

CONCEPT NOTE

RURAL REVITALIZATION, YOUTH, AND SOCIAL AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP PLATFORM

1. Context

Asia history and profile. Early agrarian communities in the region relied on an economy of surplus crop cultivation and coastal trading of domestic products. Farming and fishing practices were artisanal, small-scale, family-based, and aimed at household and community level food security. Agriculture, cultural practices, as well as faith and spiritual beliefs were intertwined in the individual's and community's daily life. Thus, planting technologies considered sufficient food production and nourishment of natural resources such as soil, water, and wild living organisms. An example is rice terracing which was developed by different peoples in different parts of Asia such as in China, Philippines, and Thailand.

Rice is the dominant staple food and is produced by hundreds of millions of smallholder men and women farmers and landless farmworkers who depend on rice production for food, income, and employment. Rice is also deeply integrated in the socio-cultural and spiritual dimensions of rural life. Other food sources include a diversity of other food crops such as root crops, herbs, vegetables, fruits, fish, poultry and livestock, as well as wild fruits and animals found in forests and jungles.

Over the centuries, commercial agriculture and export activities grew rapidly. Demographic changes also resulted from migration required by a heightened demand for labor.

Asia is home to over 4.5 billion people, or about 60 percent of the world's total population. With 49 nations, the region is the largest continental economy and the most rapidly growing economy. (This is expected to increase to over 5.1 billion by 2050.)

Changes and challenges. In the rural areas of Asian countries, agriculture is the main economic activity that ensures food security. Over the decades, the share of agriculture to gross domestic product (GDP) in all countries has decreased due to economic transformation, even while a majority of the region's populations continue to rely on agriculture for survival and economic growth.

"Agriculture has undergone its own structural transformation with increasing shares of high-value crops in response to changing diets and export opportunities. Its capital intensity has increased at a rapid pace and so has the intensity with which it uses

agrochemicals and water resources. Rural households are unquestionably deriving less than half of their income from farming and for the poorest households that percentage is even less; in fact, 2 non-farm employment has grown across all Asia, a welcome development, particularly in South Asia, in the face of the reduced capacity of industry and services to offer jobs to the growing numbers of young people” (An Outlook on Asia’s Agricultural and Rural Transformation: Prospects and options for making it an inclusive and sustainable one, IFAD, 2019).

In the last four to five decades, the region’s rural and agricultural sector experienced major challenges and transformations:

- Agricultural transformation: modernization, intensification, corporatization
 - Agricultural modernization, while being a key factor in the development of the nations, resulted in the ecological degradation of lands, water, and forests of which SEA has been historically wealthy. Agricultural intensification (Green Revolution) that transitioned small and subsistence farming to large commercial agriculture contributed to increased productivity of land and labor and also caused cultural, economic, and environmental effects.
 - Agribusiness and contract farming increased from the 1990s and the relevance of agricultural labor as a source of income decreased.
 - Farming families have changed as some members engage in seasonal agricultural labor or work more often in off-farm livelihoods that are usually in the town centers or cities. Rural off-farm livelihoods occur near or within cities and urbanizing areas.
 - Urbanization has intensified and affected agricultural food systems and supply chains, bringing rise to new forms of off-farm employment especially in post-harvest, processing and distribution/trading services.

- Environmental degradation
 - Environmental degradation of renewable and non-renewable resources, especially for the poor for whom the degradation of natural resources (e.g., water, soil fertility, wildlife), further their poverty situation and ecological, natural, and health hazards (e.g., animal diseases, pandemics).
 - There has been an intensification and increase in the frequency of climate change or extreme weather events such as heat waves, droughts, floods and tropical cyclones in recent decades. These have aggravated the shortage of water and affected agriculture, tourism and fishing, challenged food security, triggered fires in forests and destruction of coastal zones, and worsened the risks on human health.

- Many parts of the region continue to experience inequitable access to and distribution of land and other natural resources, leading to conflicts, peasant and

women organizing, and different forms of engagement with the public and private sectors.

▪ Migration

- Outmigration of labor from the agricultural sector into non-farm pursuits such as trade, the hospitality industry, manufacturing, and health care, has resulted to labor growth that is higher than land productivity growth. Still, agricultural production remains to be an important source of food and nutrition for the region's populations.
- Intensifying migration flows have altered agrarian communities in Southeast Asia with new forms of livelihood and remittance inflows but also changes in gender identities, stretching of the household and the villages across long overseas distances, lifestyle and consumption changes, and ethnic identity and citizenship issues, among many others.
- Climate-induced migration is a growing phenomenon brought about by storms, flooding, temperature increases, sea-level rise, and other climate change events and impacts that cause temporary or long-term displacement of individuals and families in the region. As the region continues to be extremely vulnerable to environmental risks and high population density, it may encounter large-scale population displacements in the near future.
- In countries and zones where population is still growing, rural populations may also grow in density, resulting in the decrease of average farm holding, and imposing on farmers the decision to engage in off-farm livelihoods.

▪ Rapid and vast changes in technology and globalization

- Increased domestic and global interconnectivity of physically distant rural communities
- "The strategy of accelerating growth in the country sides could worsen rural poverty. Hooking rural areas to the globalization process undermines self-reliance and self-sufficiency and makes local communities more dependent on the global trading system. This also means extending, instead of shortening, the "food miles", thereby increasing the carbon footprint of agriculture." (Serrano, 2010)

▪ In rice-based farming systems, poor rural women engage in multiple roles as unpaid family workers, paid farmworkers, wage or income earners, household budget managers, and main major caretakers of family health and nutrition. Gender roles in Asia vary by region, agro-ecological system, type of farming systems, crops grown, interlinks with livestock and fish production, and opportunities for off-farm occupation for family members. Female participation increases with poverty and in unfavorable rice environments.

▪ Youth leaving the rural areas and the agricultural sector

- With changes in agriculture, most rural youth are engaged in employment outside of agriculture. In addition, over 80 percent of the employed youth work in the informal sector.
 - Asian rural youth confront various development issues: access to quality education; transition between education and employment; access to adequate healthcare hampered by economic, social and, at times, legal barriers; lack of participation in the creation of development policies; migration; access to land and farm technologies; access to financial services and other enterprise support.
- Inadequate governance support for farmers' development and sustainable and regenerative agriculture
- There are insufficient development and investment policies for rural revitalization through social entrepreneurship and youth development. Whatever related policies are in place hamper a more robust countryside development where smallholder farmers, municipal fishers, peasant women, and underprivileged youth can be more active stakeholders
 - In recent times, there has been a blurring of rural-urban divide brought about by new information and communication technologies, social and mass media, and improved infrastructure in the countryside, also bring about changes in the lifestyle, traits, and customs of rural residents. Rural and urban transformations expressed in agrarian transition and urban sprawl occur as simultaneous, interrelated, and multidimensional processes.
 - Rural development should not be business-as-usual but should shift to sustainable rural development which looks at development in an integrated way, balancing the economic, social, political, cultural and ecological dimensions.

“The general trajectories of change in the region are exemplified by the increasing market integration of rural production into the national and global economy, the diversification of rural livelihoods, changing mobility and migration patterns and ongoing processes of industrialization and urbanization. Rural populations' responses to these profound changes in the worlds that they live in vary greatly – ranging from hidden forms of everyday resistance to organised protest movements.” (Agrarian Angst, Caouette and Turner, 2011)

“A closer look at the production pipeline should reveal to us that those who grow our food usually suffer a double whammy. At the head, there's the high cost of land, water, seeds, farm machineries, interests on credit, etc. At the tail end, there's the pricing down at the farm gate, the high costs of storage or bringing the produce to the market.

“The 'cheapness' of rural is neither friendly to the producer or to the environment. It breeds further intensification of production per unit of land with no assurance of

increased income. Likewise, poor municipal fishers are forced to over fish already depleted fishing zones. Meanwhile, rich and urban consumers, the non-agricultural sectors, enjoy relatively cheap prices that discount both rural labor and the land, water, forest resources.

“The strategy of accelerating growth in the countryside could worsen rural poverty. Hooking rural areas to the globalization process undermines self-reliance and self-sufficiency and makes local communities more dependent on the global trading system. This also means extending, instead of shortening, the “food miles”, thereby increasing the carbon footprint of agriculture.” (Serrano, 2010)

With the increasing challenges for rural and agrarian communities, citizens’ actions are needed to ensure that rural populations and the youth will be able to decide and act on a more just, sustainable and resilient rural future.

The Covid19 pandemic. In the Covid19 time, the lives, livelihoods and food systems of Asian peoples continue to be threatened, involving small holder cultivators, fishers, farmworkers, food processors, retailers, and consumers. Even as panic buying has gradually eased and with the experience of quarantines and lockdowns, there is a heightened recognition of the critical importance of sustaining food and agricultural supply chains, livelihoods, and cash availability. 5

When the whole world felt the serious effects of the Covid19 pandemic early this year, short- and long-term responses were initiated by both public and private sectors at the local, national, regional and international arenas. In these efforts, the most vulnerable communities and sectors were prioritized; immediate relief was delivered to a certain extent. Quarantine and other health protection policies constrained mobility and travel, economic activity and exchange, social interaction and family gatherings, schooling and educational activities. There were also abrupt changes in civil society action and political campaigns.

Half a year later, the effects of the pandemic and policies to address it further highlighted the unbalanced economic, social, and cultural relationships between and among rural and urban communities in each region, in each country. Several human survival activities that were threatened by the crisis demonstrated the crucial links between communities. These included economic value chains in food production to distribution and consumption; ensuring food safety; trading and exchange of goods (e.g., food staples, essential commodities, medicines, water) and services; transportation by land, water and air; and others. This situation presents a vast range of opportunities for local communities and organizations to engage in social enterprises that will earn for them and at the same time respond to social, cultural, and environmental challenges through more participatory and fairer pathways.

In the face of all these, and even before the pandemic, emerging strands of youth activism are sprouting all over. One brand espouses a journey back to agriculture that conserves and nurtures ecological wealth – a journey that values the traditional

and cultural wisdom that does not take away natural wealth but instead knows how to bring nature back to nature in richer form.

Another strand is also like a journey back to small local, grassroots-initiated businesses, but also a journey forward to social entrepreneurship that places equal values on people, planet, profit, prosperity, and peace.

2. The RR Platform

This platform on Rural Revitalization, Youth and Social Entrepreneurship initiated by the ISEA aims to make an influence in bringing rural reconstruction practice and policy in the Asian region into a sustainable and resilient path. In particular, the platform also intends to fulfill the following objectives:

- Serve as a platform for learning exchange on RR, youth and SE
- Project collective impact on recovery of SEs and marginalized sectors served
- Develop and advocate changes in government policy and programs for SE recovery and as partners for building back better
- Generate support from private donors, financial institutions, national and intergovernmental bodies to broaden impact and practice of social entrepreneurship and cross sectoral collaboration

The initiating groups of the platform also intend to:

- Make an influence in bringing rural reconstruction practice and policy in the Asian region into a sustainable and resilient path
- Recognize and learn from stories of rural reconstruction/ revitalization, youth engagement, and social entrepreneurship in the region
- Support the youth to engage and be involved in social entrepreneurship towards rural revitalization

In the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), the RR, SE, and youth platform seeks to contribute to the acceleration of most of the goals and in particular, the goals on poverty eradication; zero hunger; good health and well-being; sustainable cities and communities; climate action; life below water; and life on land.

Last 8 September 2020, a recent Round Table Discussion – the first such discussion by an initial group of seven (7) organizations¹ from the region – raised several opportunities that can be optimized to push forward the case for rural revitalization, youth and social entrepreneurship:

- advocacy for more responsive governance that will pursue enabling policies and commit investments for youth development and involvement in social entrepreneurship that will promote rural revitalization
- improving food security and developing food systems specifically to promote healthy diets and address malnutrition by encouraging youth into social entrepreneurship

- exploring technological innovations as an area of work and for learning exchange, including how to inspire the youth to become innovators for food security, e.g., food storage technologies
- nurturing youth innovation and activism to fortify the next generation of social entrepreneurs
- designing combined digital and physical platforms for social entrepreneurs and youths
- preparing for the impact of climate change on food production at the smallholder level and at farming community level
- highlighting the relevant aspects of traditional indigenous knowledge systems and practices
- improving social and economic safety nets and measures for small producers

For the next six (6) to 12 months, the proposed strategies and actions of the platform include:

- learning exchange and studies on RR practices and systems such as on food production, storage, and distribution, and on ecological design thinking, based on the programs and practice of participating organizations
- social enterprise development at community and institutional levels
- mobilization and capacity building of youth: Recently, the national rural reconstruction and citizens' movements in China, the Philippines, and Thailand have joined to strengthen exchanges in the areas of ecological agriculture development, cultural revitalization, and green sustainable community building. By establishing an exchange platform for youth in these two countries, the program intends to share traditional wisdom and experiences on rural regeneration and to build a foundation for people-to-people collaboration. This now involves online learning exchange among youths, community organizations and support NGOs in China, Philippines, and Thailand, to strengthen the discourse on food security and resiliency in ecological, climate, and health hazards.

A broader framework will be developed collectively with other stakeholder organizations in the platform.

¹ Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement (PRRM) as Co-Convener; Sources for Action (SFA) – Rural Reconstruction Network China as Co-Convener; Change Fusion Institute (Thailand); Rural Reconstruction Nepal (RRN); Dhan Foundation (India); International Institute for Rural Reconstruction (IIRR); and, Institute of Social Entrepreneurship in Asia (ISEA)