

Sustainable (Organic) Agriculture and Alternative Marketing as Alternatives to Globalization

By Rebecca Eisses

The word 'globalisation' is associated with a number of other words and phrases, such as 'World Trade Organization', 'trade liberalisation', and 'open borders'. Basically, globalisation involves dismantling national barriers to and reducing national control over global trade so that goods, services and capital can flow freely.

Put in those terms, it sounds like rather a good thing. Freedom is to everyone's benefit, isn't it? In fact, as the world's poorer countries have come to realise, the world's big power holders are far more interested in having other countries open their markets to developed country goods than opening developed country markets to goods (mostly agricultural produce and textiles) from poorer countries. The rules of the globalisation game are rigged in favour of the haves at the expense of the have-nots. Despite the new trading rules, wealthy countries, especially the European Union (EU) and the United States continue to heavily subsidize their farmers and dump excess agricultural produce on developing country markets. This undercuts domestic prices and makes local producers unable to sell their products. When trade negotiators meet at WTO headquarters in Geneva to discuss these problems, the voices of poorer countries are drowned out by the EU and US squabbling over markets they already dominate. Schedules to cut subsidies and quotas are supposed to make trade less distorted. For a farmer in Minnesota to take a cut from 50% of his/her farm income in subsidies to 35% is something. For a farmer in Zambia to take a cut from 0% to, well, 0% is not the same thing.

There are a number of possible solutions for Third World countries. One is to learn to play the game better. This is an approach that countries in the Cairns Group, which includes Canada, Australia and Thailand, are taking. This is also the objective of the 'technical assistance' that is touted by the WTO and World Bank to help countries overcome 'implementation' problems. Using this strategy, a country would try to make existing rules and procedures work for it by identifying goods and services which it can produce competitively and concentrating allowable support on those commodities- the comparative advantage theory of classical economics.

Another approach, advocated by groups such as Oxfam, is to change the rules of the game to make them fair. This seems like a good approach on the surface, despite the fact that the powerbrokers that control the game are unlikely to go along with it. This approach still serves to legitimise the globalisation game

which, even if it were fair, would still have producers dependant on the global marketplace and distanced from the consumers of their products. The problem is not just that the rules of the game aren't fair but that the game itself is inherently flawed.

A third approach is not to play the game at all. This is an approach advocated by many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the South in both policy and practice. By refusing to participate in the globalisation game, small-scale producers of goods and services can retain control over the supply, delivery and price of their goods and services. This approach can be clearly illustrated using the example of sustainable agriculture and alternative marketing in the context of Thailand.

Thailand is a country rich in natural resources and has a long history of exporting agricultural produce. However, traditionally most farmers were quite self-sufficient, depending on natural processes to build soil fertility and control pests and supplementing their diets and income with wild plants and animals from the forest. While there was certainly some level of trade between farmers and others, rural people were not dependent on outsiders for their livelihoods.

The arrival of the Green Revolution in the 1960s dramatically changed the Thai countryside. The Green Revolution promoted the use of new varieties that were able to use chemical fertilisers more efficiently than traditional varieties to produce high yields. The new varieties were often susceptible to insect and disease pests and so insecticides and fungicides were also introduced to combat pest problems. Herbicides and new machines like hand tractors were also introduced as labour-saving technologies.

By using these new technologies, the idea was that farmers would be able to increase production. Farmers, even small-scale farmers, were encouraged to specialise by producing only one or two commodities on a larger scale. Under this system of specialisation, farmers would become more competitive and efficient. They could sell their single commodity and use the money to buy the food and other goods that they formerly produced themselves within their own community. The agricultural produce could be sold to different parts of the country or, ideally, abroad, in order to earn foreign currency for the country's economy. Villagers who had only ever operated on the periphery of trading markets were to be completely integrated into them.

Along with these new technologies, two new government departments were created with the help of the World Bank. One was the Department of Agricultural Extension (DOAE), which was responsible for promoting the new technologies and has staff placed in every subdistrict in the country. The second

was the Bank of Agriculture and Agricultural Co-operatives (BAAC), which was responsible for extending agricultural credit to large and small-scale farmers to allow them to purchase the new external inputs and machinery.

If the goal of the Green Revolution was to increase agricultural production and stimulate economic growth, then it certainly met with some success in Thailand. If the goal of the Green Revolution was to decrease rural poverty, then its success has been far less evident. Rather, Green Revolution technologies served to introduce a number of new problems and to aggravate existing ones. Let's take a closer look at some of the results of the Green Revolution for small-scale farmers.

Farmers all over Thailand have become crippled by debt. It is impossible to overemphasise the scale of this problem. Rural debt was largely created by the BAAC as the Bank lent money to farmers to purchase chemical inputs. A number of BAAC policies and practices have led to farmers becoming trapped in a debt cycle, for example the practice of calling loans due at harvest, forcing all indebted farmers to sell their crop at the same time thereby lowering the market price.

The problem of rural debt has also been aggravated by the DOAE. Many extension projects planned at Department headquarters in Bangkok are then required to be implemented all over the country, with regional or provincial quotas for the number of farmers participating in the schemes. District and subdistrict agricultural officers often therefore use personal influence, rather than a project's merits, to convince farmers to join. These types of projects invariably involve an initial investment by the farmer, for which s/he must go into debt. These types of projects are also generally economically unsuccessful (i.e. the farmer fails to make a profit).

Another problem that has resulted is environmental degradation. As already mentioned, new varieties susceptible to pest attacks have caused outbreaks of pests that had previously been unidentified as crop pests, so rare was their occurrence (e.g. brown planthopper). Where once soil fertility was naturally regenerated, the use of chemical fertilisers led to degraded soil. Animal manure that could have been used for compost was no longer available in sufficient quantities since hand tractors had replaced large draft animals (cows and buffalo). Chemical fertiliser and pesticide runoff contaminated streams and rivers, causing problems downstream.

The indiscriminate and unregulated use of pesticides has also led to an increase in health problems, for consumers to some extent but mainly for farmers and their families. Most farmers use pesticides without knowing how to use them properly and safely. As pesticides lose effectiveness due to pest resistance,

farmers resort to pesticide 'cocktails' of unknown toxicity. Safety equipment is not commonly worn and is never adequate. Indeed, adequate safety equipment is impossible to wear in tropical countries, as applicators would suffer from heat stress. Farmers generally get information about pesticides from advertisements and suppliers or from their neighbours rather than from government officials.

Another problem caused by the new, efficient farming is labour migration. In the new economy, farmers are expected to use all their time productively. Labour-saving technology is not meant to make a farmer's life easier so much as to free up his/her time for other productive pursuits. Many rural people, especially the landless who formerly earned a living by working on other peoples' farms, have been displaced by this technology. Even landholders will temporarily migrate to the cities to find work during the slack seasons. This is often necessary to earn cash to service debt. Defaulting on debt can also turn formerly landed farmers into landless. Temporary and permanent slums have sprung up in urban centres around the country. Labour migration has aggravated gender inequality, has caused the breakdown of communities and has contributed to the spread of HIV/AIDS and drug addiction to rural areas.

So this is what has happened to small-scale farmers as a result of playing the globalisation game under the current rules. Even if the rules of the game were fair, the rural poor in Thailand would hardly benefit. Their problems stem not just from poor prices for their produce but from reliance on external inputs and resulting debt, from a lack of household food security and from labour migration to cities.

There are a number of civil society organizations in Thailand that are addressing these issues with positive results. One of the strategies is sustainable, organic agriculture coupled with alternative marketing. Organic agriculture promotes the recycling of resources on-farm from within the community. This increases self-reliance and decreases reliance on external inputs. Because community resources tend to be inexpensive, the need for credit is reduced. Community savings groups and credit unions rather than the BAAC can provide credit where it is still needed. Organic agriculture is also generally extended to farmer groups rather than individuals in order to rebuild community strength.

Alternative marketing emphasizes a personal relationship between producers and consumers. It emphasizes farmers' organizations and consumers' organizations mutually supporting each other. Under alternative marketing systems, farmers own the market and set their own prices for their products, usually coordinating with consumers to set fair prices. In addition, alternative marketing emphasizes the use of natural, biodegradable and recyclable packaging.

The results of this approach in Thailand have so far shown the following: improved net income and reduced debt, stronger communities, overall reduced labour (while sustainable agriculture generally involves an increase in required labour compared to conventional production, overall labour goes down as farmers can live solely off the proceeds of their farms), and increased gender equality. It is also expected that there are benefits to the environment and the health of producers and consumers although there is no concrete data to support these claims.

It is clear from the Thai model that globalisation is not necessary and that it is not a solution to the problem of rural poverty but rather aggravates the problem.

This leaves civil society with 2 tasks:

- One is to make the alternatives to globalization feasible. This involves devising alternatives (especially in contexts that are poorer in resources than Thailand), then making them widely known, and then removing any practical, regulatory or other barriers to their adoption.
- The other is to contain globalization. This involves (a) keeping a watch on what is going on in the major institutions promoting globalization, such as the WTO, (b) analyzing the effects of this on marginalized people such as small-scale farmers, fishers, the urban poor, etc., and (c) making this information known to them so that they can choose the best alternative.

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