help to eradicate poverty and misery or if this requires a different kind of education.

Aida raised another issue. She thinks that we are in a survival struggle. In spite of the

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conferences and seminars we hold across the globe, in spite of all the resolutions we pass and laws we make, we are in a survival struggle. Our land, forest and water resources for example are taken away every day. And there is no way to defend these resources because our opponents are powerful, owning capital and technology. Globalization has brought about this reality. Before, Indian rich people were not able to exploit resources. Today, with globalization, they have capital and technology at their disposal. They can exploit all the resources of the country to create wealth. Therefore, many of us in India or Mali, including Aida, are in a survival struggle. We are not asking for computers. We are not asking for motorcars. We are just asking for a piece of land, so that we can survive. But even that is not possible.

So this is very important issue. And some of these issues need time to get into. But I also want to raise two other questions.

One question is about the dignity of labor. Every work is respectable, whether you are lawyer or somebody sweeping the floor. All jobs are dignified jobs. This is what we learned from Mahatma Gandhi. But how many people do really see small jobs as dignified jobs?

I was talking to a couple of people from France yesterday. They only possess half a hectare of land. They make a living from only half a hectare of land but the people around them think that they are crazy, that they are not "real" people. As long as there is no dignity for labor why should everybody be in farming? Farming is seen as a job that demands sweat and work. Some people think that farming is the job of stupid people. They think that intelligent people work with computers, laptops and mobile phones and that only stupid people will be on farms, working hard on land. These people make a difference between what they think is forward and backward. To them, computers, mobile phones, and motorcars are forward while land, agriculture and producing food is backward. This notion



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needs to be challenged.

The other additional question I want to raise this morning is about understanding. We are all very concerned about how people can live with one dollar a day. We agree that having to live with one dollar a day is a bad thing. But we have not yet decided how much wealth one should be able to create personally. What is the upper limit of wealth? We only speak about the lower limit: it should not be less than one dollar or two dollars a day. But how much wealth can someone create? Where is the limit? What is the ceiling? We haven't created a ceiling. Can wealth even reach the people at the bottom if there is no ceiling at the top?

I think there are various, large issues that we need to look into when we are speaking of poverty, land, agriculture, *etc.*... And today we are going to share experiences.

In India we began the land reforms back in the 60's. When India became free, the government of India said it would redistribute land. Land would go to the person who is cultivating it. But this was only a false promise. Land never went to them because land lords became members of parliament. They could afford elections, came to parliament and decided that land would not be redistributed. On paper land was to be redistributed, but in reality, land was never redistributed.

At that time a follower of Mahatma Gandhi called Vinoba Bhave initiated a movement called "the Bhoodan movement" ("Land gift" Movement). He said not to wait for the Government to solve all the problems. The community should take initiatives to solve the problems themselves. Mr. Vinoba walked across the country for 14 years for the "land gift movement" asking people to take initiative to give part of their land to landless people. Believe me about four million hectares of land were given thanks to the "land gift" movement. It was redistributed to many people who saw their lives changed.



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Land can make a difference. In many places of the world the gift of land was given to the poor people. If you visit one of the families who received one hectare of land, you will understand how much of a difference it made in their life.

It inspired us to use the method of Bhave Acharya: "foot march". This method doesn't require money. You just have to "walk and talk" to mobilize people around issues.

The first "foot march" was organized in 2000 when we walked three thousands five hundred kilometers in six month. As a result, we were able to force one state out of all the states in India to create a task force for land reforms. And through this task force, we were able to give land to 300,000 people. That was an interesting beginning. So we moved from the idea of a "gift" to the idea of "justice": it is not only a gift but a right for people to get land. Then we used the same method in different states of India, and in every state we were able to get a state task force constituted. We realized that people's power can really work. If you sit down and just cry about problems, nothing is going to change. But people coming together, walking kilometers and kilometers, mobilizing people, using theater, organizing rallies and public protests slowly create a momentum making a democratically elected government understand that if they do not listen to these voices they are going to get defeated in the next election. Our slogan was "give us land or jail". This had a lot of impact and in many states it was possible to create a land task force and bring about some changes in the land distribution.

The biggest walk we organized was in 2007 when 25,000 people got together to walk to Delhi, covering the distance of 350 kilometers. Imagine the power of 25,000 people using non-violence as a method, walking by foot to the capital of India. We were successful in terms of bringing about two policy shifts:



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- The first was the “forest rights Act” which allows indigenous people of India to get land. As I said yesterday, the implementation is very slow: only 5 million people got land, whereas 8% of Indian people are indigenous people. Still, a lot more pressure needs to be built on the government for that act to be implemented properly.
- The second was the creation of a “National Land Reform Council” by the Prime Minister and a member of the Council.

We had around 300 recommendations to the government of India, saying that if they were to follow all of those recommendations, land reforms in India could be addressed properly. As a result, we would be able to address the Millennium Development goal of eradicating poverty. In a country like India where so many people rely on land, there can be no eradication of poverty without land reforms and redistribution of land. In addition to that we gave notice to the government of India saying “if you don’t implement your promises within the next five years (the notice was given in 2007 and will come to an end in 2012), hundreds of thousands of people are going to walk to Delhi”. We are now preparing hundreds of thousands of people across the country for a walk to Delhi. The walk is going to last 33 days. The walk will begin even before as a slow walk of about six thousand kilometers. It is going to be one of the biggest demonstrations in India to address the agenda of land redistribution to poor people. We need to achieve this shift of land to the poor people to prevent that all the land is given to multinational companies or national companies.

We call our approach the “three-fold” approach. What are the three folds? One is an approach of dialogue with the Government. It is important to make them understand why small farms and family farms are very important. The second aspect is struggle. Thirdly, when there is no struggle, when there is not talk, people go back to the villages to do



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development programs. That is why we are different from politicians. Politicians are only willing to talk and struggle, because they want come to power. But they do not go back to villages to develop land and make it useful for people to make a living.

Similarly, it is important to understand that there is the power of the poor. Poor people are not helpless, if they stand up any government is likely to change. They are the people who create the government and should have the power to challenge that government. That is why organizing the power of the poor is a very important agenda in India. There are millions of poor people in India. Why do we look at them as powerless? How do we bring this power together?

The second aspect is the power of young people. How do you get young people to take responsibility? They should act responsibly not only as customers, buying things from the market, but also as actors of their own destiny, of the destiny of their own country.

If we can bring together the power of the poor, the power of the young, and the power of solidarity, we are going to achieve what we are all trying to achieve.

A method we are using in India, which is also used in countries like Columbia or Brazil, is occupying land. There are hundreds of places where people occupy land. It is like saying: "the land is here, it is not in Delhi, not in Bali. So why not occupy this land? Let the police come, let the military come, but we will not move from the land". So if you come to India you will find hundreds of places where people occupy land. To occupy and cultivate land and fight for its title is a very powerful method.

Lastly, we are asking the government of India to make a gradual move into land reforms. How can one address land reforms and land redistribution gradually? One way is to respect the land. Like Aida said, land is not just a material for commerce. It is something that



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people love, like a mother loves a child. We have to respect the land and not only use it for commercial purposes.

The second way is to give homestead land to everyone. First of all, there should be no Indians without a piece of land to construct their own house. In today's India there are millions of people without homestead land. As a result, they are constantly migrating. There are slums in the cities, because there is nothing back home in the villages. Even the Royal Bank recommended that there should be no compromise on homestead land and that it should be given to everybody. Secondly, we should retrieve the "lost land". This is a very interesting agenda. Many indigenous people have lost their land because powerful people occupy their land. Even though they have the land title and they know it is their land, they cannot cultivate it. In India there is a law called 117 A and B. Under this law, the land should be taken back and given to the indigenous people. This is to be done and we are fighting for it.

The third way is through a "Tenancy Act". I am told that the "Tenancy Registration Act" in France is very strong and that for 27 years or so, a tenant cannot be removed by the owner of the land. But in India a tenant can be removed any day. The "Tenancy Registration Act" provides that if A lives on a piece of land and B owns this land, A will have a cultivation right and B will have the ownership. This is very important to protect people from being kicked out at the will of the owner of the land.

In India, we are also speaking about the implementation of the "Ceiling Act". Under this law, there is a "ceiling" of 20 acres of wet land and 40 acres of dry land per person. But the law is not implemented. Some people have divided their land of the family into various names to manipulate the Act. Therefore, we are now trying to bring about the implementation of the Act, so that land will be taken from these people and given to landless people.



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The final radical proposition we are making in India is the lowering of that "ceiling". In a country like India with one billion people, one family cannot get as much as 40 acres of land (around 30 hectares). The land ceiling should be brought down to a level of 5 acres (around 2 hectares), so that everybody can get land. For a French farmer, 2 hectares may look very small, but in India 2 hectares are a lot. A family can live very well with 2 hectares of land. We also need to stop giving thousands of hectares of land to national and multinational companies. Two hectares are enough for familial agriculture. One family cannot have 40 hectares or they would need tractors and machines, etc... So moving from mechanical agriculture to familial agriculture is one way to move to out of poverty.

Let me conclude with this interesting quotation from Gandhi. Gandhi was asked what he meant by democracy, and he said "democracy is all about the people's capacity to control the state when power is abused". Democracy is not only to elect the government; democracy is also to control the state when power is abused. Across the globe, we find that various governments are abusing their power and that they create poverty for millions and richness for few. To challenge that, we need to use the democratic space and change the situation.

Thank you very much.