

International Symposium on: ‘Sustaining Food Security and Managing Natural Resources in Southeast Asia – Challenges for the 21st Century’.

Chiang Mai, Thailand, January 2002¹

Reducing poverty and hunger and sustaining the natural resource base remain vital challenges for Southeast Asia. In a region so vast and diverse, progress on this front requires that different disciplines cooperate and jointly contribute their share to finding solutions. Placing poverty at the center of research, and developing people-centered innovations is to be given highest priority in all efforts. While economic growth has a vitally important role to play in poverty reduction, other factors are significant, too: infrastructure, security in land tenure, education and health services.

The overall and primary prerequisite for poverty reduction within a framework of natural resource protection is, however a firm political will and commitment to a pro-poor strategy. It implies good governance, fair legal processes and participation of the poor in political decision making.

These were central themes that more than 240 participants from 24 countries, leading academics, development experts, political decision-makers and business and NGO representatives discussed in Chiang Mai, Thailand in January this year in a symposium initiated and funded by the Eiselen Foundation Ulm. In plenary and contributed paper sessions, a total of 56 papers were presented and discussed, supported by a poster session with 50 contributions. The presentations led to a stimulating exchange of research results and experiences that should contribute towards achieving food security, reducing poverty and increasing food production with sustainable natural resource management in Southeast Asian countries. A country panel discussion with panellists representing China, Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia and India further enriched the discussion with country-specific experiences.

In his opening presentation on ‘Nutrition Security and Natural Resources Scarcity’, Prof. M. S. Swaminathan (M.S. Swaminathan Foundation, Madras, India) underlined that food security, with its multidimensional complexity and links to sustainable management of scarce

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natural resources, is still a key concern in Southeast Asia. In Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, food energy deficiency affects up to 30% of the population and still today 30 to 40% of children under 5 years are underweight.

A number of keynote presentations such as those of Prof. Webb (TUFTS University, Boston) Dr. Pingali (CIMMYT, Mexico) or Prof. Pongsapich (Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand) emphasized that achieving food security and preserving the natural resource base must be addressed in a holistic way employing a multidimensional approach that integrates natural and environmental sciences, economics, social and political sciences and law.

Technical innovations and therefore research in agriculture are fundamental and a prerequisite for increasing agricultural production as has been underlined by Dr. Wang (IRRI, Los Banos, Philippines) and Prof. Xuan (Cantho University, Vietnam). Agricultural research must focus on small-scale agriculture and include poor farmers in marginal areas. Technical innovations need to be complemented by research and innovations in the fields of economic policies, governance, participatory technology development, institutions and infrastructure (Prof. Kaosa-ard, Chiang Mai University, Thailand).

The symposium showed a wide range of promising innovations relating to crops, post harvest protection, processing, natural resource management, and diversification of farming systems (Prof. Uphoff, Cornell University, New York, Prof. Gypmantasiri, Chiang Mai University, Thailand). However, there remains a great scope for learning from each other across disciplines, ecological zones and national boundaries. More attention clearly needs to be given to platforms for exchanging experiences and new approaches, such as this symposium, but also to institutionalized 'knowledge exchange mechanisms' both in research and in the practical implementation of development policy.

Weak legal security, arbitrariness and distortions regarding access to resources are a reflection of institutional weaknesses in most parts of Southeast Asia (Prof. Onchan, MERI, Bangkok, Thailand). Participation, the installation of a fair and enforceable legal framework that is manifested in real legal enforcement as opposed to legal rhetoric, and the implementation of democratic constitutional processes should be considered high priorities on the research and policy agenda relating to poverty reduction and sustainable natural resource management.

The management of natural resources and the improvement of living conditions in rural areas in Southeast Asia are inextricably linked to market liberalization and globalization and changes in the scope of international trade (Dr. Dillon Centre for Agricultural Policy Studies, Jakarta, Indonesia; Prof. Siamwalla, TDRI, Bangkok, Thailand). The region is increasingly integrated into international trade. The opportunities and risks related to the liberalization of international trade are highly country and sector specific. Interactions between the international economic framework, trade relations and the potential for development in rural areas should be given high priority in research programmes on poverty reduction and sustainable natural resource management.

A research agenda with a clear focus on people and their problems, with due consideration to gender dimensions, is absolutely essential, as was underlined by Prof. Von Braun (ZEF, Bonn, Germany) in the closing session. Social security questions and public health issues should be addressed in a holistic approach within the context of research on poverty reduction and should be clearly linked to sustainable natural resource management.

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