

Role of Cooperatives as Producers & Consumers in Ensuring Food Sovereignty

Statement by

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Honorable Chair

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

A very good afternoon to you all!

*It is my great pleasure to be here at this august gathering to share some ideas **on how co-operatives as producers and consumers can play an important role in ensuring food sovereignty and achieving sustainable development.** I would like to convey my gratitude to the organizers for inviting me at the program. I also wish to offer my sincere thanks to them, particularly International Co-operative Alliance - Asia and Pacific and the Esteemed Government of Vietnam for nicely organizing such an important event.*

Distinguished Audience

*Co-operatives provide a space where citizens of the world, irrespective of race, gender, culture, social background or economic condition, can get together and meet their needs and build better communities. The International Co-operative Alliance is the apex organization of co-operatives world-wide, including individual and national-level co-operatives, federations, and public entities as well as one billion members and around one hundred million employees. The Alliance seeks to forge a global strategy to become the fastest growing enterprise by 2020. Producers' Co-operatives, also known as "**Agricultural or Farmers' Co-operatives**" and "**Consumers' Co-operatives,**" endeavor to secure food sovereignty at national, regional and global levels. "**Food Sovereignty**" denotes that the people who produce and consume food should have adequate control over the mechanism of food production and distribution, rather than corporation and market institutions.*

*Food sovereignty is the right of people to healthy and culturally appropriate food - produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agricultural system and secure sanitary and phytosanitary standards. While strict compliance standards is not just one isolated rule for the **Consumer Co-operatives**, they require the **Producers' Co-operatives** to follow the canons of traceability and meet the terms of a set of many rules that deal with pests and pathogens as well as other syndromes.*

Ladies and Gentlemen

*In order to emphasize the important role that cooperatives have in poverty reduction and economic and social development throughout the world, the United Nations has encouraged Member States to promote cooperatives and the contributions they make in these areas. UN specifically encourages Governments to support agricultural cooperatives “**through easy access to affordable finance, adoption of sustainable production techniques, investments in rural infrastructure and irrigation, strengthened marketing mechanisms and support for the participation of women in economic activities.**”*

*With adequate support, **producers' or agricultural cooperatives** in particular, have the potential to empower communities to not only increase their food security, but also their food sovereignty, which emphasizes a community's right to define agricultural policies and practices that are socially and culturally unique to them. On the other hand, **Consumer Co-operatives** are enterprises owned and managed by consumers in order to fulfill their own needs and aspirations. They operate within the market system, independent of the state, but very much in the form of mutual aid, inclined not towards commercial profit, but social gains. **Consumer co-operatives**, thus, take the shape of retail outlets, owned and operated by the consumers, such as Food Co-operatives. They also take the form of co-operatives operating in the areas as health care, insurance, housing, utilities, and personal finance, including credit unions. Inspired by the philosophy of Robert Owen or the Rochdale Pioneers, the consumers may also form “**Co-operative Villages**” or “**Colonies of Common Interests**”. Residents of these villages or colonies would take the dwellers out of poverty by growing their own food, making their own clothes, and ultimately becoming self-reliant.*

Distinguished Gathering

*Bangladesh presents a similar instance of co-operatives for common good. Our Prime Minister Her Excellency Sheikh Hasina launched “**One House one Farm**” project throughout the country that emerged as the best example of cooperative-based initiative to secure food sovereignty, poverty alleviation, and inclusive development through family farming. Since micro-credit initiatives failed to take poor peasants out of the shackles of poverty, “One House one Farm Project” commits to a paradigm shift from micro-credit to micro-savings.*

Learned Guests

*Agricultural sector itself has a variety of important functions that impact economic, environmental, nutritional, gender, age, health, and cultural spheres, each having an essential role in the developmental framework of a country, eventually contributing to food security. While the basic material needs of their citizens remain an unfulfilled promise in the majority of world’s states, few countries like Bangladesh has been successful in mobilizing strength and resources for securing food autarchy. **Comilla Co-operative Model** in Bangladesh has paved the way for green revolution and agriculture-based rural development in the country. “**One House one Farm Project**” is a new initiative in the same direction, which directly contributes to agricultural production and food sufficiency.*

While food sovereignty is seen as a means to achieve food security, agro-ecology is seen as an alternative to industrialized farming. Food may not necessarily originate from cultivated fields; it may also come from forests, meadows, and coastal regions that are often destroyed by agricultural expansion. Nutritional foods and medicines do not need to be separated either, nor must they come from the pre-existing notion of a Western diet, for even weeds and wild plants have been proven to provide an excellent source of proteins, vitamins, and minerals - all necessary to obtain a healthy diet. Regions that adopt these forms of unconventional foods have also been found to generate incomes. They have also been proven to provide an invaluable source of employment and food for rural communities, particularly women. Indeed, organic farming practices utilized by smallholder farmers under co-operatives appear to be better for

consumers, producers, and the environment as a whole, signaling the call for a decreased emphasis on commercially favored crops and modern farming methods.

Ladies and Gentleman

Several economic factors are central to the struggle for food sovereignty. The privatization and commoditization of food and water generates a capitalist ideology and action on a global scale. This approach in turn threatens the production of good, healthy and abundant food. The ruinous practices of multi-national corporations such as land grabbing, the destruction of local markets via price dumping (dumping of food at prices below the cost of production in the local/global economy) and the export of the high quality produce have a knock-on effect on the power balance between farmers, consumers, and the multi-nationals. These difficulties encourage rural to urban migrations, which factor in the progressively rising costs which threaten the future of food production.

Distinguished Gathering

We endorse co-operative endeavors that uphold a set of propositions like:

- Farmers must be rewarded and supported for developing their business and generating economic activity and development.*
- Fair wages for farmers and agricultural workers – proposed schema (wages, affordable food, fair prices to agriculture worker and farmers, avoid rural to urban migration, etc.)*
- Fair ethical prices which enable a ‘fair’ standard of living*
- Affordable food, that is healthy, enough and culturally acceptable*
- Encourage price protection policies for countries, (e.g. increased import taxes on products which can be produced in the ‘home’ country and lower import taxes on not-local products)*
- Agrarian reform that ensures redistribution of resources, economic justice and local autonomy*
- Increasing farms autonomy, that is to say the independence of the farmers.*
- To secure equal access to local markets.*
- Food security, quality and safety*

- *Development of rural areas via increased employability, wages and access to information and opportunities for young people*
- *'Not mass production, but production by the masses - which serves to improve economic stability via increased employment, thus increased opportunities, wages and standard of living.*

Respected Guests

We need to employ ecologically-sound and sustainable farming methods and techniques. While new technology is welcomed, peasants' indigenous knowledge also merits due attention. Unplanned urbanization and outworn system of production pose threat to nature and environment. Conservation of ecologically critical areas also demands appropriate care. Schools need to offer proper education about ecologically sound farming and food production.

Local agriculture is in decline and the economic crisis has a negative influence on agriculture: it is inclined to industrialized monoculture farming. On the other hand, solutions must be adapted to local situations.

Revered Delegates

So we call for:

- *Dialogue and debates between peasants and politicians.*
- *Recognize traditional methods in combination with new knowledge.*
- *Teaching about how to diversify local production.*
- *Improve link between rural and urban, create network between farmer and consumer.*
- *Education and information so that everyone knows what they are eating and how it was produced.*
- *Passing on of traditional peasant knowledge.*
- *Small scale farming to improve the relation and transparency between farmer and consumer.*
- *Teaching both ways between farmer and technicians, to prevent top-down processes.*

- *Agricultural education has to include teaching of alternative agricultural methods as organic farming, agro-ecology, bio-dynamics, etc.*
- *Training and information sessions on market changes at local, national and regional levels.*

Finally, a dialogue with co-operators from all over the region, their experiences, achievements, contradictions, and aspirations will be helpful for the renewal of the system of production and the results it would bear for the producers and consumers in securing food sovereignty.

Thank you very much for listening with patience. Thank you indeed!