

LIOH's discussion on the Rights to Food in Myanmar

13 May 2022

Myanmar has diverse ethnic nationalities and each of them have their own specific food that brings comfort and strength during hard times – such as *Tar-la-baw* in Kayin, *Pal-htamin* in Burmese and *Sar-bu-dee* in Chin. Generally, rice is staple food together with freshly picked greens. However, it's not about what the people eat, it is about eating together.

Even before covid pandemic, government policies were about connecting peasants & farmers into existing international food regime empires those make working people & even for the peasants themselves - increasingly dependent on having to buy imported food. Covid disrupted food chains and many more people became food insecure.

The situation is worsen since after the coup in the last year, as the farmers couldn't resume farm works or harvest the crops – together with dispossessions on their housings, land and livestocks. Displaced communities are growing bigger and struggling to cope with the new situation. Junta's troops used to raid and torch the villages together with destroying or stealing crops and foods as a daily basis. According to the Data for Myanmar, the number of houses burnt down reaches over 11,000 during February 2021 to April 2022. And nearly 2,000 innocent peoples including farmers had been killed during the same period – according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners.

On the other hand, the farm cost is steeply increasing by the fuel price together with fuel shortage, higher input costs by restrictions on transporting food & farm inputs, rapid money inflation and another wave of labor migration – meaning that food production would be dropped dramatically this year plus the food prices are starting to rise. A pound of locally grown coffee now cost twice of its price from the last year.

Community food aids and donations mean – building solidarity and resistance among people, families, households and communities – both in rural and urban areas. People are practicing small actions – such as offering low priced meal & commodities to maintain stable food prices; and keeping & sharing the seeds in order to grow food. Some initiatives have already starting such as – promoting awareness on the possible food crisis & preparation to overcome; promoting home garden for food; and diversified crop practices together with maintaining local seeds.

There are some activities of international food aids happening in very few areas. Those food aids are manipulated by the junta – as an example in Yangon had shown that the junta-appointed administrators took credits on the rice distribution of the World Food Program.

At the same time, some of the Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) and the peoples' resistance forces are taking care of farmers & their crops – by providing securities while harvesting, assisting in their cropping or harvesting and avoiding the armed-fights during harvest season.

Food is heavily commoditized and people are not experiencing the right to food – especially during this pandemic years compounded by the junta. The future food system should be -

- ◆ The food system that values the culture and brings the people together.
- ◆ The food system that values and dignifies peasants & their efforts.

Recommendations

Food crisis is going on and likely to get worse. The crisis is not just the result of covid, it's weaponized by the junta. Therefore, sustainable answer is supporting for resiliency and food sovereignty – rather than more international food aid.

International organizations working for livelihoods projects, Humanitarian organizations and the UN itself --- how can they reach to remote areas and without supporting the legitimacy of junta? Because junta is using food aid to reward and punish – instead of fulfilling the rights to food. These international agencies should better work with local organizations, CSOs and EAOs as they know their communities and the needs of their communities. EAOs have their local administrations that local community trust, they have been there forever, know the areas, know the needs, know where to get food, know how to effectively provide assistance especially under the current situations.

The problems in COVID-19 response, including access to support, services, and information in ethnic rural areas, and the immediate livelihood and health needs of villagers will certainly require action through non-state channels, especially country like Burma/Myanmar. Given the current situation, the international communities should adopt a comprehensive and flexible COVID-19 relief policy that ensure vulnerable communities living in conflict affected areas have access to the covid19 assistances.

Diversify international funding distribution so that more funding is made (directly) available to non-state actors. In particular, increase direct funding for ethnic service providers and civil society organizations. Prioritize methods of service delivery and communication that rely on local civil society organizations and ethnic service providers that have the ability and networks (due to consistent access and trust from the community) for local implementation of support program. The international communities should avoid adopting policies that undermining the people's struggle against the military dictatorship. Any forms of assistance provided, should not legitimize the military rules.

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