

AGRICULTURE AND FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

Challenges and Opportunities
in North East India

A DISCUSSION PAPER BY
Focus on the Global South
ActionAid
Solidarity for Sustainable North East

IN COLLABORATION WITH
Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung –South Asia

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Agriculture and Food Sovereignty: Challenges and Opportunities in North East India

A Report by

Focus on the Global South, ActionAid, Solidarity for Sustainable North East
In collaboration with Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung (RLS) –South Asia

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This discussion paper is a report of a workshop held on 29-30 August, 2019 at the Don Bosco Institute, Guwahati. The complete list of speakers can be found in annexure 1.

Organised by: Focus on the Global South, Action Aid and Solidarity for Sustainable North East (SOSNE)

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SETTING THE CONTEXT

The eight north eastern states of India comprising of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Tripura, Manipur and Sikkim constitute 7.8 per cent of the country's total geographical area, while their share in the total net sown area is 3.2 per cent. With 56 per cent of its total geographical area under forest cover, India's north east consists of a unique mix of undulating hills, wetlands, plains and river valleys. The region also represents diversity in forms of its farming systems, spanning across plain land paddy, flood plain cyclical agriculture and vegetable cultivation, orchards, various types of plantations and more traditional varieties of jhum or slash and burn cultivation. Diversity is also found in land tenure systems and the people who are from numerous tribal and non-tribal groups populating the region. Some parts of the North East are covered under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, which provides legal safeguards and sanctionsthe various community driven governance systems operational in the region.

The nearly three decades of neoliberal reforms pursued by the Indian state in its agricultural policies have resulted in a deep seated farm crisis in the countryside. Binding international trade agreements, the entry of agribusiness, deregulated domestic costs and prices of agricultural inputs and produce, saw the build-up of the agrarian crisis. India's widening balance of trade and fiscal deficit concerns were thrust upon the rural working population through cuts in public investment in social sector spending. Agricultural subsidies and investment in extension services saw a reduction in this period. As an outcome, cost of production rose steeply, while the prices received by the peasants failed to keep pace with the increasing cost of living. Reforms brought in

the Public Distribution System (PDS) additionally have raised concerns regarding meeting food security and nutrition needs of the vast population of the rural poor.

The seminar on 'Agriculture and Food Sovereignty: Challenges and Opportunities in the North East' was organised in the backdrop of this national scenario. This seminar report looks at some of the major concerns and themes around agriculture that were raised by the various participants that included different peasant organisations, activists and civil society organisations working in the region. There was an attempt to bring out the diversity in the challenges of the region.

Today, most of the North East region is a net importer of food grains. Relegated to the margins in most central policies, the North East suffered years of 'neglect'. In more recent times the region has re-entered the policy frame through the centre's 'Act East' initiative, which has brought in a flurry of infrastructure projects along with increased geo-political attention to the region. As another instance of state policy intervention, the Niti Aayog – the central governments think tank – cameout with its approach document on jhum cultivation, subscribing to a path of transition from the traditional slash and burn form to a more settled form of cultivation. Questions of sustainable models of agriculture, keeping an eye on protecting food security and biodiversity of the region appear as issues facing the future of agriculture. The present seminar tried to develop a better understanding of what these issues mean for the North East's agricultural pathway as well as the challenges and opportunities they pose for the region.



JHUM AND UPLAND AGRICULTURE:
CHALLENGES AND ALTERNATIVES

JHUM AND UPLAND AGRICULTURE: CHALLENGES AND ALTERNATIVES

Jhum cultivation is a generic name for slash and burn agriculture practiced by indigenous tribal communities in the North Eastern states of India such as Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland and also in the Khagrachari and Sylhet districts of Bangladesh. It is one of the oldest systems of agriculture. In India the total area under jhum cultivation is 0.94 m ha (metric hectares) whereas NorthEast India itself accounts for 80% of the jhum area (0.76 m ha). Jhum cultivation was discussed in detail where participants debated about the various challenges and opportunities it has for the communities in the North East.

FEATURES OF JHUM CULTIVATION IN THE NORTHEAST

Participants presented key features of jhum cultivation and its significance in the life of the Jhumia communities. The majority of upland families in the North East are involved in traditional farming or jhum cultivation. A very important aspect of jhum is that it is rooted in culture and the ancestral knowledge of the indigenous communities. It requires very little use of modern agricultural inputs (no use of chemical fertilizers, pesticides) but is extremely labour-intensive. The aspects of decision-making power of the community and food sovereignty are central to jhum cultivation. The system of jhum integrates sustainable wildlife management and promotes biodiversity. It is also based on an indigenous holistic worldview and the values of reciprocity, and ensures community vitality and linguistic, cultural and biological diversity. However, this system of farming results in low production.

Women play a very important role in this food production system. The women in the North East are considered to be the repository of seed systems. They not just save seeds but make significant contributions to almost all the activities of the jhum cycle. They are not only responsible for the very intensive activities of the Jhumia cycle but also for domestic care work.



Another critical aspect that came out from the discussions on jhum was its ecological impact. The jhum system comprises of two distinct phases: a cropping phase, followed by the fallow cycle (a soil recuperation phase). Both the phases are inseparable and an integral part of this farming system. Jhum land is an intergenerational resource or common property resource and the entire production system is controlled by Jhumia families and their village authorities.

The process of jhum farming involves the identification of jhum plots and preparation of farm beds. The identified jhum plot is first cleared of vegetation and is then left to dry before burning. This process is

called slash and burn. After the jhum plots are allocated, the community prepares the grounds for sowing in the next three-four months. They clear the bushes, lop the tree branches and leave them to dry for burning in the next spring just before the planting season begins. Farmers do not clear-fell the trees from the jhum plot. On the contrary, they carefully trim the selected trees and use them as stands for climber plants, such as beans. Hill farmers plant as many as 20 to 30 types of crops comprising of cereals, root crops and vegetable seeds, including millet and many varieties of rice on their jhum plots. Sowing is done immediately after burning the crops with the help of simple tools such as a dao (sickle) and a



wooden spear. The villagers get their annual fuel (firewood) supply from the jhum plot that is cleared for burning. They stack this fire wood in a fuel storehouse. This fulfils their demand of fire-food and does not let the trees and vegetation go to waste. In the months of March and June the soil remains exposed to the rain resulting in sprouting of the seeds. This is the time when the farmers plant rice on the wet ter-

race. By mid-July, they start harvesting ginger followed by corn and other vegetables. In the following months, rice, millets and other fruits and vegetables are harvested. With the harvesting of crops, the cropping cycle of the year comes to an end. After completion of harvest, the plot is left fallow for forest regeneration and soil health recovery.

DEBATE ON JHUM CULTIVATION

Conflicting views on jhum cultivation were also discussed. One view advocated by many farm scientists and forest administrators describes jhum as 'primitive and

wasteful' and holds it responsible for burning and depletion of forests, soil erosion and environmental degradation. They argue for abandoning this age-old practice.

Some of the other arguments for renouncing jhum are its inability to stand the precariousness of the market, that have both long and short-term food security implications. The other view emerges from the multidisciplinary research on the jhum system and holds that it is based on sound ecological principles embedded in traditional knowledge. They argue that this system encourages communities to hold on to their value systems and develop their own systems of learning and healthcare apart from food and fuel. They contend that this form of agriculture is the only sustainable way of pro-

ducing food for the family and community. It also remains the only practice capable of safeguarding the indigenous species of crops and plants, many of which are endemic to specific areas in the mountain region. A lot of research suggests that it is the backbone of community agriculture. In a broader sense, in this age of decimation of species and plant diversity, this method can be termed as an important storehouse and bank for variety of food crops and other important plants.

PROPOSED ALTERNATIVES TO JHUM AND ITS VIABILITY

A recent Niti Aayog publication on shifting cultivation has recommended that the Ministry of Agriculture take up a "mission on shifting cultivation" to ensure inter-ministerial convergence. It suggests that both state and central governments should think towards bringing transformative changes to shifting cultivation. It notes that between 2000 and 2010, the land under shifting cultivation dropped by 70 per cent. It also quotes data from the Indian Council of Forestry Research and Education published in the year 2014 that points out that from 35,142 sq. km in 2000, the area under jhum cultivation dropped to 10,306 sq. km in 2010. Relying on this data, it argues that jhum cultivation is no longer viable and jhumia farmers are themselves moving from jhum to other forms of farming. This report has also laid down a range of enabling programmes and policies that would help and support communities to overcome the challenges of jhum. However, this document does not make any new claims as both central and some state governments have already been making these points to argue for the transformation of the agricultural

system of the jhumias. In the last few years there has been a push from the government to replace jhum cultivation with commercial/plantation crops such as palm oil, rubber, areca nut and cashew nut.

However, several studies show that jhum cultivation is more sustainable and rooted in ecological biodiversity than modern cash-cropping. These studies also make a case for higher dietary diversity under jhum compared to any of the cash-crop systems. The Niti Aayog report was brought up by the participants and it was agreed that it needs to be studied and responded to.

An important concern flagged by the participants was regarding exclusion of the communities practising jhum from the processes towards shifting to other forms of agriculture, thereby neglecting their agency and decision-making power. The session on jhum concluded with an agreement that the proposed transformation from jhum to other forms of agriculture must be discussed and undertaken in consultation with communities.



PLANTATION ECONOMY IN THE NORTH EAST

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One finds a variety of plantation systems in the North East. In this seminar, issues, scope and concerns pertaining to three types of plantations, namely rubber, tea and palm oil were discussed by participants. Rubber plantations have been promoted in the state of Tripura, while tea plantations are found in the state of Assam and palm oil plantations have found a recent entry into Mizoram. The discussions around the plantation economy were focused on issues of viability, potentialities of generating sustainable incomes and the challenges facing it.

RUBBER

The state of Tripura, under the previous Left Front government took the approach of increasing the area of cultivation, and increasing paddy yields through introduction of High Yielding Variety(HYV) seeds to attain food security in the state. Since the early 2000s, the (System of Rice Intensification) SRI method was adopted in over one lakh hectare of land to enhance productivity, and farmers were encouraged to produce seeds on their own farms.

Tripura also adopted a policy path towards moving jhumia households into a more settled form of agriculture. The Tripura Tribal Autonomous Areas Council provided proper housing to families and alternative livelihoods were created through promotion of rubber plantations and horticulture crops such as oranges and pineapples. Small tea growers, producing tea on one to two hectares of land were also provided state support through the Mahatma



Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA) scheme.

Rubber plantations were thus introduced into Tripura as a rehabilitation scheme for tribal households affected by years of ethnic violence in the state. The state government had introduced rubber plantations in the 1980s, and after 1983, the Tripura Rehabilitation and Plantation Corporation Limited became the discharging authority to provide state support for rubber plantations. The scheme supported landless tribal households to start rubber plantations through allocation of land titles, along with rubber saplings and other input support. Around 3,568 families were included in this rubber promotion scheme, the majority of whom were jhumias. Presently, Tripura is the second largest producer of rubber in

the country after Kerala. These rubber plantations are spread across more than 3,800 hectares of land. The scheme was reported to have enabled households to raise their incomes. It was also a scheme intended to move households involved in jhum cultivation into a more settled form of agriculture.

The issues concerning the environmental implications of rubber plantations came up in the discussion. An additional factor of concern was the domestic price fluctuations in rubber due to its close links with international prices.

TEA

Tea is the oldest form of plantation in the North East. Its roots go back to the British colonisers, who introduced tea in the region as early as 1833. The issues pertaining to the tea plantations in the North East are primarily of the low wages received by the tea garden workers and the vast profits accrued to the manufacturers and retailers. In recent years India has emerged as the second largest producer of tea in the world, after China. Within



India, Assam contributes almost half of the total domestic production, while having only 6.5 per cent of the total number of tea plantations. This shows the concentration of large tea estates in the state. The state has a total population of 6.86 lakh plantation workers in these tea estates.

There have been media reports on an alleged slowdown in the tea industry in recent times.

This comes at a time when there has been a concerted organised struggle by the tea plantation workers demanding a raise in their wages along with a 20 per cent bonus. However, contrary to media reporting, figures suggest that there has been a rise in tea production in the country between the period of 2014 and 2018, along with a marginal increase in the tea auction prices.

The profits accrued by the tea industry are disproportionately distributed between the workers and the retailers. The retailers (such as the supermarkets) mopped up 53 per cent of the total profits, while the tea pickers at the bottom of the ladder received only 0.16 per cent of the total profits. A study shows that the Assam tea plantation workers received only Rs. 115 per day as minimum wages in 2015, one of the lowest not only in the country, but also in the world. In Kerala, for instance, workers received Rs. 254 per

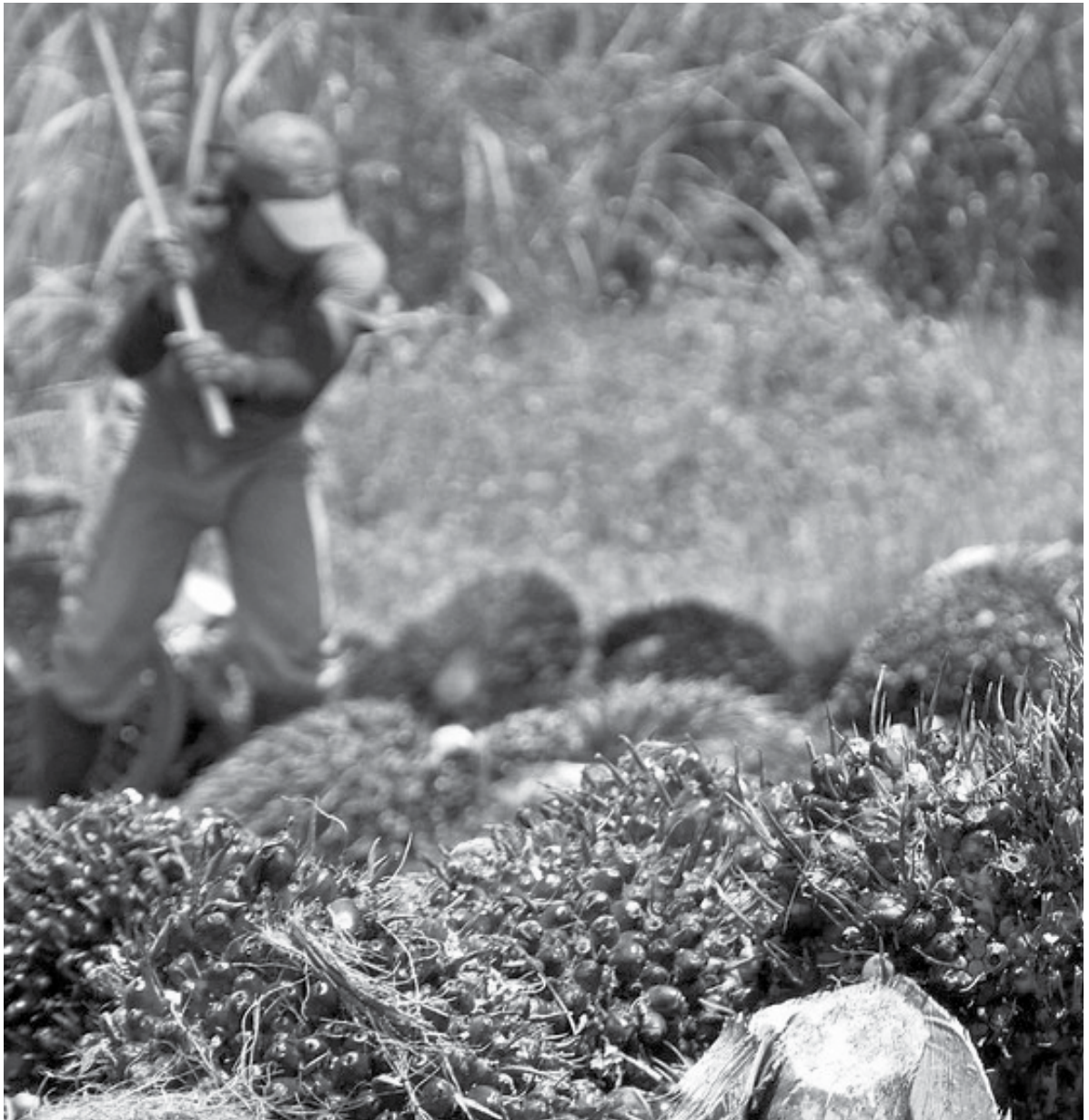
day, although the tea prices there were lower than that in Assam on an average. Thus the economic logic for keeping the wages low for plantation workers in Assam does not hold ground. The workers' struggle in Assam proposed to raise the minimum wages to Rs. 177.

Assam also has 1.75 lakh registered small growers in the state. The small tea growers have to compete with the big corporate players in the tea industry. There have been instances of poor quality tea produced by corporations, which fail to meet export standards. However, small tea growers if given marketing support can gain opportunities to export their organic varieties of tea. A majority of the small tea growers do not have legal titles to the land. Thus there has been a demand for providing legal land titles along with other state support to these small tea growers. Supporting the small tea growers will primarily mean ensuring sustenance of the small and marginalized cultivators of the state.



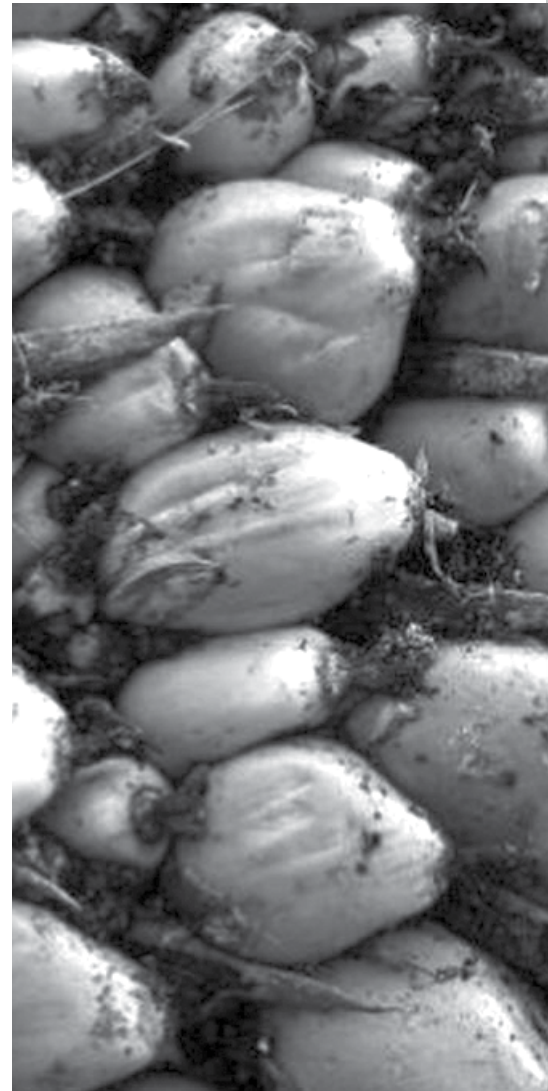
PALM OIL

Palm oil is the newest entrant into the plantation economy of the North East. The Mizoram government in 2004 adopted the Mizoram Oil Palm (Regulation of Production and Processing) Act to legally designate land for oil palm production in the state. Oil palm production was introduced in seven districts of the state, with the support of the National Mission on Oilseeds and Oil Palm (NMOOP) of the Government of India on a centre-state cost sharing arrangement. About 1,000

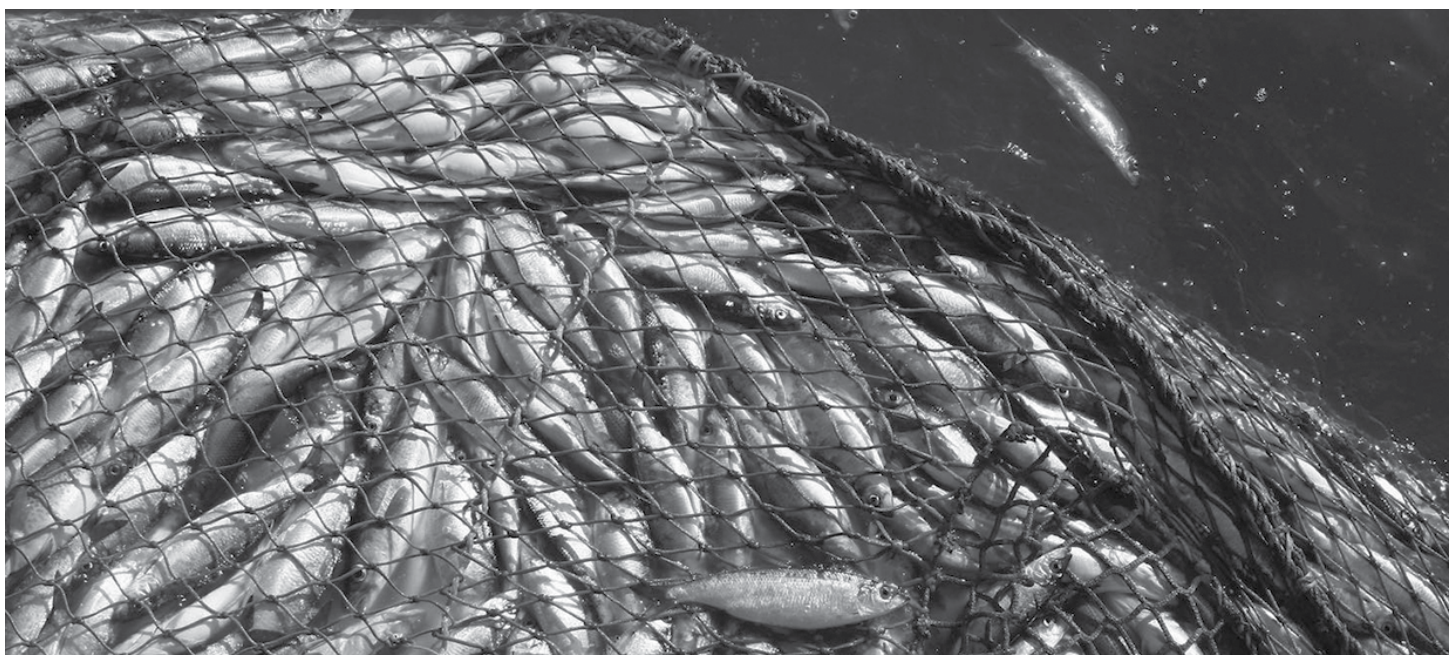


hectares of land were identified for oil palm production in the state, on a public-private partnership model. Contract farming was adopted for catering to the marketing aspect of the oil palm production. The government of Mizoram signed (Memorandum of Understanding) MoUs with agribusiness companies such as Godrej Agrovet, Ruchi Soya and others, on the terms that those who would buy fresh fruit would bunch and transport it to mills. The companies would also provide all the inputs, including seedlings and fertilizers in the initial years. There is no oil pressing mill in Mizoram. The new Land Use Policy adopted by the Mizoram government in 2011 further pushed for expansion of land under palm oil production. The policy stressed on shifting people out of jhum cultivation through promotion of palm oil production. Prospective palm oil cultivators were incentivised by providing individual rights and land leases in an otherwise collectively controlled land tenure system. The shift into oil palm production was also projected to raise household incomes. Presently oil palm cultivation is spread across 26,000 hectares of land in over 197 villages.

However, there have been concerns raised regarding oil palm plantations on different grounds. One of the chief issues is that of remunerative prices. Presently the fresh fruit bunches get sold at a very low Rs. 5.5 per kg, whereas the Commission for Costs and Agricultural Prices (CACAP) recommends the prices to be raised up to Rs. 10.35 per kg. There have also been instances where the oil producing companies, despite taking advantage of the state subsidies, backed out from buying the produce, which left farmers in the lurch. Contract farming, which comes with a promise of providing certain levels of income, in this case has turned out to be otherwise. With a largely poor road infrastructure, lack of access to markets and an absence of oil refineries in the state, the farmers have limited options to dispose of their produce. Palm oil fruits are known for their regular bearing, under conditions of adequate availability of inputs and irrigation. However, in recent years the yield has been falling. Along with the falling yields, the shift of plain land which was traditionally under rice cultivation, to palm oil production, has posed challenges of food insecurity in the state. Palm oil being a monoculture crop does not allow intercropping. There have also been ecological concerns raised over this system of monoculture. A major transformation brought in by the palm oil plantations has been the restricted participation of women in the production system in contrast to their substantial role in the communal system of jhum cultivation. The peasant organizations working among the palm oil cultivators in Mizoram see the need for conducting more thorough studies to have a better understanding of the socio-economic implications of palm oil plantations.



FISHERIES



FISHERIES

Fisheries is a very important sector in many states of the North East. Different issues concerning the fisheries sector were highlighted. Fish is a very important source of protein and minerals and it forms the staple for many in India. After milk, it is the second most consumed animal protein in the country. According to some estimates some 80 crore people in India consume fish. The consumption of fish has increased threefold compared to the figures in 1961. While coastal fisheries has received both policy focus and attention from the movements in terms of organising, inland fisheries has not garnered enough attention the terms of both. Therefore, a session on the current state of inland fisheries was designed to bring out the issues and challenges of this sector.

INLAND FISHERIES

India has vast and varied inland waterbodies such as rivers, estuaries, ponds, lakes, wetlands and backwaters, bearing rich resources of fish. Production from inland waterbodies yields a total of 7.21 million tonnes of fish every year. This is more than 66 percent of total fish production in the country. The constituents of inland fisheries are fishworkers who fish from capture fisheries, fish farmers involved in culture fisheries, capture based culture fisheries, fish vendors, fish sellers, other fish workers, net makers, dryers, boat makers and repairers. Figures suggest that inland fisheries sustain more than four million fish workers in the country.

CHALLENGES TO INLAND FISHERIES

Despite being a major source of livelihood for millions of people, inland fisheries are facing significant challenges. Pollution in water bodies from industrial and urban waste, encroachment of water bodies, diversion of water bodies for irrigation purposes, industrial utilization and water diversion for urban centres, pose major threats to inland fishing and small fish farmers. There is a lack of sustainable policies to protect water bodies and therefore livelihoods of millions of fishworkers who are linked to these water bodies. The National Water Policy does not provide any direction regarding maintaining the ecological flow of water bodies which is necessary for inland fishing. Alarmingly, the water policy does not mention fisheries and fish workers.



Destructive fishing and fish-farming, poor watershed management, obstructed catchment, run off from chemical agriculture, rapid commercialisation leading to steep lease rents are also affecting fishworkers. The other major concerns raised by fishworkers are the looming threats of the so-called blue revolution, the river-linking project and the inland waterways project. The Indian Government has tried to restructure all the existing fisheries schemes under the tag of "Blue Revolution". The scheme was aimed at covering multi-dimensional activities for development and management of inland fisheries, aquaculture and marine fisheries and was to be implemented exclusively through the National Fisheries Development Board (NFDB). A key focus of the scheme was on increasing productivity and production from aquaculture, and fisheries resources, both inland and marine. This also provides suitable

linkages with the Sagarmala Project, which is a series of infrastructure projects on the coastline. These projects, aimed at the already vulnerable coastline will prove detrimental to the communities dependent on coasts.

Small scale fishing communities are by far the largest primary non-consumptive stakeholders and natural custodians of inland water bodies. However, they are being ousted from their natural habitats. Development activities in the river basins of Ganges, Mahanadi, Kaveri, Narmada and Mandavi have forced fishing communities to migrate to other towns and cities. Many fishing villages are getting deserted as there is an eventual decrease in the number of fish in the water bodies. Apart from the domestic onslaught, there are international covenants because of which the government is trying to develop protected areas. In the name of protected areas, the Government has stopped all livelihood activities in these demarcated zones, thereby displacing fishworkers.



FISHERIES IN THE NORTH EAST: ASSAM AND MANIPUR

The NorthEast of India is not only rich in agriculture but is also very rich in terms of the fisheries sector. The state has huge sources of inland water bodies, big rivers and small streams that contain varieties of small fish. The region has more than 3,000 varieties of fish. Assam alone produced 3,27,000 metric tonnes of fish in the year 2019. In 2012-13, the corresponding figure was 2,33,000 metric tonnes. In spite of this increase in production over the years, there is a demand-supply gap. Experts suggest that this gap would widen in the coming years as the government is not paying enough attention to boost this sector.

Recently, the government has paid attention to culture fisheries and has increased its budgetary allocation. But an increase in culture areas has not resulted in an

actual increase in fish production. A crucial sector of fisheries is capture fisheries that has been neglected. Ponds and wetlands along with rivers form the sole source of capture fisheries. Rivers such as Barak and Brahmaputra need to be protected and sustainable fishing should be encouraged in these rivers. The government has also invested heavily into aquaculture. This poses several dangers to the fish and fishing communities. New varieties of fish from aquaculture enter natural water bodies during floods, thereby endangering indigenous species. Large parts of Assam remain flood-prone but the state does not have any provision for funds for rehabilitation of both farmers and fishworkers impacted by floods. Another important issue that came up is the availability and price of fish seeds. Fish seeds are not readily available during the monsoon and winter seasons. During this period, fishworkers have to pay huge sums of money to buy seeds from the market, sometimes going up to Rs.600 per kg. The Government has not taken any steps to regulate the prices of fish seed and other inputs necessary for fishing.

Inland fisheries are an important source of livelihood for people in Manipur. More than 10,000 families are directly dependent on the Loktak lake. There are 168 species of fish in the lake. The government is increasingly pushing for development projects such as dams that are destroying the lake system. The fish population has also been adversely affected in the last few years. This has affected fish-workers and dependent communities around Loktak.

Women also play an important role in the fisheries sector. They are involved in fishing, value addition and selling fish in the markets. In spite of playing such a visible role, they are not recognised as fishers. They do not enjoy a legal recognition which would give them access to social benefits, training, credit, decision-making bodies and other resources. Women of coastal communities have started to raise their voices to gain recognition of their role and also to become active in public debates about the future of fisheries and fishing communities, safety at sea, resource management, the development of the local economy, trade and marketing, community participation in decision-making processes or the role of research. Women have started to organise themselves either in autonomous organisations or with men within established fisheries bodies.

DEMANDS FROM FISH WORKERS

The first and foremost demand is the right of fishworkers to water and water bodies. Just like farmers have a right to their land, fishworkers demand the right to water bodies. They demand both tenure rights to sustainable use of water and fish resources, and governance rights to protect water and fish resources from encroachment and environmental degradation.



The other important rights that have been on the charter of demands include the right to access bank loans at low interest rates, and the right to form and run institutions of economic empowerment, i.e, the right to form cooperatives. They have also demanded the right to infrastructure: the right to have affordable access to boats, nets, transport and markets. Access to affordable fish seeds and fish feed are also important demands.

Right to social security is another important right that would include affordable housing, health and life insurance, old age support, pension, educational support for children, and preferential rights for women fish workers. Women fishworkers are more vulnerable to development activities owing to social structures relating to gender, and therefore should be given preferential rights.

The National Wetlands Policy that has provisions for leasing of wetlands does not recognise fishworkers as stakeholders. Therefore, they are subsequently kept away from policy spaces. The demand to involve fishing communities in policy making is critical to ensuring the protection of their livelihood.

NEED FOR ORGANISING AND NATIONAL AND REGIONAL LEVEL COORDINATION

The discussions paved way for the need to build national and regional level platforms. Until 2016, there was no proper platform for inland fisheries in the country. The country has a marine policy in place from 2004 that guarantees certain rights for marine fishers. After much interposition from the inland fishworkers, the government was forced to prepare a national policy on inland fisheries. The inland fisheries union has been involved in consultation meetings with both the government and the fishing communities to strengthen ground activities and push for an effective inland fisheries policy. The All Loktak Lake Areas Fisherman's Union, Manipur has also been very active in the struggle against development projects in the Loktak region and the struggle for safeguarding the livelihood of thousands of fishworkers.





LACK OF ACCESS TO MARKETS AND IMPACT OF TRADE AGREEMENTS



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One of the recurring themes that came up in the presentations made by various participants from different states of the North East was the issue of limited access to markets for their produce. The participant from Arunachal Pradesh as well as Manipur focused on the lack of access to the market for their produce. With an overall low cash economy of the North East, marketing of agricultural produce is one of the chief sources of monetary transactions in the region. In Arunachal Pradesh, permanent or periodic markets are sparse, and most of the transactions take place at the individual consumer level.

The North East has one of the thinnest distributions of regulated markets; for instance, 11,215 sq km is the average area covered by a regulated market in Meghalaya, as compared to the all-India average of 449 sq km (State of Indian Agriculture 2015-16). The absence of adequate marketing and other road infrastructure is one of the major challenges facing the cultivators of the North East, denying them assured prices for their produce. Any model of farming, be it horticultural

or food grain, can become sustainable only if presence of reliable markets can be assured.

Another aspect of markets and prices that has growing ramifications for the North East is the issue of global trade agreements. With an increasingly commercial plantation oriented economy of the North East, there are more linkages between global markets and the domestic prices received by farmers. For instance, due to India's trade treaty with the ASEAN, there has been an inflow of low tariff palm oil products into the domestic markets. This has ramifications for the palm oil cultivators of Mizoram, as the inflow of cheaply priced palm oil from major producing countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia can potentially lead to a drop in the domestic prices received by cultivators. Other trade agreements such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) are also estimated to create further stress on the domestic plantation economy. Therefore, there need to be wider safeguards for the plantation crop growers, a wide section of whom in the North East are small and marginal farmers.



CONSERVATION AND AGRICULTURE

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A perspective on conservation based on lived experience was shared. In 2017, the Indian Government came up with a wildlife action plan for fifteen years. The government claims that the major purpose of this plan is to increase the green cover of the country from 21 percent to 33 percent in the next fifteen years. The Kaziranga National Park is one of the most successful models of conservation in the world. It is important to recognise that this model was not possible without the contribution of the local communities in and around Kaziranga. It has been nurtured and nourished by the people for several years and this makes a strong point for the importance and involvement of local communities in the management structures of forests and national parks. The idea of conservation that had people in the centre is under threat. Today's idea of conservation is indeed exclusionary, one that views wildlife as something pristine but not something encompassing humans. It is envisioned as separate from communities.

For years, communities of Kaziranga have contributed towards maintaining the congruence between people and the forest. The onslaught on this idea of conservation that is being planned by the Government would change the fundamentals of the country. The proposed reforms in the forest laws would empower the bureaucracy and put 33 percent of the landmass under the control of the forest department. This would mean more impunity and power in the hands of the forest department.

The communities that live in and around Kaziranga are dependent on the forests for their life and livelihood. The plan to convert the national park into a protected area would require for it to be made into a well-defined space. This would immediately mean that the people would not be allowed to enter these well-defined spaces that would function as exclusionary spaces under the forest department.



CONCLUSION

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After deliberations and discussions, it was concluded that there is a need for a concerted effort in the region to build a strong network which will focus on the agriculture, environment and trade nexus. It was also recognised that there was a wide gap in knowledge in understanding the economies of the 'unregulated' zone which has largely been left to be 'colonised' by modern economies. Several suggestions were put forth by groups present in the seminar. One suggestion was to create a regional hub for agriculture-related research that will respond to new policy challenges. The hub would build awareness among farmers and other constituencies. Proper research studies on the future of plantation economies were suggested. Work on improving agriculture marketing mechanisms, and on how best to use public funds available for farmers groups, needs to be explored. A primer on food sovereignty and trade challenges for the North East needs to be brought out in local languages to inform farmers, elected representatives and grassroots groups. The fisheries groups decided to organise a meeting focused on the North East. A jhum research centre for the North East that would focus on the intervention of local communities in the shift from jhum to other forms of agriculture, was also suggested. There should be an exploration of a possible way to engage with North East Food Processing Farmers Association and other entrepreneurs. Efforts need to be made to turn community networks associations into cooperatives and collectives. Solidarity for Sustainable North East (SOSNE) (currently 35 groups) decided to function as a convening space for follow up work studies on land use changes on common property resources and farming trends in the North East. Impacts of large infrastructure projects like dams in Arunachal Pradesh, such as Dibang and Subansiri, and impacts on downstream communities in Assam need to be studied.

ANNEXURE 1

Programme Schedule of the Workshop on 'Agriculture and Food Sovereignty: Challenges Ahead for India's North East', held at Don Bosco Institute, Kharguli, Guwahati, Assam on 29-30 August, 2019

DAY 1 Thursday 29th August	
09.30 –10.00	Registration
10.00-10.30	Welcome and Introduction Ram Wankheirakpam (Indigenous Perspectives/SOSNE) Self Introduction by Participants
Session 1 10.30-11.30	SETTING THE CONTEXT <i>State of Agriculture in India Today</i> : Ranjini Basu (Focus on the Global South) <i>Chair</i> : Mrinal Gohain (ActionAid India)
Tea Break 11.45-13.00	
1145-1300	STATE OF AGRICULTURE IN THE NORTH EAST <i>Sustainability of Upland Agriculture</i> : Dr. Vincent Darlong (Vice Chancellor, Martin Luther Christian University) <i>Role and Activities of Indian Council of Agriculture Research</i> : Narendra Prakash (Director, Indian Council of Agricultural Research) <i>Future of Agriculture in North East</i> : Daniel Ingty (Former IFAD Project Director) <i>Open Discussion</i>
Lunch 13.00-14.00	
Session 2 14.00-15.30	VIEWS FROM THE GROUND <i>Current Challenges in Agriculture in Tripura</i> : Pabitra Kar (All India Kisan Sabha) <i>The Need for Ccovergence in Agriculture and Allied Sectors in Reference to the Experiences of Mishing Autonomous Council</i> : Paramanada Chayengia (Chief Executive Member, Mishing Autonomous Council) <i>Conservation and Agriculture</i> : Pranab Doley (Jeepal Krisak Sramik Sangha) <i>Chair</i> : Linda Chhakchhuak
Tea Break 15.30-15.45	
Session 2 15.45-18.00	VIEWS FROM THE GROUND 2 <i>continued Flood and Farmers of Assam</i> : Soneswar Narah (Jeepal Krisak Sramik Sangha) <i>Traditional, Present and Future Agricultural Practices and Policies of Arunachal Pradesh</i> : Vijay Taram (Farmer and Lawyer) <i>Problems of Marginal Tenant Farmers in Barak Valley</i> : Swapan Sinha (Farmer)

DAY 2 Friday, 30th August	
Session 3 09.00-10.00	<p>CHALLENGES OF THE PLANTATION ECONOMY</p> <p><i>Small Tea Growers: What is their Future?</i> : Hemanta Gohain (Assam Small Tea Growers <i>Development Cooperative Society Limited, Dibrugarh, Assam)</i></p> <p><i>Tea Gardens and Labour Conditions: Wil Im Oil Plantation in Mizoram:</i> Zion Lalremruata (All Mizoram Farmers Union)</p> <p><i>Chair:</i> Benny Kuruvilla (Focus on the Global South)</p>
Tea Break 10.00-10.30	
Session 4 10.30-12.00	<p>UPLAND AGRICULTURE AND SHIFTING CULTIVATION</p> <p><i>Jhum and Upland Agriculture: The Broad Picture:</i> Sanat (Writer, Activist)</p> <p><i>Understanding Upland Agriculture:</i> Thingreiphi Lungharwo (Mountain Indigenous Knowledge Center)</p> <p><i>Understanding Niti Aayog's Shifting Cultivation: Towards a Transformation:</i> Amba Jamir (Sustainable Development Forum Nagaland)</p> <p><i>Chair:</i> Dr. Vincent Darlong (Vice Chancellor, Martin Luther Christian University)</p>
Session 5 12.00-13.30	<p>INLAND FISHERIES SECTOR</p> <p><i>Experiences of Fisheries in Assam:</i> Dr Lakhi Prasad Hazarika (Principal, DDU College, Dolgan, Assam)</p> <p><i>Rights of Fishing Families of Tezpur, Assam:</i> Dr Ranjita Baniya (President, Fish Biologist & Head of Aquaculture, Wetlands and Livelihood Division, JEEVA-SURAKSHA)</p> <p><i>Experiences of Fishers of Loktak:</i> Rajen Oinam (All Loktak Lake Areas Fishermen Union Manipur)</p> <p><i>Chair and Discussant:</i> Pradip Chatterjee</p>
Lunch 13.30-14.30	
Session 6 14.30-15.15	<p>CROSS CUTTING ISSUES</p> <p><i>Trade and Agriculture:</i> Ranja Sengupta (Third World Network)</p> <p><i>State of Women in Agriculture in the North East:</i> Samhita Barroah (Associate Professor, Martin Luther Christian University)</p>
Session 7 15.15-16.00	<p>DEBATE ON ALTERNATIVES</p> <p><i>Debates on Food Sovereignty: Linking the North East with the Mekong Region:</i> Shalmali Guttal (Focus on the Global South)</p> <p><i>Can Cooperatives be a Solution in Advancing Alternative Relations of Production and Marketing in Agriculture:</i> Benny Kuruvilla (Focus on the Global South)</p>
Session 8 16.15-17.30	<p>CLOSING PANEL : FUTURE WORKS AND COLLABORATIONS</p> <p><i>Chair:</i> Benny Kuruvilla (Focus on the Global South)</p>



FOCUS ON THE GLOBAL SOUTH

Focus on the Global South is an Asia-based regional think tank that conducts research and policy analysis on the political economy of trade and development, democracy and people's alternatives. It works in national, regional and international coalitions with peoples' movements and civil society organisations and has offices in New Delhi, Manila, Phnom Penh and Bangkok



ACTIONAID INDIA

ActionAid India (AAI) is part of a global federation and is a full affiliate of ActionAid International that is present in over 40 countries. AAI works to address the root causes of poverty in partnership with grassroots organizations, civil society groups and platforms.


SOLIDARITY FOR A SUSTAINABLE NORTH EAST

Solidarity for a Sustainable North East (SoSNE) is a network of independent NGOs and movement groups from NorthEast India. SoSNE provides a common platform to pursue regional research and monitoring that enhances the work of member organisations.



ROSA LUXEMBURG STIFTUNG (RLS)

The Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung (RLS) is a Germany-based foundation working in South Asia as in other parts of the world on the subjects of critical social analysis and civic education. It promotes a sovereign, socialist, secular and democratic social order, and aims to present alternative approaches to society and decision-makers. Research organisations, groups for self- emancipation and social activists are supported in their initiatives to develop models which have the potential to deliver greater social and economic justice.



Agriculture continues to be the main livelihood activity in the North East (NE) Region, both in the valleys and the mountains. The share of agriculture in the State Domestic Product (SDP) in various states in the region ranges from 19 to 37 per cent. As with the rest of India, the contribution of agriculture to the economy in the NE also declined during the neoliberal reform period. Intra country trade imbalances have also negatively affected the NE region, especially during the Green Revolution.

This report is an output from a two day workshop that brought together farmers and peasant groups, fish worker unions, academics and researchers to discuss the existing trends and problems in agriculture from states of Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Tripura. The report highlights issues such as plantation economy, upland agriculture, impact of trade policies on agriculture and fisheries.