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Bangladesh

Climate change and food sovereignty caravan

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Bangladesh is one of the most vulnerable countries in the world to climate change and sea level rise. Flooding due to tropical cyclones constitutes a devastating hazard through storm surges and accompanying water logging and salinity. For example, in 2007, Cyclone Sidr, caused 3500 deaths and in 2009 Cyclone Aila, destroyed homes and inundated the land of southern Bangladesh with salt water. The coastal areas of Bangladesh comprise low-lying and poorly protected land which supports a large population.

The majority of this population are poor and dependent on agriculture, and are thus more vulnerable to tropical cyclones, storm surges, floods, and droughts. For example, in 2004 severe floods destroyed over three quarters of food crops, and left 10 million people homeless. There is also a desertification process occurring in the northern districts of the country. Finally, the coping capacity in Bangladesh remains limited due to the relatively poor physical infrastructure.

These trends were confirmed by the Bangladesh Krishok Federation (peasant farmer's organisation, BKF) and Bangladesh Kishani Sabha (peasant women's organization, BKS) who organized 31 workshops in different parts of Bangladesh from 17th December 2009 to 27th January 2010.

Those workshops were organized to assess the impact of climate change. Peasant communities commented on the increasing length of hot dry periods; decreasing water table levels; increased incidence of flooding; changes in weather (such as cold periods and fogs) causing failure of crops; increased cyclone activity and high tidal inundation causing salination of rivers and soil; and changes in the frequency and character of the Monsoon disrupting traditional farming practices.

Further, in Bangladesh, food security for peasants has been undermined by issues such as unequal land distribution (especially landlessness) and lack of credit.

As a result, there is an urgent need for both education concerning climate change amongst the peasant population and mobilisation of the population around key issues such as access to land and food sovereignty. Food sovereignty has been recognised by peasant communities and movements as one of the most important practices that enable peasant communities to both mitigate, and adapt to, the effects of climate change. Food sovereignty implies control over territory and biodiversity; self-governance; and ecological sustainability and has acted as a point of encounter, common interest and solidarity. As a result, the BKF has been actively involved in the international farmer's network, La Via Campesina (LVC), whose opposition to dominant responses to climate change has combined a commitment to the importance of localized forms of agriculture, and food sovereignty.

The BKF and BKS are planning to organise a Climate Change and Food Sovereignty Caravan during late 2011, in order to begin to address these pressing issues, and seeks funding in order to support such an important initiative. Representatives from the BKF participated in the 'Trade and Climate Change' caravan that preceded the COP15 mobilisations in Copenhagen in 2009 and also participated in those mobilisations as a member of LVC.

Aims of the Caravan

The Caravan will be organized by the Bangladesh Krishok Federation and Bangladesh Kishani Sabha who will be the

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host movements in Bangladesh. The broad aim of the caravan is to address the key issues of climate change and food sovereignty, because there is an ongoing and urgent need to

(i) inform and mobilize vulnerable peasant populations throughout Bangladesh in order to respond to the threats of climate change: and

(ii) build upon international solidarity networks concerning climate change and food sovereignty, such as those nurtured within La Via Campesina of which the BKF is a participant.

In particular, the purpose of the caravan will be to deepen and extend networks of grassroots movements in South Asia and build international solidarity around specific campaigns concerning issues of climate change and food sovereignty. Food sovereignty is one of the most important practices that enables peasant communities to both mitigate, and adapt to, the effects of climate change. Moreover, it also represents one of the most important solutions to the threats that climate change poses for the planet. The caravan will include a gender perspective on these issues throughout its duration. It is expected that there will be participation from grassroots movements from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

The focus of the caravan will be on

(i) movement to movement communication, learning, and the sharing of experiences, skills and strategies, for example concerning sustainable farming practices, and traditional and indigenous knowledges;

(ii) education of communities about the effects of climate change;

(iii) holding training and workshops; and

(iv) conducting rallies. For example, it is expected that along the route of the caravan, seeds will be planted as a key symbol of food sovereignty.