

LAUNCHING OF THE AFA SUSTAINABLE RICE CAMPAIGN

February 15, 2004

Karawang, West Java, Indonesia

Introductory Note:

The launching of the AFA Sustainable Rice Campaign was a major sub-event during the first AFA General Assembly (GA) in Depok, Indonesia. It was held during the fourth day of the GA. It was held in Karawang, West Java, which was about 2 ½ hours away from Depok. The AFA rice campaign kicked off with a rice forum, a rice festival and a dialog with rice farmers from the villages in Karawang.

The article below is lifted from the first AFA GA proceedings. For the full text of the proceedings, please see the section : Campaigns/farmers' empowerment/actions.

I. Forum on "International Production and Trade Issues of the Rice Industry" Resource Person: Ms. Indrani Thuraisingham, Executive Director, SEACON

Opening Remarks

Head of Cilamaya Wetan Sub-District

The head of the Cilamaya Wetan Sub-District welcomed the AFA delegates to Karawang. He said that the Karawang District has 25 sub-districts and 313 villages.

The head of Cilamaya Wetan pointed out that the sub-district is the Rice Barn of West Java and has 2 kinds of rice varieties. One farmers group has rice areas of around 15 hectares. Their goal is productivity and self-sufficiency in rice production. But they have problems like the 40-60 centimeter floods that visit the area during heavy rains.

He thanked the participants for coming, wished them a beneficial visit, and requested that they tell him the good and the bad things that they see.

Welcome Remarks

Head of Local Agriculture

The representative of the Head of the Local Agriculture welcomed the AFA delegates and apologized that the Head himself cannot come. He said that 80% of the people in Karawang were farmers and the total land area is 85,000 hectares. The farmers were engaged in farming and fishpond activities. He added that the agricultural problems that they faced were: 1) lack of water during the dry season; and 2) pest and disease problems. He hoped for a fruitful discussion between the local farmers and the delegates from AFA

Opening Remarks

Esther Penunia, AsiaDHRRA Program Officer

Esther introduced the topic of the forum by saying that year 2004 is the International Year of Rice (IYR), and that AFA members are in the Asian region which is the biggest rice-eating and rice-producing area in the whole world. She added that the International Year of Rice provides a good opportunity for AFA members to advocate, to their national governments and regional institutions for sustainable rice production and for rice trade policies that will cushion negative effects to small rice farmers. She said that AFA had decided to implement a sustainable rice campaign and that the forum served as a kick-off for this. Then she introduced Ms. Indrani, the resource person for the forum.

TALK : International Production and Trade Issues in the Rice Industry

Resource Person: Ms. Indrani Thuraisingham, from Malaysia, Executive Director, Southeast Asia Council on Food Security and Fair Trade (SEACON)

On SEACON

Ms. Indrani gave a brief presentation of SEACON. She said that SEACON was established in 1996, when the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (UN-FAO) organized the World Food Summit in Rome. It was the southern voice to the World Food Summit, which was attended by governments from SEA

She said that SEACON addresses the issue of how international and regional trade agreements impact on small scale food producers. It does researches for members doing advocacy.

Ms. Indrani recounted that during 1998 and 1999 crisis, SEACON was one of those who argue that there was no need for the food aid from US and Japan that were being dumped in Indonesia. As a result, a fact-finding mission was sent to investigate in Indonesia to examine the claim that 2/3 of the world food production needed to be donated to Indonesia.

She said that the finding was that there was no need for the food aid because there was enough food being produced by farmers, but these were not being distributed. Thus, they were able to convince FAO to change the statistics and stop the food aid just in time during the crisis.

On Rice Production and Trade Issues

Ms. Indrani stressed that rice production is a way of life in Asia, where 250 million farmers depend on rice cultivation. She added that 90% of the world's rice is produced and consumed in Asia.

In terms of rice consumption, the countries may be ranked from the highest to the lowest: China, India, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Vietnam, Thailand, Burma, Japan, and Philippines.

In terms of rice production the countries may be ranked as follows: China, India, Indonesia, Vietnam, Thailand, and Philippines.

China and India's rice production are sufficient for local consumption. Thailand (1st), Vietnam (2nd), America (3rd), China (4th), Myanmar (10th), and Taiwan (14th) are rice-exporting countries, while Indonesia (1st), Philippines (8th), and Malaysia (9th) are rice-importing countries.

Starting 1996 and 1997, there has been declining rice production across all countries. Indonesia produces and consumes the most, while Thailand is number one in export due to increased land for rice cultivation. And in other countries, farmers are shifting to fruits and other products.

On Rice Trade

Ms. Indrani pointed out that only 5% of rice production is traded among countries, while the rest is for domestic production.

There is rice fluctuation due to insufficient production during monsoon season and bumper harvest during good harvest season. Thus, governments established mechanisms and policies to control the price of rice due to political reasons (for both farmers and consumers). There are government enterprises, like NFA in the Philippines and FMO in Thailand, that buy rice from farmers.

But governments are now being asked to privatize these enterprises after joining the WTO. As private companies, they will no longer give support to farmers but will only be concerned with profit.

As a reaction governments have put rice in the sensitive list of AFTA. But in 2010, governments can no longer give any support to the rice sector.

On Rice Technology Issues

Ms. Indrani pointed out that multinational corporations (like Monsanto, Syngenta, Bayer, and Dupont) that are providing pesticides and chemicals for production have also gone into seed production, which ties in the use of the seed with a particular pesticide or fertilizer, to force farmers to continue the use of chemicals. This was to counter the shift to organic farming and sustainable agriculture by more and more farmers.

For example, there are now Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) like "Vitamin A Rice" in the Philippines. Many of these seeds are patented and the farmers have to buy them, but cannot sell them. It leads to dependency, while the environmental and health impacts of GM technology are still unclear.

On the Food Aid Issue

Ms. Indrani said that food aid from big countries like US and EU during times of crisis is used by these countries as an excuse to support their own agriculture. They use smaller countries as markets for their products.

She added that many farmers who want to go to organic farming cannot get credit from banks, who provide money only for traditional farming that uses chemicals. Thus, big land owners and MNCs benefit from rice trade, not the small farmers.

What We Can Demand from Our Governments

Ms. Indrani said that the following can be demanded from government:

1. Maintain import quotas to protect the domestic rice industry, which the big countries want to remove under WTO rules;
2. Rice should be taken out of WTO because it is a staple food for 3.3 billion people in Asia;
3. Agriculture should still be subsidized;
4. Government intervention through price control agencies should continue, to ensure good price for farmers and affordable price for consumers; and,
5. Stop big companies from buying land from small farmers, which lead to their displacement and food insecurity.

What Small Farmers Can Do

She said that the following could be done:

1. Shift to alternative agriculture (organic farming, sustainable agriculture) and showcase them among Asian farmers;
2. AFA should do research and networking on international trade issues and impact studies; and,
3. Strengthen the farmers movement through farmers exchange and farmer-to-consumer linkages.

Open Forum

1. *What are the experiences of other countries on how they cope with the fluctuation of the price of rice?*

-- In the Philippines, PAKISAMA encourages its farmer members to go into diversified farming (crop, vegetables, livestock, etc.) so that they have other sources of income when there are fluctuations in the price of rice. It also pushes for a policy that the government should buy at least 10% of the total production of palay in the country during the harvest season.

2. *How can farmers get compensation from big pesticide companies for the negative health effects of their products?*

-- There are documented cases of the negative health effects of pesticides on farmers that have been brought to the Human Rights Commission. There are no safety nets or occupational safety measures for farmers when they use these pesticides, which come into their countries in the form of investments.

3. *What is the relationship between AFTA and GATT-WTO?*

-- AFTA facilitates the obligations of the member countries under WTO by opening up their regional markets first. It also has flexibilities to make exceptions for member countries when it involves issues of national security or crises situations, which is not possible under WTO.

4. How can AFA and SEACON work together? What can SEACON do for the AFA rice campaign?

-- SEACON has members in 7 ASEAN countries. It is doing a research on the impact of AFTA on small rice producers in the 7 countries (to be finished in July 2004). It will also begin a one-year advocacy based on the research results and identify agricultural products where the member countries have potentials.

-- SEACON will then advocate for safety nets for small farmers if the impacts are negative and recommend alternatives. AFA can work with SEACON members at the national and regional levels. SEACON is also part of a bigger network looking at the issue of rice seeds, which are being manipulated and traded by multinational companies.

II. Organic Rice Festival (1300-1600 hours)

Delegates from each AFA member country prepared various organic rice delicacies, explained the preparation and traditions associated with them, and shared the food with each other and the Karawang community (farmers, women, children, etc.)

III. Dialogue between AFA delegates and Forum Peka members(1600-1730 hours)

After the rice festival, a dialogue was held between the AFA delegates and the Karawang farmers.

Kamnan of Sor Kor Por (Thailand) spoke to the community about the situation of farmers in Thailand and their concern for sustainability in agriculture. He said that farmers in Thailand plant together, buy together, and sell together.

One farmer asked about the experiences of other farmers from AFA member countries. He said that his income is very low, while production cost is very high. He wants to know how other farmers from other countries overcame this problem.

Sang Jun of BFA (South Korea) replied that farmers in South Korea also suffer from low income from farming. He said that farmers get 50% of their income from agriculture and the other 50% from aquaculture and other sources.

Maruchan of Ainokai (Japan) shared that in their agricultural high school, they teach children about the low input farming method – organic farming. She said that they had been using organic farming methods for 30 years to grow vegetables and rice. She added that it is very inexpensive because it uses local resources, while providing labor opportunities and healthy products to consumers.

After the dialogue, representatives of AFA gave tokens of appreciation to Karawang farmer-leaders

and posed for souvenir group photos.