

Culture & Society

The Absent Agriculturist in International Affairs

A.R. Vasavi

Although issues of land, agricultural commodities, trade, pricing, productivity, patents, and farm subsidies are central to international negotiations, the agriculturist continues to be absent from decision-making regarding such matters.¹ International agriculture-related transactions are dominated by players such as agribusiness multinationals, state representatives from developed countries, and a coterie of compromised scientist-administrators, while agriculturists are overlooked. Decision makers blindly support agribusiness agendas and deploy deep and extant forms of violence against rural and agrarian terrains. The end result is the production of multiple crises such as food scarcity, rural exoduses, abandonment of agriculture, and neglect and decimation of agriculturists. If such depredations are to be avoided, agriculturists across nations must be recognized as citizens with rights equal to those of urban, industrial citizens. Their contributions must be factored into all decisions which affect their lives, livelihoods, and futures.

The food crisis in Africa, impending food scarcity in large parts of the developing world, and epidemic of suicides by Indian agriculturists are typically associated with corruption, migration, and extant conditions of poverty. While much of this is true, there are deeper structural factors that cause widespread distress in agricultural sectors. New regimes of

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laws and regulations—promulgated by national and international agencies—value market rights, dominant states' interests, corporate competitiveness, and investor profitability over agriculturists' rights. Policies pertaining to agricultural production, marketing, trade, and patents should accord agriculturists their rightful voice.

This essay provides a sketch of the various ways in which policies regarding trade, development, expansion, and international philanthropy related to agriculture bypass agriculturists. Such neglect accounts for continued crises in various parts of the world and renders international aid redundant.

Anti-Agrarianism: Trade and Development Policies. Despite evidence of the resilience, viability, sustainability, and productivity of small cultivators, current international trade and market-led regimes intentionally or unintentionally seek their demise. Policy priorities, such as providing high-technology and know-how, reproduce biases against agriculture and draw on a range of perspectives to retool agriculture to fit into the new regime of global trade. Absent in these measures are the more appropriate and required strategies of decentralizing agricultural research, enhancing local innovation capacities, and ensuring political accountability of production systems. Such measures could help address local, ecology-specific problems and enable agriculturists to retain their agency and abilities.

Instead, a range of new trade and development policies constitute an orientation in which the interests of the majority, especially the marginal cul-

tivators, are overlooked. Claims made by the WTO regime stating that agricultural trade liberalization will benefit developing countries are contested by critics and farmers' organizations, such as Via Campesina.² OECD demands for increased access to developing markets have caused prolonged delays in the GATT. Developing countries' challenges are only more evidence of continued failure to consider the sustainability of agricultural operations.³

The relegation of the agricultural sector in international development regimes is evident in policy documents disseminated by institutions such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank. Reports such as the *World Development Report 2008: Agriculture for Development* consider agriculture a laggard in need of reengineering and replacement with other vibrant economic activities.⁴ Such plans include opening agriculture to private sector players, encouraging contract farming, and integrating the agricultural economy into the larger global markets.⁵ Policy pronouncements see globalization of agriculture with increased inputs of private capital and high-technology as the only solution to problems of low productivity, food scarcity, and poverty in most rural areas.

Over the years, national agricultural policy documents have begun to reflect guidelines from international aid and development agencies. This includes recommendations which inevitably lead the economy to shift surplus rural populations into urban areas, and for small-scale and subsistence farming to collapse. These statements set the tone for the reproduction of 'agro-skepticism,' in which the rural and the agricultural are seen as lacking any worth.⁶ This is

evident in the promotion of education, urbanization, and employment policies that privilege urban sectors over rural and agriculture ones in most countries—especially those in the developing world. Such attitudes account for repeated statements by leading policy makers, think-tank members, and administrators that agriculture cannot cater to the overpopulated rural regions, that the poor human-to-land ratio accounts for the failure of agriculture to sustain people, and that an overhaul in the very working of the land is non-negotiable. While each of these have legitimized the increasing externalization, financialization, and corporatization of agriculture—increasingly basing the sector on external inputs and integration into the market—the larger structural issues and problems of poor soil fertility and inequitable access to land, resources, and capital remain unaddressed.

Attendant with these structural issues is the dissemination of dominant images of agriculturists all over the world: the starving peasants of Africa; the suicidal peasant of India; the left-inclined and ready to bear arms peasants of South America; the resilient peasant turned factory worker of Southeast Asia; the peasant turned migrant worker of China; and the increasingly uncompetitive and exhausted farmers of Europe and the United States. Such stereotypes support the ‘advanced marginality’ of agriculturists in which the marginal are further neglected and their needs deliberately overlooked.⁷

Especially since 1991, national-level agricultural and rural policies seem to be on three parallel tracks. One track consists of a body of policies, missions, committee reports, and position papers

written by eminent scientists, scholars, or science-administrators as heads of committees and organizations. Many of these, such as the National Agricultural Policy in India, provide comprehensive reviews and recommendations to scaffold agricultural growth and the rural economy in general. Several governments, however, place these on the back burner; as such, the policies remain far from implementation.

On the second track are policies, legislation, and programs formulated without due process or public input. These policies seek to integrate land and agriculture into the larger global, neoliberal economy. Scholars and representatives of public and private think-tanks are also members of such initiatives and draw their perspectives from overarching neoliberal economics which justifies increasing financialization and liberalization of all economic activities. While policies of the first track remain largely rhetorical and rarely employed in actual programs, the second track of policies and programs are finalized by a chosen few and subsequently granted legitimacy through implementation.

Early results of the imposition of transnational agribusiness interests over those of regional and national food security were ‘banana republics.’ The ‘banana republics’ produced not only exotic food crops for Western markets, but also tyrants who then wrecked the local economies of these regions. Failure to address regional agricultural politics or provide appropriate policies has led to conditions and events of extreme violence in which the most marginal and vulnerable are victims. Over the past two decades, several economic programs have been undertaken with-

out being subject to widespread debate or scrutiny. Events from around the world provide testimony to the rampant violations of agrarian and agriculturists' interests and ideas: the promotion of biofuel or crop-fuel production in Latin American countries; the spread of 'boom crops' (such as cocoa, oil-palm, coffee, and shrimp) in Southeast Asian nations; the access to mineral belts by international mining companies; and the continued promotion of export-based factories in China's once-rich agricultural belts.

In all of these cases, the idea that non-agricultural livelihoods and economies benefit both local and national economies has been the *raison d'être* for such policies. These decisions have been made by compromised political actors and bureaucrats and backed by international financial interests. The immediate and long-term interests of agriculturists have been bypassed, leading to contentious and violent confrontations.

In India, U.S.-led programs, such as the Indo-U.S. Knowledge Initiative on Agriculture, have been adopted without any public debate.⁸ The fact that its key objective is to develop new and commercially viable technologies for agricultural advancement in both countries indicates its biases and orientation. Linked to this, members from leading transnational agribusiness corporations constitute the Knowledge Initiative Board, along with select representatives from the Indian government and a few agricultural universities. The absence of representatives from agricultural groups, elected representatives, and civil society organizations indicates the blatant violation of democratic processes in matters of agricultural devel-

opment. In bypassing democratic processes and in the absence of stringent and effective regulatory mechanisms, these second track agricultural policies work against the interests of small and marginal agriculturists and the sustainability of agriculture.

The third track of policy documents is produced by corporate consultants who seek to realize neoliberal goals of commercializing agriculture and redefining the mass of rural persons as pools of cheap urban labor. For example, several regional states in India have "Vision 2020" and/or "Vision 2050" documents which are authored by management consultancies and have become directives of state economic policies without subjection to wide-spread discussion or debate. Such documents prescribe a shifting of large masses of agriculturists toward more efficient livelihoods, commercializing agriculture to make it both competitive and efficient in the global market, increasing the volume of people in the service economy, and legitimizing the notion that technology and appropriate management of resources will solve all the structural problems of poverty. What are sometimes presented as pro-agriculture policies are often populist postures that support dominant farmers or large-agricultural players who also wield political clout.

The current internationalization of agriculture enhances existing structures of inequity, introducing and abetting various risks while avoiding problems of resource distribution, inclusive economic growth, and social development. Agricultural development is defined primarily by increased productivity, with productivity made a trope for develop-

ment itself. The end result has been a series of fallouts—economic, social, and ecological—encapsulated in current world-wide crises of food, energy, and livelihoods. Large parts of Africa, once exporters of food grains and crops to the West, are now devastated by nearly thirty-five years of corporate globalization, free trade, and anti-peasant policies, all of which were imposed by the World Bank, IMF, WTO, United States, and EU.⁹ Free trade agreements have enabled private traders and companies to import subsidized food grains from these regions, rather than negotiate with local farmers. Subsequent ‘dumping’ drives local farm prices below costs of production and local farmers out of business. This process is singularly responsible for destroying various viable

subsequently displaced local agriculturists.¹⁰ In some cases, a single company is allocated up to a million hectares. Similarly, China’s expansion into Africa’s agricultural belts has become a cause for concern. Brazil’s success in export agriculture has led the country to expand to various other South American nations, causing the collapse of small cultivating units and creating large pools of displaced peasantries. Such agri-expansionism will only exacerbate land inequities, loss of livelihoods, and the problems of ecological degradation. Subsequently, already vulnerable populations will become more prone to food scarcities and inevitably suffer from famines and war. Dispersing agriculturists from the worlds of agriculture and rendering agriculture into techno-

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and agricultural production regimes in vast regions of the world.

New Agri-Expansionism. The new scramble for arable land has made rural areas the new global frontier. Recent international agreements and concessions support such agri-expansion, often in violation of both ecological norms and citizenship rights. India, Saudi Arabia, Korea, China, and the EU have joined in a race to cultivate and expropriate vast tracks of Africa’s agricultural land. India’s agribusiness companies have been permitted entry into some African countries, especially into Ethiopia and Kenya, creating vast zones of industrialized agriculture which have

industrial domains in which high productivity alone is valued will have sharp, long-term implications. It will be the basis for rupturing the social fabric and collectivities that were also the foundations of viable economies, their attendant societies, and the functioning of nations.

International Philanthropy and Agrarian Citizenship.

Even as international trade regimes promote the liberalization of markets and the marginalization of small producers, international philanthropic agencies and foundations seek to address the fall-out that results in decreased production, food scarcity, and famines. “Live Aid”

and other international charitable responses to such forms of distress are primarily in the form of emergency aid; they serve only as a bandage that does little to heal the deeper structural wounds of inequity.

Over the past few years, initiatives such as Alliance for Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), led by the Gates Foundation, have looked for high-tech approaches to resolve Africa's endemic problems of food scarcity. AGRA is based primarily on a science and technology model and overlooks the voluminous data that critiques the original Green Revolution itself. The AGRA initiative will make smallholders more environmentally vulnerable by introducing methods and technologies of

and well-being represents the erosion of the agrarian citizenship of agricultural peoples. Such citizenship should go beyond civic and political citizenship and recognize the land, agriculture, and resource-based rights of agriculturists. Agrarian citizenship should legitimize the "...political and material rights of rural dwellers...based not solely on issues of rural political representation, but also on a relationship with the socio-ecological metabolism between society and nature."¹² Moreover, it should be the cornerstone of agricultural policies and trade relations.

The loss of agrarian citizenship has often led to the formation of vast masses of people as "rural refugees," or those displaced from rural areas and now re-

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cultivation that will erode the ecological bases of Sub-Saharan Africa. As Holt-Gominez et al point out:

AGRA's 'alliance' does not allow peasant farmers to be the principal actors in agricultural improvement. The Rockefeller and Gates Foundations consulted with the world's largest seed and fertilizer companies, big philanthropy, and multilateral development agencies, but have yet to let peasant farmer organizations present their views on the kind of agricultural development they believe will most benefit them.¹¹

The denial of agriculturists' rights

siding in urban ghettos. It also accounts for the spread of new forms of illegalities that threaten societies, nations, and international relations. These illegalities include practices such as formation of labor gangs that override minimum wage rules, black economies in which tax rules are subverted and banned products sold, and transnational circuits of illegal migration. The disruption of Afghanistan's pastoral economy and the rendering of the once sturdy Pashtun/Afghan peasant into a warrior is only one of many stark examples of what such rural disruption entails. The subsequent "...loss over food and agriculture implies a democratic deficit as citizens

are not given a voice in the determination of the policies affecting their lives and their future.”¹³

Promising Alternatives. The possibility and strengths of including agriculturists’ voices is demonstrated in a select number of reports. The *International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development* (IAASTD) was one of the first to highlight the need for a rights-based approach to issues of food security, agricultural development, and science and technology for agriculture.¹⁴ Focusing on smallholdings and their owners and workers, the UN-led study calls for the recognition of small cultivators and the moral basis of their livelihood, rather than market-oriented globalization.

The “Democratizing Agricultural Research” workshops and farmer juries held in West Africa and India are other positive examples.¹⁵ They have not only represented the voices and ideas of agriculturists, but also placed them at the center of policy reconstruction and efforts to forge new agricultural agendas. As agriculturists at one of these meetings pointed out, the challenge is to retain their food security and also enable them to have access to income. They had strategies and suggestions to ensure these; agriculturists now recognize that markets are not invisibly controlled, but are instead manipulated and directed. Furthermore, agriculturists realize that they can also have a say in the pricing of their products. Similarly, FoodFirst Information and Action Network International (FIAN), a German international human rights organization, marks a shift in the dominant capitalist “West vs. Africa” narrative as it seeks to

recognize the specificities of small-scale agriculture and the constraints and disadvantages faced by the average, marginal African peasant. FIAN seeks to initiate a regime of fair trade with these agriculturists.¹⁶

Recent political mobilization in South America, as in Venezuela, that seeks to address the centuries-long land denial to indigenous groups and the promulgation of new civic and political rights that recognize various livelihoods is another big step in the direction of according rights to cultivators. In Asia, civil society organizations are now spearheading coalition movements in which rights to land and natural resources are gaining currency. For example, in India, Ekta Parishad, a Gandhian movement, has spearheaded the demand for land rights and recently signed a memorandum with the Government seeking address of land related issues. Women as key cultivators, especially in regions like Africa, are now being recognized by some governments and their legitimacy, rights, and knowledge are being reinforced through new policy initiatives. These cases represent possibilities of addressing the deficits of existing agrarian structures and the exclusion of agriculturists from decision and policy-making.

Conclusion. National and international crises are being forged as agriculturists become rural refugees and increasingly displaced peoples. International trade, development, expansion, and philanthropy agreements, which claim to rescue agriculturists, exacerbate the situation. As agriculturists everywhere—from post-communist peasant workers to displaced agrarian refugees

in Africa—search for sustainable solutions to retaining viable livelihoods, they also demand recognition of their worth and citizenship.

If any genuine international change is to be initiated, it must come in the form of offering dignity and agency to agriculturists: recognizing citizenship rights and the ecological specificities of varied agricultural zones, localizing food production and distribution, enhancing ownership rights, providing for collective production, marketing abilities among the most marginal cultivators, and enabling a sustainable resource base in which rights to culturally diverse forms of living and food security are central pillars. It will only be in the according of voice, agency, and

representation to the average marginal agriculturist in each of their domains, regions, and nations that the myriad problems of food and livelihoods will be resolved.

New imaginaries of agriculture are required, which will not treat the agriculturist as a supplicant, patient, refugee, or dependent. Recognizing that agriculturists are also repositories of knowledge across the world will prepare us to face the complexities of global warming, climate change, the search for sustainable livelihoods and lives, and the strengthening of genuine grass-roots based democracies. As one astute and hard-pressed agriculturist said to me, “will there be life when the tillers of soil, the feeders of the world will be done away with?”¹⁷

NOTES

- 1 The term agriculturist is used as a blanket term to include both peasants/subsistence cultivators and also farmers who cultivate for the market.
- 2 Timothy A. Wise, "Promise or Pitfall? The Limited Gains from Agricultural Trade liberalization for Developing Countries," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 36, no. 4 (October 2009): 855-870.
- 3 Faizel Ismail, "Narratives and Myths in the WTO Doha Round The Way Forward?," *Economic and Political Weekly* 47, no. 31 (August 2012): 55-60.
- 4 World Bank, *World Development Report 2008: Agriculture for Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). For detailed reviews and critiques of this report from the perspective of various regions and countries see the *Journal of Peasant Studies* 36, no. 3 (July 2009): 603-645.
- 5 Contract Farming refers to farming practices wherein the initial capital, inputs, and even know-how are provided by agri-business agencies; farmers act only as cultivators or producers.
- 6 See the essay by Haroon Akram-Lodhi, "Modernising Subordination? A South Asian Perspective on the World Development Report 2008: Agriculture for Development," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 36, no. 3 (July 2009): 611-619.
- 7 Loic Wacquant, "The Rise of Advanced Marginality: Notes on its Nature and Implications," *Acta Sociologica* 39, no. 2 (2006).
- 8 The 'Indo-US Knowledge Initiative in Agricultural Research and Education' (KIA) was initiated in 2006 under George Bush but did not take-off until March 2010 under the Obama regime. Its purported focus was on four key areas: Biotechnology, Food processing and Marketing, Education and Training, and Water Management and Precision Agriculture. The initiative provides a platform for strengthening the role of agri-business giants such as Monsanto, DuPont, Wal-Mart, Tesco, and Cargill in the nation, many of whose representatives are on its board. For an excellent overview and critique of the KIA see Kavitha Kuruganti's essay, "Targeting regulation in Indian Agriculture," *Economic and Political Weekly* 43, no. 48: 19.
- 9 Ruth Wedgwood and Tiffany Basiano, "The Right to Food' and Foreign Land Deals in Africa," *The Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies of the Johns Hopkins University SAISPHERE* (2011): 57-59.
- 10 See the report by the Government of India Monitor, "The Indian Land Grab In Africa," Internet, <http://www.countercurrents.org/goi201211.htm>.
- 11 Eric Holt-Gimenez, Miguel A. Altieri, and Peter Rosset, *Food First Policy Brief No.12: Ten Reasons Why the Rockefeller and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundations' Alliance for Another Green Revolution Will Not Solve the Problems of Poverty and Hunger in Sub-Saharan Africa*, (California 2006).
- 12 See Hannah Wittman, "Reworking the Metabolic Rift: La Via Campesina, Agrarian Citizenship, and Food Sovereignty," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 36, no. 4 (October 2009): 805-826.
- 13 Frederic Mousseau, *Food Aid or Food Sovereignty? Ending World Hunger in Our Time*, (California, 2005): 61.
- 14 IAASTD, "Towards Multifunctional Agriculture for Social, Environmental and Economic Sustainability," Internet, http://iaastd.net.docs/10505_multi.pdf.
- 15 Two exemplary cases are that of the work conducted by the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) in West Africa (see Michel Pimbert, Boukary Barry, Anne Berson, and Khanh Tran-Thanh, *Democratising Agricultural Research for Food Sovereignty in West Africa* (London: 2010). Also see the work by Alliance For Democratising Agricultural Research in South Asia, *Raitha Theerpu (Farmers' Jury): Report of Jury on Democratising Agricultural Research in Karnataka*, (Hyderabad, 2009).
- 16 FIAN International, *Policies to Overcome the Marginalisation of African Peasant Farmers. Policy implications of project work on African smallholders in focus—a voice in EU trade policy*, (Heidelberg: 2009).
- 17 Woman agriculturist, fieldwork notes in India at the height of the epidemic of suicides, Karnataka, India.

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