



# ASIA

## Economic Powerhouse that is Home to Hunger

### Introduction

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The tale of hunger, as a factor of poverty and malnutrition in Asia, is a baffling tale of people who have slipped through the cracks. These people should enjoy the universal human rights promised to all human beings but they have become invisible. As their states celebrate economic growth and development that, on further examination, appears inequitable, it becomes clear that these victims have been left behind in the margins of society. Thus, a substantial section of the population stands at the threshold of poverty and food insecurity due to skewed development policies adopted by their governments, such as the case of the Philippines; in other cases, such as India, there is a neglect of communities who are socially and economically exploited and discriminated against on the basis of caste. Apart from these socio-economic factors the geographical terrain and limits to physical access play an important role in poverty and hunger: plains are much more accessible than mountain ranges. In this way, the disadvantaged and vulnerable groups have to face numerous obstacles from varying sources to access what should be available to them as a matter of right. While the nature of the problem of hunger and food insecurity manifests itself differently in various countries, it would not be too farfetched to generalize that hunger continues to remain a constant barrier for Asian countries trying to reach their goals of development and equitable growth.

It needs to be understood that hunger and extreme poverty do not persist because of the states' failure to recognize them as real issues, rather, it stems from neglect and insensitivity toward the victims throughout the policies of these countries. This is seen in instances where the governments choose to address the concerns of a small, but influential, minority when formulating plans for development. This collaboration with private partners, exportation of agricultural products, and undertaking of "development projects" often caters to such influential minorities, and aims to attract tourism, at the expense of local populations.

Left with no other alternative, victims are forced into a lifestyle of migrancy, subjecting them to emotional and physical distress and requiring them to travel vast distances on foot to find employment. These stories play themselves out across Asia with some variation: the exodus to Metro Manila in Philippines, the flocking to sweatshops in Dhaka, and the disappearance from government records in India are just a few examples. Adding to this unhappy reality are unemployment, poverty, lack of education and health facilities, a generally poor standard of living, and unsatisfactory working conditions when employment is available. Moreover, the labour available is often outside the skill set of these migrant workers as well, further limiting, their options. This, in turn, puts a great stress on the already



broken systems of access to health, education, housing, and other basic needs leading to a cycle that only feeds upon itself.

Politically these problems are often compounded by a neoliberal model of development, shoved down the throats of some of the governments while happily adopted by others, that has left large sections of national populations impoverished by forcing the states to withdraw from welfare schemes and services delivery systems. Suspension of hard earned labour rights in what is referred to as “special economic zones” in India or “export processing zones” in Philippines has also played a crucial role in victimizing much of the labour force by eliminating many of their rights.

Among the factors perpetuating food insecurity in the region, faulty prioritization of concerns by the national elites requires further mention. Nepal is a salient case where the quest of political democracy has pushed everything else, the problem of hunger included, into the background. The country has been in “transition” for too long while the political leadership lets large sections of its population starve. The problem here, though similar to other countries, is aggravated because of transnational migration of a largely male population into neighbouring India leaves the women behind to fend for themselves without support.

At the ground level, the issue is exacerbated by delivery mechanisms which are weak and opaque. The fact that corruption is prevalent across Asia is internationally accepted and it is clear that much of the funds meant to reach the desired target communities rarely reach them intact. embezzlement, theft, and corruption along the system are part of life in many of these countries and allow only a small amount of funds to reach the intended beneficiary. This malfeasance is guarded by the lack of transparency in the system as no proper checks and balances are maintained.

Most of these countries have ratified or are signatory to many international covenants which make it mandatory for them to ensure that their citizens are provided with basic rights. In addition, the constitutions of these countries also provide for a right to life and livelihood (though the exact nature of this may vary). However, it seems that the governments routinely ignore their duties, and it falls on other organizations and campaigns in various countries to fight for food security. They have been pressuring the governments to make food security achievable for citizens; in the case of India, this resulted in the passing of the food security act in 2013. Though it has many limitations, such an act is definitely a positive step given the widespread hunger and malnutrition that has lead to deaths in the country.

Addressing the problems of transparency, corruption, policy planning, grievance redressal mechanisms, and utilizing feedback remains central to making food security a reality. In its endeavour to support the struggle for right to food for everyone, the Right to Food desk of the Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) is actively engaged in six Asian countries though to varying degrees. The countries are India, Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Philippines and Indonesia. The basic idea central to the right to food programme is to change the dominant discourse in these countries that sees right to food as a non-justiciable right or even a mere favour from the state and to make this right an inalienable part of right to life with dignity. In other words, the basic objective is to radically restructure the discourse on right to food and make it a right of the people. This can only be achieved through a relentless



focus on building an honest delivery mechanism with corresponding facility for addressing grievances. Only in the presence of a strong initiative by the governments of these countries and a strong delivery mechanism can food security be achieved. In the absence of this, relentless pursuit of the faulty policies of inequitable growth will only continue to deepen the crisis already faced by these countries.

Following are short reports of AHRC desk's interventions and experiences at the grassroots in Bangladesh, India, Nepal and, the Philippines.

## Bangladesh: Extreme Poverty Amidst Spectacular Success

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The fight against hunger in Bangladesh is fraught with hope and despair. Go by the Global Hunger Index 2012, and it is one of the seven countries that made the most "absolute progress" among 120 evaluated countries in slashing rates of hunger from 1990 to 2012. Conversely it still stands in the "alarming" range. The progress, howsoever piecemeal, was largely accomplished by integrating poverty alleviation, with a focus on vulnerable and marginalized sections, as an integral part of national development strategy in 2008. The strategy worked and resulted in significant reduction poverty levels in the country: the national incidence of poverty has decreased from 34 %, to 25 % from 2000 to 2005. This substantial development was also found in human development indicators. The complication, however, is that extreme levels of poverty persisted while these strides in development were being made.

To understand this consider that the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics has not been declaring the percentage of the population whose direct calorie intake falls below a threshold of 2122 calories, despite having the necessary data. Instead it noted the 3.56 % increase in overall calorie intake per capita per day to 2318.3 K.cal in 2010. This raises serious doubts that the gains achieved by the country during 1990-2005, when it brought down the number of people below the 2122 threshold from 47.5 % to 40 %, have either been lost or worse. Further, the survey also claimed a significant decrease in the overall incidence of poverty which stood at 31.5 % in 2010 compared to 40 % in 2005. The analysis put poverty levels at 21.3 % (it was 28.4 % in 2005) and 35.2 % in rural areas(43.8 % in 2005). The survey, again, leaves much to be explained as such a sharp decline in poverty levels in rural areas seems impossible to achieve in a Bangladesh faced with steep price hikes of food baskets turning costlier by 36 % in 2011 alone.

Contrast this analysis with the World Bank dollar-a-day standard - the most popular linear scale for poverty - which holds the universal standard of extreme poverty at \$1.25 a day, and it becomes clear how difficult it can be to address the issue.. This standard does not address the differences in the disparity of poverty where certain regions and sections of the population being more vulnerable to poverty than other. It also does not address the cause of distress migration when populations are forced to relocate to other regions in search of employment and related facilities for education and health. Invariably the extreme poverty makes it difficult for these populations to achieve a basic minimum standard of living in all spheres. Thus, it relates to hunger, The 1996 World Food Summit definition of food security as "when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and



nutritious food which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life" may actually be more informative.

One area where Bangladesh did succeed was a significant reduction in the number of underweight children; brought down to 36 % in 2011 from a precariously high 66 % in 2005. There is little to celebrate, though, as this high rate of under nutrition is still unacceptable.

Ensuring food security in Bangladesh has become a challenge largely due to extreme poverty of a sizable section of its population coupled with a complete lack of implementation of social welfare policies. The government itself concedes only 24.57 % of households having been supported by at least one public safety net program over last twelve months. This is evidence of the gap between the official poverty level and the number of households receiving government support, howsoever abysmal, shows the loopholes that plague social welfare policies in Bangladesh.

In addition, the governmental policies and initiatives have largely tended to address poverty only through short term plans and programmes, thereby making no substantial difference to the living conditions of the majority of its population. Furthermore, the economic growth obsessed policy pushed on Bangladesh (among others) and pursued by the government ignores the conditions of extreme poverty and presumes that a general model of development would reach the marginalized section and bring about change. However this model has not worked and consequently the conditions of food insecurity, poverty, health, and education of a substantial section of the population are still endangered.

This is why the news of individuals and communities starving to death in 2013 took the sheen off the claims of progress and indicated that the fight against hunger was far from over. For instance, the condition of several elderly women and men living in destitution in the Palashbari area of the Gaibandha district of the Rangpur division bought up the fact that the excluded and marginalized section of the population continues to face extreme poverty. Most of these people have no one to look after them and are physically unable to make ends meet by themselves. Further, despite being both entitled to and most needy of various social welfare schemes of the government, such as the Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) program aimed at ensuring food security for the marginalised groups, they are denied the benefits because of endemic corruption and criminal inefficiency that define the system. As a consequence, most of them are forced into begging or living on doles offered by kind hearted neighbours for survival. Unfortunately, the neighbourhoods in this district frequently gets lashed by floods and droughts and are often in no condition to help.

The reality for the people of Rangpur is typical of almost all of rural Bangladesh that still depends largely on agriculture that, in turn, depends upon the benevolence of nature. Unlike much of the rest of the world, Bangladesh gets ravaged by foreseeable natural disasters, namely floods, year after year but fails to put preventative measures in place. The floods do not merely cause havoc, they also significantly affect paddy production exposing all those dependent upon local agriculture to hunger. Bangladesh's dependence upon the world rice market is another factor that significantly affects the poorest sections of its population leading to food procurement almost always making up more than 40 percent of their expenditures.



Government coffers do not face a shortage of funds to help alleviate these problems. Since the late 1990s the various Poverty Reduction Strategies were funded by the World Bank and the IMF to advance Bangladesh's development. What is lacking is a commitment on the part of the government coupled with methods to deal with faulty planning, corruption, and lack of coordination and other systemic flaws. Consequently, instead of having a clearly thought out policy framework to provide employment and food security, authorities end up addressing the issue with knee jerk responses and half-hearted attempts to sort out specific crisis situations.

This leads to two issues that need addressing. Firstly, the condition of extreme poverty and lack of availability and accessibility to resources, which perpetuates poverty. Secondly, faulty planning policies forcing more households to slide into extreme poverty over a period of time. Poverty can never be alleviated without providing the people with employment opportunities and this is where Bangladesh seems to have squarely failed. Largely an agrarian society, Bangladesh is often forced into seasonal unemployment by the vicious pattern of a drought and floods that renders people jobless twice a year. In addition, Monga, also known as Mora Kartik, which refers to months of death and disaster because of floods in September to November and in March-April, also has a devastating effect on society. With no other industries in the district, the loss of jobs in Monga months renders people absolutely jobless and exposes them to the brutal cycle of debt and bondage while the agricultural department of the Government of Bangladesh continues to neglect these farmers, even at the level of policy formation. Farmers, thus have to work for the interests less benevolent powers to secure seed, fertilizer, diesel and even electricity required to grow their crops. The situation is so bad that even in the years when farmers do manage to gather a productive harvest they fail to get good prices for them.

Conditions are even more arduous for the landless agricultural labourers. With no work available in the 5 Monga months of the year, they have two choices, either to depend solely on the mercy of landlords or run away to Dhaka to work in any of the sweatshops that masquerade as garment factories for wages that are often not enough even for survival.

To compensate for the lack of the state in addressing hunger, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) sought to place poverty alleviation within the ambit of millennium development goals and focus on microfinance programmes in order to reach to the extreme poor. As of December 2010, 13 countries worldwide recognized the right to food or provided for state obligations relating to food and nutrition as state policy - Bangladesh, Brazil, Ethiopia, India, Iran, Malawi, Nigeria, Pakistan, Panama, Papua New Guinea, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka, and Uganda. Currently, NGOs in Bangladesh are pushing for a constitutional amendment to guarantee the legal right to access food or a food security "framework law" that will hold the state liable for any scarcity according to the IRIN report. Further it also outlines the fact that "According to the most recently published National Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) from 2011, 40 [%] of children are too short for their age (known medically as 'stunting'), a harbinger of lifelong development delays and one of the leading causes globally of brain damage. Some 36 [%] of the surveyed children in Bangladesh under the age of five were underweight for their age (showing signs of stunting, and/or 'wasting' - weighing too little for their height). While there has been a slight improvement in child



nutrition levels since the last DHS in 2007, there are still too many nutrition-deprived hungry children nationwide."

In international politics there have been quite a number of ratifications and conventions to which Bangladesh is a signatory. These include the UN Declaration on the Right to Development, which in 1986 made it the state's responsibility to create "conditions favourable to the development of peoples and individuals" as well as the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action adopted by the World Conference on Human Rights (which said everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for their health and well-being, including food) in 1993. Apart from these Bangladesh is also a signatory to covenants which focus on economic social and cultural rights. Likewise, neglecting food security and employment has also spiraled into a neglect of other basic rights. It has ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in 1998. Unless Bangladesh works towards ensuring and protecting the basic minimum rights of its people, poverty and hunger will continue to remain an unresolved problem.

It is in this regard that Bangladesh has taken some welcome steps like abandoning neo-liberalism and getting increasingly engaged in supporting agriculture. Subsidizing fertilizers for farmers and building a buffer stock of food grains, rice in particular are some of the most important; Bangladesh is also trying to procure lands in foreign countries to strengthen the food security of its citizenry. Its decision to sell them in open market in times of food scarcity to stabilize food prices is not an encouraging sign however, and it must evolve a public distribution system based on the principle of entitlements. It must also ensure that these interventions are not appropriated by criminal or corrupt interests deeply entrenched in the system.

In sum, though the successes achieved by Bangladesh in bringing down the levels of absolute poverty and malnutrition is commendable, it still has a long way to go. It is good that the government seems to continue the trend by promising to spend 3 percent of its GDP on safety net programmes in 2014-15, yet the emergence of sweatshops with little or no protection for the working classes is a clear threat to progress.

## **India: Eradicating Hunger Demands Action, not Hollow Promises**

India is also an example of hunger, starvation, and the assorted illnesses that accompany it. Not only have the civil rights and human rights organisations documented and raised the issue of chronic hunger and malnutrition repeatedly, but the government itself has acknowledged this fact with the Prime Minister of India referring to hunger as a "national shame." Yet this solemn realisation has not translated into concrete action aimed at reducing the unacceptable levels of hunger and poverty experienced by a majority of the Indian population; in fact, the hunger levels and availability of food has never been lower in the history of the country and India has been ranked in the "alarming" category on the Hunger Index prepared by the International Food Policy Research Institute. Noted economist Utsa Patnaik has said the last time that similarly low levels were seen was during the great Bengal



Famine and around the period of World War II<sup>1</sup>. Notably, every single country in Asia barring Bangladesh has been performing better, and including war torn countries like Afghanistan and Iraq. Even Guinea-Bissau, Togo, Burkina Faso, Sudan, Rwanda, and Zimbabwe were found to be feeding their people better than India. The ranking is commensurate with findings of Prof. Patnaik who had decisively shown that an average Indian family in 2005 was consuming a staggering 110 kg less grain as compared to that in 1991.<sup>2</sup> If one goes by the criteria for famine put forward by the World Health Organisation (WHO), then the world's largest democracy can be labeled as "famine stricken." One of the WHO criteria defines a community with more than 40 % of its population having a body mass index (BMI) of less than 18.5; by that yardstick, Indian children as a whole and many other communities (mostly the Dalit and tribal communities) are in the grip of a near-perennial condition of famine.

The alarming nature of this situation becomes clear when one observes that the high rates of hunger existing simultaneously along with millions of tons of food grains rotting in the godowns of the Food Corporation of India (FCI) every single year. While replying to a question in parliament, Sharad Pawar, the incumbent minister for Food and Agriculture, informed the lower house that over 11,700 tons of food grains worth 68.6 million Indian rupees (or approximately \$ USD 1.5 million) were found damaged in government warehouses.<sup>3</sup> This wastage of food could be interpreted as - and dealt with as - a criminal offence in other countries, and in India This may be an attractive position given the level of hunger. Added to this is the fact that at any given point in time the FCI stocks almost double the amount of buffer norms, an amount that hovers around 30 million tons of food grains. Evidently, the government is not hard-pressed with any shortage of food; on the contrary, it has more than enough to release that it could not only save children from malnutrition but also avoid unused food grains rotting.

The tragedy of the situation becomes more pronounced when one considers that though the country is unable to feed its own citizenry, the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA) approved the export of two million tonnes of wheat from Government stock, at subsidised rates, as fodder for livestock in the developed world. This could give raise to concerns of corruption, as a political and financial deal for the government being preferred over the malnourishment of children seems antithetical to common sense and good faith. The government's role in bending the rules to help private entities profiting from scams like "humanitarian" export of non-Basmati rice to several African countries<sup>4</sup> is further evidence of malintent. It should also be remembered that concerns of transparency, leakages, corruption, delivery mechanisms, and grievance redressals are not recent ones, they have been plaguing the system for a long time. One has to only recall the then prime minister Rajiv Gandhi

<sup>1</sup> Patnaik, Utsa, 2007, *The Republic of Hunger and Other Essays*, Three Essays Collective, New Delhi.

<sup>2</sup>Patnaik, Utsa, 2009, 'Origins of the Food Crisis in India and Developing Countries', *Monthly Review*, [Volume 61, Issue 03 \(July-August\)](#)

<sup>3</sup> [http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2010-07-27/news/27602784\\_1\\_fci-godowns-foodgrains-fci-depots](http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2010-07-27/news/27602784_1_fci-godowns-foodgrains-fci-depots) (last accessed on 9th February 2012)

<sup>4</sup> Dutta, Saikat. 'Whose Name On A Grain Of Rice?' *Outlook*, July 2009. Can be accessed here <http://www.outlookindia.com/article.aspx?250566>



conceding back in the 1980s that nearly 85 % of the funds allocated to various schemes was lost to corruption.

Add conscious attempts to keep the markers of poverty at extremely low levels and thus pushing a substantial section of the population out of the social security net to the sordid saga of corruption and claims of growth and equity fall flat. The policies presumably meant for inclusion have been subverted time and again and The Justice Wadhwa Committee identified this as the core problem plaguing the system and asserted that the very basis of adjudging the poverty level at an expenditure of less than 15 rupees a day was "too low." It also submitted to the Supreme Court that nearly half of the poor do not have Below Poverty Line (BPL) cards and are thus disenfranchised.<sup>5</sup>

This denial of rights is not an anomalous matter. The Planning Commission of India has the audacity of first putting a central cap on the number of BPL families in the provinces and then defending it while asserting that it does not harm those genuinely needy. For the uninitiated, the "central cap" is an arbitrary figure that state governments have to stick to while identifying families below poverty lines. Families in excess of the cap are then left to their fate. In others words, they are just denied away by the magic wand of statistics.

The Planning Commission acknowledged this complaint in a written submission to the Supreme Court and said that "is aware that many States complain that people who are indisputably poor are left out of the BPL list because of the cap imposed by the Central Government. It is not denied that this is indeed the case in many states."<sup>6</sup> It then blamed all of the consequences on state governments, arguing that the problem has been caused by wrong identification by the states. Any rational person would find the argument not merely baffling but also absurd, as did the Supreme Court. In an order dated 29 March 2011, the court expressed its dismay over the issue and asserted that it failed "to comprehend the rationale and justification of putting a cap by the Planning Commission." The fact of the matter is that the state governments, taken together, have identified 111 million Indian families to be BPL, well above the central government's estimation that puts the BPL count at around 60 million. It should not need to be mentioned that these 51 million families have been abandoned by the state and thus condemned to live in a state of perpetual food insecurity.

Chronic hunger does not affect the citizenry as a whole as much as it affects those condemned to live on the margins of Indian society. Even a cursory glance at any data on hunger brings this fact out. The Hunger and Malnutrition (HUNGaMA) report, whose findings the prime minister based his national shame comment on, underscores that the children from Muslim and Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribal households are among the largest numbers of victims and they suffer more than others. In a social system, aptly described by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar as a system of "graded inequalities," that penalises people for accidents of heritage (instead of giving equal opportunities to all individuals irrespective

<sup>5</sup> Complete text of the Justice Wadhwa Committee report can be accessed here  
<http://pdscvc.nic.in/report%20on%20computersisation%20of%20PDS.htm>

<sup>6</sup> The cap was fiercely protested by the Right to Food Campaign, India. More details can be found here  
[http://www.righttofoodindia.org/data/pds/June\\_2011\\_report\\_protest\\_planning\\_commission\\_%20poverty\\_line\\_23\\_may\\_2011.pdf](http://www.righttofoodindia.org/data/pds/June_2011_report_protest_planning_commission_%20poverty_line_23_may_2011.pdf)



of their caste, creed, or community) primary responsibility for helping those on the margins lies with the state. This is why the state is treated as *parens patriae* (parent of the citizens) and has the right to intervene in cases of interest to the citizens such as in matters of health, physical comfort, and welfare, whenever such interests are threatened. But the Indian state would have none of this. Instead it seems prepared to let its citizenry live in the political arena rendered futile by extreme levels of socioeconomic inequality, as forewarned by Dr Ambedkar.

The failure of the state to address the excluded communities is further evidenced in the condition of government run programmes such as the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS). The ICDS was formulated in 1975 with a mandate of fighting malnutrition among children under six years of age. The most conservative estimates, as acknowledged even by the government, peg malnutrition among children at 42 %. A closer look at the budgetary allocation for the scheme brings out that every child is entitled to a mere 4 rupees (\$.08) per day. Even in the absence of corruption this amount is itself cruel to the country's poor.

Again, the government is aware of this and it keeps setting up committees and commissions commensurate with the enormity of the issue. It had set up, for example, the Prime Minister's Council on India's Nutrition Challenges way back in 2008 which only met once, in 2010. Not a single decision taken in that meeting, like the restructuring and strengthening of the ICDS, was ever implemented in spite of recommendations from various governmental committees as well as civil society groups. All other decisions taken in that meeting, such as making efforts for universalisation of the ICDS by providing for an Anganwadi centre for 500 to 1,000 people instead of existing upper limit of 1500; providing a second Anganwadi for a population of 1,000 to 2,000, and another for every additional 1,000 people; an Anganwadi for every 150 to 500 people in tribal areas; and a mini-Anganwadi centre for places with a population of less than 150, remain unfulfilled as well. Similarly, Prime Minister's Manmohan Singh pledge that all children below the age of 6 years would be brought under the protective cover of Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) by March 2012 remains unfulfilled. Other proposals included ensuring a compulsory monthly weighing of children under the age of three at Anganwadi centres for keeping a tab on their nutritional situation, universal registration of births, issuing mother and child protection card and upgradation of Anganwadi centres into Anganwadis-cum-crèches.

In the absence of any clear-cut guidelines, several ministries have made controversial decisions like the involvement of private sector in child survival and nutrition. The move has paved the way for private profiteers to enter the sector with packaged food for the marginalized, as exposed by the civil society. For example, private companies in cooperation with vested interests in administrative and political hierarchies have been found to have stolen more than INR 1000 Crore, or USD 185 million in the state of Maharashtra alone as per the findings of a report of Biraj Patnaik<sup>7</sup>, Principal Adviser, Commissioners to the Supreme Court and were submitted to the court with reference to SLP (Civil) No. 10654 of 2012 in the matter of Vyankateshwar Mahila Auyodhigik Sahakari Sanstha v. Purnima Upadhyay and Others listed along with Civil Writ Petition 196 of 2001 (PUCL v. UOI).

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.humanrights.asia/news/ahrc-news/AHRC-STM-223-2012>



It is in this respect that recently passed National Food Security Act 2013 comes across as a welcome (though grossly inadequate) step in India's fight against hunger. The need of a Food Security Bill covering almost 67 % of the population exposes the hollowness of government's claims over significant reduction in poverty and shows that the claims of having brought it down from 37 % in 2004-05 to 22 % in 2011-12 are absurdly inaccurate. The Bill also serves as evidence for the fact that the rural distress caused by the agricultural crisis is yet not over. It shows that the crisis has now hit urban centres as well. The bill furthers reaffirms various findings how majority of India is barely surviving. NSSO's findings, for example, for 2011-12 (July-June) show that INR 521.44 is all that the bottom 5 % of the population has to survive a month in rural areas and INR 700.50 in urban ones. These findings, shockingly, bursts another bubble: the myth of Indian middle classes' march into an era of prosperity. This evidence pegs average monthly expenditure of top 5 % of Indian population at a lowly INR 4481 in the countryside and only a marginally better INR 10,282 in the cities. Adjust it for the expenditures of the rich significantly lifting the average and we get a horrible scenario of widening gulf in incomes between the top 5 % of Indian population and the rest of the public. To understand what this means, the average monthly expenditure on a national level is a meagre INR 1430 for rural areas and just INR 2630, or about the cost of a family of five watching a single movie in a multiplex, in urban centers.

This is why the Right to Food Campaign has raised serious concerns regarding the Act even while welcoming it and demanded amendments to turn this piecemeal bill into a comprehensive food security law that "incentivises agriculture production, provisions for local procurement and local storage along with a decentralised and deprivatised universal PDS; along with special entitlements for children, mothers, aged, disabled, widows, migrants and destitute including universalised ICDS; monthly pensions, community kitchens and destitute feeding programmes; effective measures for grievance redress, transparency and accountability and safeguards against commercial interference including GMs in any of the food/nutrition related schemes and against the introduction of cash transfers in place of PDS."

The biggest omission is that the bill makes food security merely a legal, and not a constitutional, right and thus leaves it susceptible to tweaking from vested interests in the future. Continuing the targeted Public Distribution System remains another contentious issue with the Bill. In order to help the poor and needy through the Public Distribution System (PDS), governments opened fair price shops selling subsidised rations, kerosene oil (and even clothes, in the distant past) in as many villages as it could. Most of these shops remain closed to the needy. Their rations and kerosene get siphoned off to the open market in yet another instance of corruption. Of course there are officials entrusted with addressing this problem, but most of them join with the contractors and take their own cuts. Such a system of no benefit to the poor and dispossessed; it not only makes the needy vulnerable to errors of both unfair inclusion to unjust exclusion but also supports serious doubts over effective implementation of the act by connection with PDS. Further, not linking the Bill with agricultural and other such entitlements significantly reduce the efficacy of the Bill whose implementation is entwined with the issues of production, availability, and distribution. As a consequence, the implementation of the Bill would require serious and urgent policy level changes in land and labour rights, to make it truly effective.



The system, of course, has a grievance redress mechanism at the lower levels, offering remedies to anyone whose rights or freedoms are violated. Unfortunately, this system is as inefficient and corrupt as its counterparts in the administrative and legislative branches. Again, even the Supreme Court of India has taken notice of the corruption and inefficiency rampant in the judicial ranks. The situation is far worse at the lower rungs of the judiciary, which often is the first point of contact for a person seeking remedy and the rest of the system.

Ensuring food security of the impoverished majority of India is not a simple task as it would upset many private interests deeply entrenched in the system. According to Bloomberg, corrupt politicians and their criminal affiliates have siphoned away USD 14.5 billion worth of food intended for India's poor, or roughly 60 % of the total food allotted for this purpose. Of the food that does reach its beneficiaries, much of it is unfit for humans to consume, even by the minimal standards set by the Indian government. The absolute failure of the Indian executive indicates government inefficiencies, disregard for human rights, and a continued relationship between corrupt private businesses and political players.

Ensuring the right to food would thereby mean that the government would have to act on many levels simultaneously. It would need firstly to stop deaths arising due to malnutrition and hunger by addressing malnutrition through strengthen the ICDS system. This should allow effective monitoring of all the stages in the ICDS supply chain, in turn curbing corruption and leakages at all levels. Also a well maintained record of the funds received against expenditure would enable to check for excesses. There should be a focus on ensuring that goods and services reach their intended beneficiaries and a more transparent system, utilizing an independent committee to investigate and identifying individual offenders. This would also mean that there needs to be a mechanism through which the administration can efficiently deal with any infractions in the future.

This approach would also require targeting corruption and impunity in the Indian government. Because the right to food is inherently linked to the right to life, the Indian Supreme Court has itself agreed that it is the responsibility of government to provide nutrition and public health. Independent studies into the status of other welfare schemes, ranging from Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act to Mid-day meal scheme, tell the same tales of unbridled corruption and embezzlement from funds earmarked for those in need of assistance.

What the government needs to do is radically restructure the whole system with an emphasis on building an honest delivery mechanism with corresponding mechanisms for addressing grievances. The government would do well to start at the grassroots, say by making the system transparent and giving communities a stake in running the mechanism. For example, the experiences of social audits in the case of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Guarantee Act (MNREGA) have been tremendously encouraging. Not only have the social audits seen massive participation by the community members but they have also helped fight corruption. Almost all studies on the MNREGA have found that it has been most successful where the process of social audits backed by community-based organisation has become institutionalised. Devising a similar mechanism could be a beginning to ensuring food security, alleviating hunger, and preventing diversion of food grains meant for the community. Making the lower judiciary more accessible and affordable is a further step in the



right direction for ensuring that those subverting the system are dealt with. The only way to deal with the issue perhaps is to guarantee that fights concerning hunger, social exclusion, dispossession, and other such ills through a system of justice. A system of justice, in turn, can only be based on rule of law, ensuring effective, efficient and immediate remedies to people whose rights or freedoms have been violated through the malfunctioning of the system.

Until the government begins to adopt such reforms to address these short comings all talk will likely remain tragically hollow.

## Nepal: Democratic Transition Pushes Poverty to Background

“Transition” is the definitive word in Nepal’s desire to turn towards democracy from religious monarchy. Human rights activists talk of it in terms of transitional justice while asserting the need of something like the South African process of truth and reconciliation. Development professionals talk of it while underscoring the need of international action for ensuring food security of the impoverished masses. Yet the painstaking process of political transition is also what has pushed everything else, in this case widespread hunger, into the background; “we have to get the constitution sorted first, all else can wait,” seems to be the unspoken consensus.

For most, such as the inhabitants of the Karnali division (the very poor, landless, and a few marginal farmers) this is a dire threat. They cannot produce anything beyond three months of supplies because of the rocky and barren nature of the land and lack of irrigation. Owing to these circumstances, the village witnesses large-scale distress migration of entire families to different parts of India. With no access to land, livelihood and often water, the government is all they can depend upon; the same government that is too busy to help.<sup>8</sup>

The predicament of residents of Karnali remains is the same for scores of others inhabiting in similarly inaccessible and hilly areas. Most of them have no sustained work opportunities and often feel the need to migrate to India. Those who cannot afford to do so eke out barely a physical survival by working for daily wages when work can be found. Even then, earnings from erratic daily wage work often cannot cover the expenses of buying food and the villagers often have to go hungry despite of social welfare schemes entitling them to ten kilograms of rice per family per season. The reasons behind this are manifold, often the Nepal Food Corporation godowns have no food, and even when they do, prevalent corruption ensures that the food get siphoned off. There is a lot of money to be made in this corruption as the market rates of food grains and other subsidized items are many times over the NFC rates. For example, the rice selling for NPR 40-55 per kg sells for NPR 100 in the open market. Just as in the other countries in this report, corruption eats into whatever little savings they might have and makes them vulnerable to exploitation.

This is a typical example of food insecurity that keeps a huge section of Nepalese population, almost 3.4 million, in perpetual fear of going hungry. The situation has recently deteriorated because of the growth in population, the lack of agricultural productivity, and

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.humanrights.asia/news/hunger-alerts/AHRC-HAC-005-2013>



weak infrastructure. Moreover, nearly 5 million have fallen below the poverty line in the past few years; consequently poor health, malnutrition, and hunger are becoming one of the pressing issues for the country. According to the Nepal Demographic and Health survey (2006), half of the children below the age of 5 suffer from chronic malnourishment which results in a low height for age or stunting. The situation is worst in the far and mid western hill and mountain regions. Further, more than a third of Nepalese children suffer from low birth weight (LBW), which originates with poor maternal nutrition. Around a quarter of Nepalese women have a body mass index (BMI) below normal and about 36 % of pregnant women are anemic.

As per the recent Global Hunger index in 2010, Nepal's score is 20 which make it the 27th out of 84 ranked countries having faced substantial deficit of food grains in the past couple of years. Reports such as the World Food Programme mention Nepal as the country worst hit by malnutrition in Asia and places it on par with countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, Uganda etc.

Contributing almost 82 % of country's total exports, agriculture continues to be an important factor in Nepal's fight against hunger. Agricultural productivity, however, has been on a decline since the 1980s and the share of agriculture in the GDP has fallen from 66 % to 38 % in the past two decades without any corresponding increase in manufacturing or service sectors. The infrastructural development remains quite low with only 15 % of households having access to electricity, with the situation being much worse for rural households at 3 %. Only 30 % of the rural population has access to roads in all seasons and 15 of the government's district headquarters have no access to roads and remain largely unconnected.

Viewing the situation in Nepal holistically would be misleading as the situation of food security is uneven. The mountainous, far flung regions facing complete neglect as against Kathmandu valley and the Terai region as the rocky and barren terrain has made it difficult to find alternative livelihood options in these regions, the lack of accessibility contributes to the problem by ensuring a time lag for even tackling emergencies.

The important issue in the hills and mountains in the far and mid western regions is simply the lack of availability of food. This situation becomes further grim because of the lack of purchasing power of the people and the increasing market prices. The transportation costs to these regions further fuel the price rise thereby either making it difficult for supply to reach these areas or by making international aid limit the amount of food which is being transported to these regions.

On the other hand, food insecurity in Terai and lower hills is quite a different case as these are food surplus regions. The problem here is often not of lack of food; instead it is faulty distribution and lack of efficient monitoring mechanism to support those not able to procure food for themselves. These regions witness a lower incidence of poverty than those found in mountain regions. Coincidentally, these are also the regions of more skewed income distribution as per World Food Programme's observation.



Food insecurity in Nepal, like almost everywhere else, hits the vulnerable and the marginalized harder than others. The vulnerable groups include landless peasants, small farmers, urban poor, Dalits, indigenous people, women and other minorities who face insecurity on a sustained basis. Accordingly, Dalits (nearly 20 % of Nepali population), Adivasis (37 %), single women households, and the destitute are often the hardest hit as they are also often the ones with no or little access to resources. These groups are structurally discriminated against and policies seldom take their context into account. Additionally, due to the weak mechanism, the benefits of governmental schemes rarely reach them. The changing demographics of the region has led to many households being left with only the old, women and children as men go outside to see work. This has resulted in women being forced to work as agricultural labor for very low wages rates. Women, even as an independent group, face more food insecurity even in relatively better off houses because of sociocultural practices. Thus, the role of the state in applying the principles of non-discrimination, accountability and participation remains central in achieving food security.

A closer scrutiny of the problem in Terai reveals that food insecurity in the region is as much structured along economic fault lines as it is around social and cultural indices, most notably caste. Terai, like rest of Nepal, also suffers lower yields because of limited technological developments reducing fields capable of having three yields a year to produce only two. Contributing to the problem is that the area is largely rain fed and prone to fluctuations of weather. Climate change is also believed to be having an adverse impact on the agricultural growth of the region (though the topic is somewhat outside the scope of this report).

It is in this context that we can make sense of the fact that while agriculture provides the principal livelihood for more than 80 % of all working adults in Nepal; studies have shown that up to 50 % of them go hungry. A primary reason behind this is unequal landholding patterns. Surveys indicate that the bottom 47 % of the agricultural households operate only 15 % of the total agricultural land while the top 5 % own more than 37 % of the land. Further, the small land holdings are fragmented with more than 70 % of the peasants owning less than one hectare of land. Such small landholdings make farming economically unviable and force the peasants to live under continuous threat of debt and bondage. The same situation is reflected in water resources where only 35 % have been found to have access to improved sanitation. The situation is particularly worse for vulnerable groups who are routinely barred from using common land and water bodies by the feudal forces still wielding much of the power in rural Nepal. A particular instance of note is the 1992 Water Resources Act that gives ownership of water resources to the state but grants the right to use water to individuals and other private parties. The Act also lists the different priorities for water usage, such as drinking, sanitation, cultural and religious use, irrigation, agriculture, hydropower, and industry. Though it is the role of the state to ensure equitable growth, this has not turned into a reality where land is increasingly being converted for commercial and other reasons.

The food security in the region was also damaged due to changes in food aid after the global recession over the last few years. Much of the food aid to Nepal through various international organisations and countries had either reduced in quantity or were stopped due to a change in the global market. This coupled with an internally changing polity and economy made it difficult to cope with food security on a sustained basis. Much of the food



security crisis of Nepal is similar to other south Asian countries, wherein the state has not given a sufficient priority to ensure that hunger and malnutrition are addressed. Lack of accountability, lack of proper infrastructure and mechanism for the percolation of resources, and no safety mechanisms to rely on incase of a calamity has made the population vulnerable to food insecurity almost at a constant and chronic level.

Given these conditions, the Supreme Court of Nepal published a key decision in 2011, regarding the right to food in the country. It clarified that everyone has the right to adequate food. The court also emphasized on the role of authorities to ensure that food is accessible and affordable for the people. Further, a link between food and other human rights such as right to social security and basic necessities, was laid out. The basis for these directives also emerges from relevant international covenants to which Nepal is a signatory or state party. These include the ICESCR, UDHR, CEDAW, CRC etc. State parties have been encouraged to take steps to protect their citizens from food insecurity and it is thus the responsibility of the state to ensure that the right to food is not violated either by acts of commission or omission. This also includes the role of the state to putting emphasis on the interest of its citizens. This is the reason the state has been criticized for its emphasis on focusing on changing agricultural practices rather than directly ensuring food security at the household level. For instance, in 2010 farmers in the southern plain suffered due to failures in seed setting in a hybrid maize crop which was donor sponsored and government a run mission. The lack of ancestral seed supply aggravated the situation and agriculture catastrophe resulted as low quality seeds were sold to farmers. The consequence was the failure of more than 15000 hectares of maize crops. While this opened the market to seed companies, it further harmed the situation of a population already suffering from the seed failure.

### **The Philippines: Urban Poor, Hungry & Hounded**

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As mentioned in previous sections hunger is experienced most acutely by those condemned to live on the fringes of the society. The Philippines is no exception. The pattern here is quite discernible: increasingly disappearing job opportunities in the countryside force the people into distress migration to urban centers, Metro Manila in particular. Once in these urban centers, the people bear the brunt of the onslaught of a neoliberal economic regime coupled with meager (or none at all) given to those in need ranging from development projects to assaults on their livelihood opportunities. Forced evictions, in fact, have become a major cause for much of the disruption of livelihood, access to land, and related resources. Couple this with recurrent natural disasters, typhoons being a recent dramatic example, and a substantial section of the population is forced to go hungry, homeless, and poor.

Despite the clear cut indications of the widespread prevalence of hunger in the Philippines, there is a stark lack of hard statistics on the issue. Most of the data that comes out is not timely and the sample size is often limits useful conclusions to vague generalizations. The primary reason behind the time lag is that the Family Income and Expenditure Survey (FIES), a nationwide survey of households that serves as the main source of data on family income and expenditure, is undertaken only once in three years by the National Statistics



Office (NSO).<sup>9</sup> The rest of the data on hunger, poverty and related disparities can only be sourced by surveys conducted by non-governmental organizations and they are often limited in their coverage. One of such surveys conducted by the Social Weather Stations (SWS) pegged incidence of hunger in first quarter of 2013 at 19.2 %, a significant increase of 3 % points over the 16.3 % hunger incidence recorded in December 2012.<sup>10</sup> The survey grimly noted the increase of the incidence of hunger in all regions of the country, barring Metro Manila, which experienced a slight decrease.

The findings are commensurate with those of different watchdogs which have repeatedly placed Philippines as the fifth most hungry country. For another example, more than 70 % of country's total population of 95 million people had to live with less than 1.25 dollars a day (the World Bank standard for poverty) in 2008 and there is no indication to believe that the situation has improved. When broken down into specific criteria, this general approximates that the number of those who must be compelled to go hungry at least once in three months, account for around 24 % of the population. Consequently the task of meeting the millennium development goals seems to be even harder with slowing economic growth and an increasing rate of poverty, with already more than 23 million people living in poverty by the most conservative estimates.

Below the poverty line the nutritional status of children is grim. The National Nutrition Survey of 2011 shows that the Philippines has made no significant progress in fighting under-nutrition and malnutrition over the last decade and the percentage of underweight children below five year remains at a staggering high of 20 %. The corresponding data for children who are below the average height-to-age ratio remains at 30 %.<sup>11</sup>

This is further corroborated by World Bank findings which state that the rate of decrease of malnutrition in Philippines is much lower than the rate in many other countries. For example, Cambodia's average yearly decrease in malnutrition is 1.1 %; Laos, 0.9 %; Burma, 0.8 % and the Philippines is lagging behind with a mere 0.66 %. Just to underscore the gravity of the data, it would take the Philippines a staggering 37 years to wipe out malnutrition, pegged at 24.6 %, among the 0-5 year old children.

Accessibility to food remains one important concern that includes both physical and economic aspects of access to food. The existing conditions do not make food affordable and available to a majority of the population. Regulation of prices is not enough as it does not necessarily mean an improved physical accessibility to food and related resources. Even then food meant to be subsidized is sold at much higher rate than intended and the quantity of food meant to be given at lower rates is significantly reduced.

Cash transfer schemes fail terribly in guaranteeing food security because they do not protect against price fluctuation and inflation. The conditional cash transfer programme

<sup>9</sup><http://www.census.gov.ph/content/filipino-families-poorest-decile-earn-six-thousand-pesos-monthly-average-2012-results-2012>

<sup>10</sup><http://www.philstar.com/headlines/2013/05/22/945070/sws-hunger-rises-among-pinoy-families>

<sup>11</sup>[http://www.fnri.dost.gov.ph/images/stories/8thNNS/fnri\\_facts%26figures2011.pdf](http://www.fnri.dost.gov.ph/images/stories/8thNNS/fnri_facts%26figures2011.pdf)



initiated by the government of Philippines entitles all extremely poor families with children below the age of 14 to receive financial support provided that their children attend school and undergo regular health checks. Apart from this, one of the other programmes is the cash/food for work which is run by the social welfare and development offices of the local governments. This involves payment in cash/food for projects undertaken. Though the beneficiaries are supposed to be paid food equivalent to 75% of the minimum wage, the value of the food packs provided has been questioned time and again. The scheme also does not cover all families in need for the restrictions put forward on the total number of beneficiaries for the fear of costs to the government exchequer.

While these schemes might improve economic accessibility to food, they still fail to address the rising food insecurities of the impoverished masses. The quality and nutritional value of food, its safety, and regulation continues to be a problem as far as subsidized food is concerned. Moreover, the schemes do not necessarily address the emergency situations like communities affected by a typhoon, because the beneficiaries of such schemes are required to wait for these goods to reach them for the purpose of procurement.

The schemes are also affected by the malice of widespread corruption that include the slippages in the mechanism of delivery, embezzlement, selling of subsidised food at retail prices, and forging of licenses make it difficult for the poor to get a consistent and adequate supply of food. For instance, certain reports indicate that even the richest areas purchased food grains meant to be sold at subsidy rate. The estimated loss because of this is nearly 45 %.

In 2007, the Accelerated Hunger Mitigation Program (AHMP) was launched with the objective of mitigating severe hunger in 42 provinces. The main goal of this has been to increase food production, and to enhance the efficiency of delivery of food. However, the problem associated with this has only multiplied with certain regions being over-emphasised as compared to others. Further, the AHMP did not analyse the real causes for persistent and widespread hunger. The basic assumption behind the scheme was that people did not have money to buy food because they have low income and a large family while ignoring the structural reasons that produce the disparities in the income and access to food in the first place. The scheme failed, also, in tackling peoples' and community's access to resources such as land, water, and credit which are monopolized and controlled by a few elite families among other contributing factors. As a result the short term measures of AHMP have met with minimal success.

Consequently, the disparity in income and growth is widening. This also indicates the failure of the agrarian reforms which has not managed to create a more equitable and just distribution of land and resources. This is a basic reason why many people, especially in the rural areas, are poor, hungry, and cannot afford to buy adequate and nutritious food. "On the Negros Island, for instance, only 1,761 sugar planters out of the 20,425 planters own more than 25 hectares. These 1,761 planters control 119,100 hectares while 14,952 small sugarcane planters, on the other hand, whose land does not exceed 5 hectares, only control 32,274 hectares."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> [http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cescr/docs/info-ngos/FIAN\\_Philippines41.pdf](http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cescr/docs/info-ngos/FIAN_Philippines41.pdf)



Concerns born out of the government of Philippines' perusal of neoliberal economic policies that prescribes economic growth as a cure for everything including hunger are similar. Even the most cursory glance on the data brings out the flaws of this logic. The gross domestic product (GDP) of the country grew from 4.7 % in 2003, 5.1 % by 2005, 5.4 % in 2006 and 7.2 % in 2007. The growth, however, did not seem to address the issues of poverty and hunger in the country, indeed both of them increased together with the growth. To put this into perspective; the latest data from the National Statistical Coordination Board (NSCB) shows that the absolute number of poor Filipinos has increased, while the percentage figure shows at best a status quo despite growth. Similarly a finding by the Asian Development Bank indicated that nearly 60% of income is allocated for food in poor families, out of which nearly 7.18% is spent on rice alone. An increase in food price means that nearly 2.7 million would be added to the total number of people, while a 30 % increase might lead to nearly 8.8 million more impoverished people. With the worldwide increase in prices, the Philippines has been importing food grains from other countries to meet its deficit. This along with internal factors such as lack of sufficient emphasis on agriculture, the flooding of market by imported rice, and lack of measures to assist rice producers have led to a further disparity in growth and increase in poverty and malnutrition levels.

The lack of access to productive resources like land and increasing poverty and unemployment has made it difficult for many rural poor to sustain themselves. The disparity in distribution of resources continues in spite of the constitution which provides that the state would undertake an agrarian reform founded on the rights of farmers and farm workers. It further established that it would focus on ownership individually or collectivity of those who till lands or a just share of the produce. But land still continues to be held by influential and powerful families. For illustration: out of the 5.16 million hectares targeted for redistribution, only around 3.96 of the land have been distributed. The strong opposition to these have often resulted in violence and killing of peasants by the landowners. These along with corruption at different levels make it almost impossible for boosting the right to food. Thus services, credit, and technologies are not only inadequate but their effects are diluted as well. Misappropriation of funds has led to near collapse of many schemes. Consequently, there are no safety nets in place. The office of the Ombudsman, claimed that in past 2 decades more than 40 billion USD has been lost due to corruption.

Unfortunately, the authorities seem to have been oblivious or dismissive of these circumstances. Various projects carried out by them have caused forced displacement of a substantial section of the population. Apart from harassment which usually accompanies such eviction, what is equally disappointing is the arbitrary grounds on which families are chosen to be offered compensation. A cursory look at the role of Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH) in August 2013 makes this amply clear. The department, pursuing R-10 Road Widening Project under the North Harbor Privatisation Project, served a notice of eviction on the families living along the R-10 or Road 10 in Tondo, Manila. While serving eviction notices to more than 550 families, the list of families qualified for compensation is only 300.<sup>13</sup> Such capricious administrative decisions ignore the reality of livelihoods being

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.humanrights.asia/news/hunger-alerts/AHRC-HAC-013-2013>



threatened as most of the members of the community get their menial jobs at the nearby seaport. Similar threats of a demolition drive are affecting more than 5500 families, 30000 people of San Roque, North Triangle in Quezon City,<sup>14</sup> and countless others in different parts of the country.

If forcible evictions, harassment, and a neglect of the majority of the population were not enough, the apathy of the government towards the vulnerable is seen in the neglect towards these populations in times of natural calamities. Thus storms such as the tropical storm Trami affected approximately 402,415 families and 1,928,685 individuals across 16 provinces. In this specific instance, an oil spill caused by a leaky marine pipeline of the Petron Corporation, an oil company with a depot in the municipality, had necessitated the declaration of a state of calamity in the coastal areas of Rosario, Cavite since August 8, 2013. The oil spill forced the local government to immediately suspend fishing activities in the affected areas. However, by the time the areas were improving it began raining on and slowly developed into a tropical storm, forcing the fishermen indoors. These factors put together makes food security an immediate issue.<sup>15</sup> Lopsided development projects are another area where governmental neglect is apparent as communities are forced to relocate repeatedly. As seen in the case of 78 families served eviction notices in the coastal area of San Dionsio: the families who had occupied this area had already faced evictions from other places like Marina and Tambo. To persuade them to move to this area, the Philippine Estate Authority (now Philippine Reclamation Authority) had entered into a formal agreement with them and promised them priority status in the housing programme. However, this time, the authorities are threatened them with second forced eviction from their settlements in less than 6 years. In a more ridiculous example, the government was intent on relocating a fisher-folk community, dependent on water bodies for their livelihood, to the mountains!<sup>16</sup>

The Philippines have also been witnessing the authorities joining hands with private companies for profits and ignoring the loss of opportunities for the poor. The eviction of vendors in Luneta Park by the National Parks Development Committee (NDPC) vendors in February, 2013 despite the protest of the vendors and civil society groups is a the epitome of such situations. Most of these vendors had been living and marketing their wares in the park for more than 15 years, had repeatedly approached the authorities for getting their legitimate rights, but received nothing but hollow promises. Inquiries by civil society groups into the issue reveal that the authorities decided to evict them to make way for a multinational food chain<sup>17</sup> Depriving the vendors of their traditional market in favor of a larger business which, as detailed above, can be a crucial factor in deepening food insecurity of the vulnerable sections of the Philippines population.

It is thus apparent that in the Philippines what one witnesses is the continuous violation of the rights of the majority for the benefit of the small but influential minority. The only thing

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.humanrights.asia/news/hunger-alerts/AHRC-HAC-008-2013>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.humanrights.asia/news/hunger-alerts/AHRC-HAG-003-2013>

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.humanrights.asia/news/hunger-alerts/AHRC-HAC-003-2013>

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.humanrights.asia/news/hunger-alerts/AHRC-HAU-001-2013>



that can address the issue of hunger and poverty in such a scenario is governmental reform to protect the rights of at risk citizens. To this end, the government must engage in a genuine dialogue with the community members for a building a consensus on a comprehensive development program addressing the concerns of both industry and the people. The Philippines must also ensure a moratorium on forced evictions of communities for development and ensure that relocation does not hamper people's access to other basic services like health, sanitation, transportation, and water. Until such constructive steps are taken disparity and inequity will only further erode food security and threaten the livelihood of the victims. .

As a signatory of the ICESR which provides for "everyone to be free from hunger" and "the right to adequate food", Philippines is obligated to take such steps. It is commendable that the government has implemented policies such as cash/food transfers for work and Accelerated Hunger Management Programme (AHMP) to reduce hunger and poverty in the recent past but it must understand that such small steps cannot substitute for the urgent need of a national food policy. Moreover, it must also understand that allocation of budget plays a crucial role in implementation of social welfare legislation/policies and the authorities have singularly failed in that aspect. For example, it allocated 1.65 billion USD to the Department of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform as compared to nearly 2.8 billion USD allocated for defense in 2012. One cannot fight hunger with such a small amount of money. Finally, the lack of redress of grievances permits the continuation of misappropriation of funds and resources without a means to stop them. In short, a strong policy formation and proper mechanisms are imperative to aim for food security and alleviation of hunger.

## **Conclusion:**

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Economic status notwithstanding, the experiences of hunger across Asian nations expose the criminal negligence of states in addressing the issue. Despite customary lip service that the political leadership of these countries offer to the issue, they have rarely taken concrete steps to snatch their citizens out of the vicious cycle of poverty and hunger. The onslaught of the neoliberal economics has compounded the problem, by dismantling whatever little structures of social security have been operational in these countries, and forcing governments to withdraw from the social sector. Experience over the past two decades have proven that the burden of ensuring food security cannot be left to the whims of the market.

This is why Asian countries must immediately embark upon a process of making national policies on the right to food with special emphasis on the vulnerable and marginalized sections of the population. They should also build public distribution systems free of corruption and capable of delivering to the needs of the people. An urgent attempt must also be made to link the questions of food security to land and livelihood opportunities, as eradicating hunger would remain an impossible dream without guaranteeing people's access to sources of sustained income. This is the only way these countries, most of which are signatory to various international covenants like the ICESCR, UDHR, CEDAW, CRC etc., can fulfill their obligation of protecting their citizens from food insecurity and ensure that their right to food is not violated either by acts of commission or omission.

