

Hunger and Food Crisis: a view from the ground

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In a press conference in Timor Leste's capital city Dili on May 14, top UN officials declared that the country is not at a risk of starvation from the global food crisis. According to the World Food Programme (WFP) Country Director Joan Fleuren in Timor Leste, "The Government is working hard to increase its imports" and sell it at subsidised prices in an effort to manage the situation and ensure that there is no food crisis. [1]

This view, however, differs significantly from that of many Timorese analysts, who fear that the country is locked into a dangerous dependency on imports to meet its food needs and already displays the early symptoms of a chronic food crisis. About four months ago, before the onset of the food crisis, the price of rice was 14\$ - 16\$ for a sack (about 35 kg). Now it averages about \$25 a sack in Dili and is significantly higher in rural areas — if it reaches there at all. And despite the Timorese Government's recent move to subsidise rice prices, there simply isn't enough subsidised rice to go around. Most of it is swallowed up in Dili and according to Dili locals, a significant portion is sold at much higher prices by rice traders, especially in rural areas. Like most net food importing countries, Timor Leste does not have control over the import prices of rice and other staples. Equally serious, it does not have an effective public distribution system to ensure that food imports reach its rural population. Relying on private companies to handle distribution, the Government cannot even ensure that those who need subsidies most are actually able to avail of them. According to Elda Guterres da'Silva from KBH, a Timorese organisation dedicated to vocational education, [2] "The new government is out of touch with problems in the rural areas; it seems intent to put in a market system and this will increase the number of poor people. Only those with money can buy rice."

Hunger is not new to Timor Leste. In 2004, reports of severe hunger and starvation were reported among tens of thousands of households in at least five districts and people in eleven out of thirteen districts survived largely on food aid. [6]

COWBOY CAPITALISM RIDES THE RANGE

Further to the west, in a country that underwent a similar process of post-conflict reconstruction 17 years earlier than Timor Leste, severe hunger and malnutrition are become increasingly visible alongside an explosion of affluence and a concentration of wealth. As a ward of the international reconstruction and development industry since 1991, Cambodia too adopted the free market model demanded by international donors, the World Bank and the IMF. What has resulted is a cowboy capitalist economy where practically everything is for sale to the highest bidder. Small pockets of plentiful consumption are surrounded by large areas of scarcity and deprivation.

Economic growth has averaged at 11 percent over the past three years, spurred by booms in the tourism, garment manufacturing and real estate sectors. But not everyone has benefitted from these booms. Agriculture and fisheries, the mainstays of the majority of Cambodia's population, have been systematically assaulted by free market policies, privatisation and liberalisation. The private sector has been aggressively promoted in every possible sphere — the economy, environment, agriculture, education, health, water supply, etc. Cambodia's multilateral creditors, the World Bank, IMF and the

Asian Development Bank (ADB), have demanded and achieved complete government “disinvestment” in essential public infrastructure, supports and services, and exhorted the country’s peasant farmers and artisanal fishers to compete in a free market that they are completely ill equipped for. As a result, farming and fishing has become increasingly precarious occupations for rural families, driving them into debt traps and eventually forcing them to abandon agriculture altogether.

Ruling elites in the Cambodian Government have facilitated a frenzy of land-grabbing in both rural and urban areas creating landlessness, homelessness and destitution at a scale never envisaged by ordinary Cambodians who really believed that they were in for better times. Vast tracts of fertile agricultural lands and rich forests (ranging from 10,000 to 300,000 hectares) have been given away as economic land concessions to foreign companies under 99-year leases for industrial tree plantations, agribusiness activities, tourist resorts, golf courses and other recreational facilities. Economic concessions extend to fishing areas, wetlands and even the country’s coast and islands. A growing, wealthy, domestic middle class has also joined the band-wagon, buying up land from small farmers and fishers unable to meet the rising costs of agricultural production, health care and food. Many of the country’s powerful bilateral allies (for example, China, Vietnam, Thailand and Singapore) have also claimed their piece of the prosperity pie through exclusive, no-bid contracts for infrastructure, energy, mining and oil and gas projects.

The prosperity of the domestic (largely urban) elites and foreign land owning companies classes has resulted in severely negative impacts among the rural and urban poor and even the middle classes, creating new vulnerabilities and poverty. Inflation is high (almost 11 percent at official count, though locals say that it is actually higher) and the cost of food and staple goods have increased sharply, creating twin crises of hunger and malnutrition. According to Boua Chanthou, the Director of PADEK, a Cambodian NGO working on integrated community development in more than 500 poor villages in Cambodia, “A crucial factor related to food is land; Cambodian farmers do not own enough land. A recent study shows that 60 percent of Cambodian farmers are either landless or own less than half a hectare. How can they produce enough food for even their own consumption? A family of five people needs at least two hectares of land to be able to produce enough food. The Government needs to act quickly to implement social land concessions and redistribute land to the farmers.”

The problem is not lack of food per se, but lack of access to food and the means to produce food among rapidly increasing numbers of people who are being systematically stripped of their abilities to feed themselves. While it is true that much of Cambodia’s agriculture (including fisheries) is small-hold and susceptible to weather and climate conditions, Cambodia is a rice and food exporter and till recently, it was the sixth largest rice exporter in Asia. Large agribusiness companies such as Thailand’s Charoen Pokphand (CP) have established operations in Cambodia for producing animal feed as well as pig and chicken farming. High grade Cambodian rice is grown under contract for Thai businesses in the western part of the country while Vietnam buys lower grade rice grown in the eastern part of the country. Fish from Cambodia’s Great Lake, the Tonle Sap, is exported to neighboring countries and to the numerous restaurants and resorts that cater to the tourist industry.

And yet, the people who produce this food are poor, hungry and malnourished. Since agricultural production does not provide sufficient food for the entire year, nor does it bring them enough income, they don’t have the cash to buy rice and food from markets that are over-flowing with food. Other important sources of food for rural families are the natural commons such as forests, wetlands, rivers and lakes from which they harvest food and medicinal plants. But the enclosure of these resources by private interests, as well as their degradation resulting from over-use has cut off rural communities from their last, fall back source of food and nourishment.

A Food Security Atlas launched in February 2008 by the WFP shows high levels of hunger and malnutrition in the country, especially in areas plagued by land-grabbing, economic land concessions and extractive industry. Included in the 10 “hot-spot” provinces that are considered the most food insecure and vulnerable is Siem Riep, home of the famous Angkor era temples and the tourist mecca of the Mekong region. Province residents say that the boom in the tourist industry has served as a massive suction pump, sucking away resources from local communities and leaving them poor, hungry and vulnerable.

Says Chanthou, “The open market system to export rice is not working in favour of the poor, who do not have enough money to buy food when prices go up. Therefore, the Government needs to intervene. The Government has taken some positive action recently, but should have done more.”

CHRONICLES OF CRISES FORETOLD

In both Timor Leste and Cambodia, the roots of severe hunger, malnutrition and starvation were planted a long time ago. In the case of Timor Leste, they can be traced back to Portuguese colonialism and the imposition of plantation agriculture on a traditional, multi-crop agricultural system. But what we see today in both countries are not simply ghosts from distant colonial pasts. There have been significant (and nightmarish) events over the past few decades that have entrenched food deprivation among innocent civilians.

The report of the Committee for Truth and Reconciliation (CAVR) *Chega!* documents how famine was induced in Timor Leste in 1977-78 by Indonesian military occupation and the war against Timorese independence forces. [7] At least 80,000 people died of hunger and related diseases during this time as military objectives were more important to the Indonesian military than the lives of occupied peoples. During the same period in Cambodia, millions of Cambodians were brutalised and starved by the Khmer Rouge in labour camps that were set up — ironically — to grow rice for the Khmer Rouge and its most important ally, China. In both countries, food and agricultural systems were militarised and fractured, and food itself became a weapon by which power was wielded.

The transitions of both Cambodia and Timor Leste to independent, “post-conflict” nation states did not result in freedom from hunger for the majority of their populations. Certainly, gains were made on many fronts — social, economic and political — but these gains were not equitably shared by all, nor did they include rebuilding the potential of families and communities to feed themselves. On the contrary, the economic blueprints devised by donors and creditors emphasised cash crops over food crops, and placed domestic producers and workers at the mercy of markets in which they had no leverage or space to maneuver. The World Bank, IMF and ADB were more interested in whether commodity markets functioned efficiently and whether suitably “enabling environments” for the private sector had been created, than whether local people had enough to eat.

Today, all the global trends related to rising food prices are reproduced at local levels in Timor Leste and Cambodia: rising costs of fuel and essential goods, doubling of the price of staples, diversion of grain to bio-fuels and animal feed, the conversion of agricultural lands to industrial, housing and tourism estates, the hoarding and manipulation of food supply by traders, profiteering by speculators through futures trade, etc. And as in every developing country, rising prices of rice, wheat, soy, corn and other staples have not translated into higher prices for small-scale producers or into increased food security for them. On the contrary, middlemen, traders, speculators and agribusiness companies are making a killing — literally.

But even when world food prices come down, unless economic and agricultural policies are drastically amended in both countries, food shortages, hunger and malnutrition are not likely to abate. “Now we can see the negative impacts of the free market” said Mateus Tilman from Kdadalak

Sulimutuk Institute (KSI), an organisation working on land reform in Timor Leste. According to Tilman and HASATIL's Pereira, resolving land conflicts and governmental investment in rural infrastructure are crucial steps to tackle food shortages and hunger. "Our dream is to have comprehensive agrarian reform and empower our farmers. Land must remain in the hands of the farmers" Tilman adds. KSI works closely with HASATIL, whose members are promoting food sovereignty as a long term solution to the country's food crisis. "We need to plant more local food crops, build independence in food and reduce dependence on imported seeds and fertilisers. We also need to promote local knowledge among farmers — use and nurture their local knowledge and build more; and we need to provide information to farmers about climate change, trade and other related issues."

Unfortunately, there are few such visionaries in Cambodia. Most development NGOs are reluctant to take on the country's elite power structures and confront national economic policies that are accelerating land and resource crises and reproducing the food crisis. However, local farming, fishing and indigenous communities are organising and federating in an attempt to build a strong and collective national voice.

Mirroring trends elsewhere, the tragedy in both countries is not that there is not enough food, but that the food does not reach everyone who needs it. Even in instances of actual food shortages, food is available in neighboring areas and countries, and with timely governmental intervention, serious food crises can be averted. But as has become evident over the past year, the world can have record grain production as in 2007 (2.3 billion tons) and still people can be impoverished by rising food prices. [8] The high profits recorded by agribusiness companies and futures traders in 2007 show that food has become a commodity for speculation and profit making. While governments in developing countries, especially net food importing countries, are finally taking some actions to protect their economies and food stocks, it is uncertain whether they will have the courage to move away from the economic orthodoxy of free market theory preached by the World Bank and the IMF, and commit to the drastic transformations of national economic, agricultural and food policies needed to build genuine, long term food security.

It is extremely important that we start to rebuild the capacities of our communities and societies to feed ourselves. La Via Campesina's proposed paradigm of peoples' food sovereignty offers the most appropriate and adaptable selection of strategies to do this. For Timor Leste and Cambodia, peoples' food sovereignty can ensure that independence, national reconstruction and peace building find longer-term, sustainable and home-grown expressions.

P.S.

* From Focus on Trade, Number 140, May 2008.

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Footnotes

[1] See UNMIT Weekly number 42:

<http://www.unmit.org/unmisetwebsite...>] The Ministry of Agriculture estimates that annual rice consumption in Timor Leste averages about 83,000 metric tonnes (mt) of which, 40,000 mt are produced domestically. The shortfall is made up through imports which are already at 50-60,000 tonnes and rising. Acting Special Representative of the Secretary-General to Timor Leste, Reske-Nielsen, suggests that rice imports provide the Timorese Government with time to come up with

medium and long term solutions. [[ibid

[2] KBH is the acronym for Knua Bua Hatene, a Timorese non-governmental organisation that provides vocational education to youth and vulnerable groups to facilitate employment and food security.

[3] East Timor: a Tiny Half Island of "Surplus Humanity". Ben Moxham, February 18, 2005.
<http://www.counterpunch.org/moxham02182005.html>

[4] ibid

[5] HASATIL is the acronym for Hametin Agricultura Sustentavel Timor Lorosai which means 'Strengthening Sustainable Agriculture in Timor Leste in Tetum, one of Timor Leste's national languages.'

[6] 'East Timor: a Tiny Half Island of "Surplus Humanity"'. Ben Moxham, February 18, 2005.
<http://www.counterpunch.org/moxham02182005.html>

[7] <http://www.cavr-timorleste.org>

[8] Making a Killing from Hunger. Against the grain, April 2008, GRAIN.
<http://www.grain.org/atg/>