The world is commemorating World Food Day (October 16) this year in a state where the food situation in the world is precarious. The lessons we have to learn from the experiences in trying to feed the world are very important. This is not because of the successes but because of the failures. The world leaders have almost come to a situation in which they need to admit that their efforts so far in trying to solve world’s hunger have failed and they are not in a position to find effective solutions.

In the year 2000, the world leaders met and decided to set up the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), when they promised that they would reduce world's hunger by half by year 2015. There were 840 million people then, who were going to bed hungry every day. They should then have realised that all these 840 million people would be dead when they reached this target. But they went ahead. Now the number of people who were hungry has not been reduced, although two thirds of the target period has elapsed; instead it has increased to 1.2 billion. The discussions that were held at the world conference on food security convened by FAO to see what could be done by the year 2050, when the situation becomes much more serious, ended up in not working out any effective strategy.

So, the task of the people on food and on Food Day should be to emphasise that the present leaders of the world are unable to find solutions to the problem of hunger. Some other strategy and some other agencies must undertake to find solutions to the problem of hunger. The world fails to solve hunger neither because the world does not produce enough to feed all, nor because the technical capacity to produce enough food is lacking. It is simply because food is produced not mainly to solve hunger but to make profits. The entire activity of food production, processing and marketing is largely dominated by big companies (transnational corporations) who are more concerned with making greater profits rather than feeding the hungry. Much of the land and other natural resources that are necessary to produce food are in the hands of big companies; they also have a strong control over seeds and inputs and also technologies utilised to produce food. The process of land grabbing by the rich has got more intensified.

The recent crisis of price increases of food was caused due to food being used for production of biofuels, more meat production leading to much food being produced to feed animals rather than to feed people and also due to large migration into cities, making the populations in the cities compared with rural areas reaching 50:50. Another factor that is affecting food production is global warming, resulting in climate change leading to lower yields. If you examine each of these reasons they are due to food production being controlled by profit-motivated producers. The reasons for failure of world leaders to find effective solutions are due to the fact that they do not want to change this situation of allowing the big profit makers to have control and ownership over food production, seeds, marketing and food producing resources of the world.
This situation can be changed only by taking over the task of feeding the hungry away from these profit making controllers into the hands of those who are genuinely interested in solving hunger. Who are they? They are the hungry people of the world. How can they do it? If they do not have the capital presently needed to produce food, they have to think of strategies that do not depend on financial capital. Can the world think of a strategy that does not depend on financial capital to produce its food?

In solving this issue it is necessary to recognise that the type of agriculture that is prevalent today is very heavily input dependent. The ecological impacts of such external input dependent agriculture has been found to be drastic and very damaging. World scale studies that have been done recently such as the IAASTD (International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development) [2] completed in April 2008 showed that the present day prevalent agriculture, though capable of producing much food and much diversity of food has committed two serious mistakes in ignoring the social aspects of agriculture and also the environmental aspects of it. This was very important research that was conducted by 400 prominent scientists, commissioned by world’s leading institutions, who studied this in a large number of countries, over a period of four years and it was finally accepted by nearly 60 countries of the world. There is an alternative approach advocated by very large farmers movements such as La Via Campesina (International Peasant Movement) [3]and very large movements of small and landless farmers such as MST [4] in Brazil who are promoting small scale ecological agriculture by small farmers as a more effective way of solving the problem of hunger.

The major difference in this approach is to make use of nature’s advantages such as maximising the use of sunlight, maximising biodiversity, improving the soil fertility by preventing erosion, by maximising the benefits of microbial activity by adopting techniques that maximise the presence of microbes in the soil and also utilising methods of integrated pest management instead of chemical pest control, chemical weed control and use of chemical fertiliser etc. Utilising mixed farming rather than mono-cropping is another technique. This approach is fast growing in many countries in spite of the massive propaganda by agribusiness TNCs to continue their previous techniques that only bring profits to the larger operators at the cost of making a lot of farmers poorer and also destroying their livelihoods while making more and more people hungry. Introduction of genetic modifications etc have been done not so much due to their effectiveness in sustainability of agriculture but for the possibilities of maximising profits in the hands of big companies.

We have been able to contact some practices that are developed in India by people such as Mr Subash Pallekar who has done many years of research in developing the technique that he describes as ‘Zero Budget Natural Farming’. This strategy is now being adopted by around four million farmers in India.

It is a simple technique that utilises the basic principle that farming is done free of charge by nature. The technique utilises only a simple formula named ‘jeevamurtha’ a mixture of deshi cow dung, cow urine, some sweetener such as juggery or coconut water and some powdered cereal and a handful of soil from the neighbourhood that contains microbes that are present in the said environment. A similar mixture named beejamurtha is utilised to prepare seeds for germination. What is important is that this application requires no financial input and it utilises natural farming totally. These mixtures require only two days of fermentation to be ready for application and the result are immediate.

On the whole what is important in feeding the hungry is to allow the people who are threatened with hunger to develop their own techniques of finding their food by going back to nature and benefits of natural farming. What is necessary is to remove the policy obstacles that exist against this strategy. Already much has been achieved by way of techniques of natural farming. Sometimes these techniques are called organic farming, or ecological farming, it can also be named regenerative agriculture since the proper techniques of natural farming will also help in restoring the ability of nature to regenerate itself.

Restoring the capacity of nature to regenerate itself is a need for survival of all human beings and all other life forms. From this point of view, this restoration of agriculture back into its natural process of regenerating nature is an essential requirement to ensure survival. This is being highlighted in the
other crises such as the crisis of climate change and global warming too. Therefore these tasks that should be achieved in our techniques and policies of food production need to be highlighted on the World Food Day. Any approach that restores the capacity of nature to regenerate itself has the moral right to claim ownership and control over agriculture. Thus, the poor and hungry people have a moral right to claim control over agriculture technology and resources of land and nature for production of food. Those who destroy this potential have no right to claim control and ownership.

IN SRI LANKA

In Sri Lanka the need for this transformation of agriculture is very high. There are many factors related to food and agriculture in Sri Lanka that cannot be effectively solved without this transformation. In summary these needs are to reduce the cost of food to the poor, reducing the present rates of malnutrition that have prevailed at unacceptably high levels for over twenty years, which damage not only the physical growth of children but the development of their brains too. A study done by the Ministry of Health, UNICEF and the World Health Organization (WHO) in March 2010 showed that the rate of malnutrition in the plantation children was as high as 40 per cent. Even in other agricultural districts it was higher than 20 per cent.

Another serious issue that is found in relation to food in Sri Lanka is that much of the food that is available is unhealthy, chemically produced and chemically contaminated. Food marketing is entirely in the hands of private companies and artificially processed foods are heavily promoted. Sri Lanka depends unnecessarily on imported food, imported seeds and imported agricultural inputs. Introduction of Commercial seeds of F-1 variety that cannot be used repeatedly are destroying the natural seed potential in the country. Unless we change this pattern, Sri Lanka’s agriculture and food situation is doomed.

The potential for adopting ecological and natural farming in Sri Lanka is very high. We have enough sunlight through out the year and also enough rainfall and water. Biodiversity and food diversity in Sri Lanka is very high and can be further improved too. The fact that we still have a very large population of small-holder farmers can turn out to be an advantage. This is because small farms can adopt this type of ecological farming with great efficiency. This can reduce the tremendous growth of health hazards that are caused by insufficiency of food and by unhealthy artificial and/or chemically contaminated food.

Although the government policies still give much priority to private sector agricultural control, the people on their own have already done much by way of small-scale ecological farming. A survey conducted by Movement for Land and Agricultural Reforms (MONLAR) in early 2008 showed that there were around 538 organisations in the country that were promoting and practicing some form of ecological farming.

The present government has many programmes trying to address issues of rural poverty and food insecurity. They are the ‘Api Wawamu Rata Nagamu’ (‘Let’s grow and build the nation’) programme which envisages the building of four million home gardens intending to get each of the families to have their own home garden. Another programme is ‘Gama Neguma’ for improving rural livelihoods and reducing rural poverty, another is Gemi Diriya (supported by the World Bank) and so on. However, unfortunately none of these programmes have a clear vision and strategy of ecological agriculture. This failure is largely due to the heavy influence of private companies such as CIC, Prima and other companies dealing with chemical agricultural inputs and commercial food that utilises the government to promote the type of farming that is beneficial to them to sell their inputs, seeds and technologies. What we need to do is to propagate the more effective alternatives that are very applicable and beneficial to Sri Lanka, to the farmers and also to consumers. This would be the best way of our preparing to face the future challenges of the country and also of the world.

It is time to set a new agenda of food production that allows and encourages the hungry and the poor people to take over the task of feeding themselves and also developing effective approaches that can feed the rest of the world. This approach can save the hungry from dying of hunger, the poor from extreme forms of poverty and also all others from ill-health caused by unhealthy food and unhealthy environment and saving the world from environmental calamities.
Allow the hungry to feed themselves – and the world
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* This article was first published by the Movement for Land and Agricultural Reforms (MONLAR) [5].
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Article-Summary:
World leaders must admit that their efforts to solve world hunger have failed and that they are ‘not in a position to find effective solutions’, writes Sarath Fernando. This situation can be changed only by taking ‘the task of feeding the hungry’ into ‘the hands of those who are genuinely interested in solving hunger’ – the hungry themselves.

Category: Governance [10]

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