

Approaching food as a strategy towards global survival in a better world

by Sarath Fernando

Sarath Fernando, the present moderator (director) of MONLAR - Movement for National Land and Agricultural Reform in Sri Lanka is one of the founders of the movement which has now reached 18 years. The thoughts that he has tried to elaborate in this article spring from his position and experiences in this movement and have furthermore come from his personal background including his involvement in various other social movements in Sri Lanka for about 40 years. All these experiences have considerably influenced his thinking and, the formation and efforts of MONLAR.

ABSTRACT

This contribution discusses the sources of thinking that have led to the formation of the Movement for National Land and Agricultural Reform in Sri Lanka. It includes furthermore a particular view on the current state of affairs as well as a way out of this form of globalisation.

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Problem : Survival at risk

The whole of humanity and the whole of nature are in a serious crisis. About half of the human population is facing an imminent threat to their very existence. The survival of nature and its ability to provide for life through a process of constant regeneration is harmed due to a historical distortion in the understanding of "progress". The direction in which human society should look for better overall survival needs to be changed.

Overcoming this problem : Regeneration of nature and of its potential to provide for survival of all

Human society has the potential to overcome this situation. This is possible only with the recognition that the excluded people, whose survival is most endangered, are the most capable of acquiring the wisdom of the way forward for the survival of all. This way is about restoring the lost capacity of regeneration by nature. The most logical approach to that recognition is to accept that life, and all that relates to life, is "impermanent". Hence, Individual greed and accumulation make no sense and can only bring about suffering. The worlds' resources and natures' generosity should be shared among all forms of life, avoiding plunder

and unnecessary personal accumulation. A new direction of progress and transformation of the methods of production and sharing should be designed and aimed at survival, conservation and regeneration to meet the “needs” instead of the “wants”. For this to succeed, the task of redesigning should be taken over by (or given over to) those who are currently threatened in their access and control over the essentials of life. Those “excluded” can create a new world that includes them, if equipped with a new vision and confidence of their ability to create such a world.

The sources of thinking

The various sources of our thinking are well founded in the history and culture of our people. The Buddhist understanding of life, adhered to by the majority in Sri Lanka, has had a strong influence on the attitude of people to life and other realities. However, other major religions such as Hinduism, Islam and Christianity have also had strong base in Sri Lankan society. Marxism has also had a very strong influence. It has enabled the current social movements to understand, analyze and strategize transformations of the modern world. In Sri Lanka this influence has been quite strong during the period from the 1930's to the 1970's and more specifically on the youth movement. In the early period it mainly had a very strong influence on various intellectuals and scholars. The nascent rise of the workers movement and the progressive political movements in the country took place largely because of this influence. In addition to that, there have been lively debates about the relationship between Buddhism and Marxism.

Although society today has moved far away from these guiding philosophies in actual practice and as it is so structured that some of these very valued ways of thinking are no longer providing directions to the ways of life today, still they are very much embedded and rooted deeply in the thinking patterns of the people. Adjustments into the processes and ways of thinking intensified by economic globalization have penetrated into the thinking patterns in Sri Lanka and have in a way wiped out these other ideas from the upper classes of society, particularly from the youth who were not part of that history.

I have had the fortune of being strongly influenced by these religious, philosophical and Marxist patterns of thinking adhered to by my family. The formation of my personal ideology and my involvement in society has benefited tremendously from the exposure to such ideas from very young age. It permitted me to combine these philosophies that are sometimes seen as contradictory to one another.

A Christian background gives value to living in community, as “Children of God, the God of salvation and liberation”, as against an individualistic attitude towards self-improvement. Salvation is for the whole of humanity and of nature, but each individual is responsible for the salvation of all.

The need to survive is common to all living beings but this need can become selfish, individualistic and exploitative, or selfless, collective and conservationist (regenerative). Marxism analyses and explains the factors that led to a division of human society into classes with contradictory interests. What determines the particular nature of human behaviour and relations, at a specific time in history, is the way people are engaged in finding their means of survival, their mode of production. People either become owners, either workers under the domination of those who own and control the means of production. In this type of human relationships, one group or class becomes dominant, having the power to control the type of relationship. There is a constant struggle that labour has to launch in order to have a better, a fairer share of the surplus value created by labour. Thus, we have contradictory and conflicting interests, which can only be overcome by changing the relationships of production to a form that does not create such a contradiction because in such a society human beings do not live “in community”. Hence, there is no collective or community approach to finding means of survival. This world excludes increasing proportions of the human population from possibilities of survival by taking away their access to nature's resources and by its destructive and unsustainable use of such resources for meaningless accumulation of wealth.

The struggle for access to resources for survival must be combined with a process of the restoration of regenerative forces of nature that ensure the survival of all.

So, the desire to create a “life of community, sharing and love” can only be achieved through a process of struggle to change the ownership and control of means of production. What is produced socially should be shared justly by the whole of society. This can only be achieved by creating a situation where ownership and control over means of production are social and not individual.

Specific conditions that prevailed between the 1950's and 1970's

As young people who began to be exposed to the realities of the society, which I will describe here, we became very interested in finding a meaningful role in life and society. This

role was based on ideals that we gathered from our elders, great teachers and from our cultural value systems. Overcoming self-interest and lack of wisdom in being attached to things in life that are “impermanent” were combined with the ideals of being committed to the well-being of others. This was seen as a commitment to the plan of “God”, a God of love and liberation (in this world, not in life after death). The preaching of the Buddha about overcoming selfish attachment and the teachings of Marx who had explained how society can be transformed, could very well be combined.

All these ideas were very alive in the society that we were exposed to. In the university there were very lively and intense discussions among young people who wanted to take forward the process initiated by the left movement. The leaders of the “Old Left” had joined governments that were not moving in the direction of building a just society and they were seen as compromising the ideals.

The revolutions during the 1960's in countries like China, Cuba and Vietnam, including the stories of sacrifice and commitment, were heard of regularly and inspired many young people who were engaged in designing their own social revolution. In Sri Lankan society, there were also the stories of sacrifice that the Buddha had made in his previous lives when he was cultivating qualities that resulted in attaining “enlightenment”. These stories, as well as the other teachings mentioned above, are recited and taught by the monks to people already in their very young age. Furthermore, these recitals are also regular features of funerals and other religious festivals. Jesus Christ, sacrificing his life on the cross for the salvation of humankind, and the sacrifices that were made by the early Christians were neither unheard of.

The youth movement that emerged in the late 1960s provided a valuable practical opportunity for real involvement in such a committed life. During this period, thousands of young people had come through education which they saw as the only avenue for their social improvement. Free Education was widespread even in the rural areas of Sri Lanka and was given in the local languages, up to the higher grades since the late 1950s. This enabled also large numbers of young people from very poor backgrounds to enter universities. However, when young people started looking for employment opportunities outside rural agriculture, they began to experience that they had very limited opportunities. Such restrictions and frustrations created by lack of opportunity made the youth realize that there was something very wrong in the way society was organized and led. This situation, worsening during the 1960's led to a rapid growth of this youth movement. The only way they saw of

solving this was to take control over the state power and bring about changes that agreed with their ideals of social justice, economic improvement and dealing with the causes that contributed to such poverty, unemployment and other social problems. Young people with some education were so attracted by these ideals that large numbers of undergraduates from major universities gave up their university carrier and joined the movement as volunteers to organize more youth in the villages and cities. It was a real fulfillment of their aspirations to be committed to the cause. Being young, immature, and optimistic they believed that the goals were achievable, even if they did not survive to see the day. There was loss of confidence and frustration with the rest of society that gave them these ideals, but which was not sincerely committed to achieving these ideals. The task of changing society, therefore was something that the youth had to undertake on their own even with no support of the elders, teachers and preachers. This led to an attitude among the youth to isolate themselves, which was a great disadvantage, but they were happy and proud that they were taking up this massive task.

The defeat followed by a period of maturity

Five years in prison provided a very valuable period for maturation through discussion, reflection and learning, in the company of large groups of fellow prisoner “comrades”. The ideals were still valid, the failures were opportunities for better thinking and planning, and the commitment remained with many. However, moving out of the youth movement provided greater opportunity for freer thinking, since there was not enough space for new thought and democratic discussion. Many mistakes had to be corrected and weaknesses overcome.

One aspect of the maturity that was achieved was the understanding that social transformation was a much deeper and a much more complex process than a simple takeover of state power by a committed political party. So, one had to think of ways in which one could become involved in the process of social transformation on a longer term basis with a much wider perspective. Therefore, what followed was a period of looking for opportunities of wider involvement in the wider process of transformation of the whole society. Adjusting into the existing society and way of life was not acceptable.

The requirement to work on a longer term basis necessitated finding more stability in engagement and there was at that time no stable organization to link up with. The opportunity that arose later to work with non governmental organizations (NGO's) was a useful compromise. An NGO

provides greater space design ones own program and process, especially if it is the right type of organization that allows for creative thinking. Later on, it would become possible to develop an NGO that corresponded more closely to our matured ideals and strategies, after further engagement in various other organizations working with different oppressed groups.

Working with the farmers movement

Rural farmers, about 70% of the whole population, have been going through a crisis of increasing poverty and a lack of livelihood opportunities since the 1960's. The small scale rural farmers in Sri Lanka make up the largest population of the poor people in the country by now. The youth uprising discussed above mainly emerged out of the crisis that was emerging in rural agriculture.

The economic policy and the political changes introduced in 1977 were only making this crisis worse since the policies sustaining rural small scale agriculture by Government support were withdrawn. Shortly after the political change in 1977, the government introduced new policies of inviting foreign investment into the country, as a way of accelerating economic growth through increased exports. Land was given to foreign investors. Instead of the earlier policy thrust of protecting social welfare and of keeping economic and social disparities low, the ideology of the Governments, guided by international forces such as WB and globalization, shifted to a policy of strengthening the big private sector, the rich. The workers unions and farmers movements started resisting this policy and fought against the rapid increases of the cost of living. Involvement in building and strengthening the movement of small and marginal farmers to protect themselves and their land has been important.

This was combined with the understanding that organized struggle of the farmers was vital to bring about social transformation. Simultaneously there were various moves by the Government to introduce a tax on irrigation. In addition to that, the prices of agricultural inputs were increasing and the cost of living began to further increase as a result of devaluation of our currency. The reduction of social welfare policies such as of free education and free health services added to the burden of the poor. Working with the All Lanka Peasants Congress, which was a very old farmers' movement and which had to be revived, was a useful experience of practical involvement with one of the most oppressed sections of society.

Wider exposure to global trends

Working with NGOs, initially with SEDEC – Social and Economic Development Centre, the social action arm of the Catholic Church, provided other opportunities of linking with international movements and wider learning of the global situations. There were emerging trends of liberation theology in Latin American countries which had an impact on the involvement of catholic agencies in the Western countries too, to which SEDEC was related. Prof. François Houtart, a well recognized intellectual and researcher who is closely related to the Movements of Global Resistance was then assisting SEDEC in setting a direction for social action in Sri Lanka. He has had a strong influence on my personal understanding and provided linkages with such movements. He was one of the pioneer thinkers behind the World Social Forum Process and continues to play a very important role in the understanding of and linking up with the global struggle against neo liberal capitalist expansion.

In 1978 Sri Lanka set up the first Free Trade Zone. A study undertaken by SEDEC to look at the human and social implications of the Export Oriented Industrialization (Development) Strategy and the Free Trade Zones provided the opportunity of studying in depth the global trends of market expansion and its implications on the economy and society in Sri Lanka. This study and my background helped in understanding clearly how the new trend of global market expansion was further marginalizing and excluding the poor and small producers. This awareness and the subsequent experiences with global movements of resistance enabled to recognize the need of the farmers' movements to relate to the global struggles more closely. A search into ways in which Sri Lankan society should face these challenges and how the struggles in Sri Lanka should be associated with the movements of global Resistance began in this period and has continued up to date.

Link between Globalized greed and poverty in the World

Learning about the impact of globalization was a valuable process that strengthened the understanding of the early teachings in Buddhism about the foolishness of suffering caused by greed, which is institutionalized globally. Hence, overcoming greed is not merely a personal virtue to be cultivated, but a necessary change to be achieved in the global economic and political structures.

It was necessary to think of a political movement that would aim at creating a social and economic system that can overcome the "structural greed", and the suffering

following from this. The poor, who are struggling against a world system of a globalized market that excludes them, have to work out an alternative that is not based on the same aspirations of greed and selfish accumulation. This idea has been very similar to the Marxist analysis that the workers or the “proletariat” who will fight for the control over the means of production will design a system of collective ownership. This should lead to a collective contribution to the well-being of all and to a sharing of benefits based on “need” and not on a personal desire of acquiring wealth (greed).

These factors and ideas became the foundation of the subsequent work with the wider peasant movement in Sri Lanka and initiating MONLAR as an organization for carrying forward this work.

Formation of MONLAR

The intensification of the described crisis in the rural agricultural sector that was exacerbated by the policy shift towards promoting more accumulation and larger disparities led to more and more youth looking for outside opportunities which were not there. Ten years of such crisis led to a much more violent armed uprising (1987-1989) of the youth in all parts of the country, except in the North and East and in the plantations where the majority is Tamil. In the North and East, there was the armed struggle for a separate state initiated by Tamil youth, which was related also to a lack of sufficient and equal opportunities for high education and employment. This was seen by them as resulting from ethnic discrimination.

This Southern uprising was suppressed with much bigger violence that resulted in 60,000 involuntary disappearances. Being aware that this social disaster was a result of the serious crisis in the rural economy, we made proposals to the Presidential Task Force for Land Distribution and Utilization and to the Presidential Commission on Youth in the year 1990, analyzing the socio-economic and political background for the youth rebellion. We argued that the root cause was the inability to solve the breakdown in rural agriculture and the inability of the economy to create alternative opportunities. In fact, the changes that were introduced in the overall economy had made things worse. Therefore, we proposed a deeper and a more comprehensive reform in land and agriculture. Strengthening the rural economy and its capacity to meet the essential requirements of the people was needed urgently.

This proposal was based on the understanding that the natural resources we have in the country could and should be used much more wisely. Restoring the ecological conditions

was vital to our understanding and this would add to meeting the primary needs of the people. The analysis and proposals of MONLAR emerged out of a process of learning though involvement with people, sharing in their struggles and hardships. Therefore, they were very enthusiastic about this analysis and agreed very much.

MONLAR was formed as a movement after an extremely intensive process of education and analysis that continued during three years. Thereafter, we started taking our experiences and analysis further to the people in rural villages through educational programs. Generally, they have reacted enthusiastically because our ‘news to the poor’ was seen as a message of liberation. However, the same discussion with some other sectors of society triggered a fairly different response. Some of them feel that our ideas are “unrealistic”. For them, what is needed is an understanding of how to enter the existing global system.

There had been an ongoing debate throughout the whole existence of MONLAR about the way we look at the world trends. Do we accept Globalization and all that comes with it as unchangeable realities, or do we try to make things a little more humane, improve various aspects of trade (“make trade fair”) etc? Do we try to make the present processes a little more sustainable or do we work for a radically different world? Looking at the realities and experiences of large masses of the poor in Sri Lanka and the poor globally we are convinced that there is a need and a possibility of creating “another world” that is radically different.

This has been the thinking of ancient teachers such as the Buddha and Karl Marx, which we feel are still valid. Our experiences and sources of thinking, such as described above, have taken shape in the vision and mission of MONLAR, which was formulated three years ago as follows:

Vision of MONLAR

A society that is friendly towards all forms of life, with qualities of care, protection and peace generally associated with “Motherhood”, free of the present form of unjust, destructive and unsustainable economic globalization.

Mission of MONLAR

Creating awareness among those who are victimized by the present form of oppressive and destructive globalization, directing and assisting them in organized actions and mediating in the identification and implementation of sustainable alternatives, encouraging them in policy advocacy leading to empowerment of such people to face the above challenges.

Why and how food is an effective strategy for survival in a better world

Those who are destined to disappear and to be excluded are the people who can lead the process of transformation of the global system that pushes them into that position. They are compelled to find alternative ways to survive. Their alternative vision of a transformed world can not depend on capital, as those who control it will not agree nor support their vision. Therefore, they have no other choice but finding other independent ways.

The global resistance against capitalist exploitation is growing. The emerging vision of this global resistance is that "A better world is possible". This better world should primarily be a world that would ensure survival for all and therefore I would say: "A better world is necessary." Survival of humankind is getting more and more closely linked with survival of nature. Therefore, how we deal with food becomes important and essential. How we produce food, how we should allow nature to produce food free of cost, as it did at the beginning of history for over 240,000 years (before agriculture began about 12,000 years ago), has to be learnt. This learning has to guide the direction of the modernization of science and technology. In this process, those who are not guided by "greed" and profit accumulation should play a leading role.

They have to be given the task of designing and creating a new science a new technology, guided by the philosophies of "non greed", accepting the reality of impermanence. This take-over of control of history by those rejected or those excluded is what Karl Marx envisaged and predicted. Overcoming such selfish and foolish accumulation will pave the way for rebuilding human community, a community of love and sharing as Jesus Christ preached.

Nature, if revived and its regenerative capacity restored, has the potential to provide the means of survival for those who are threatened in their survival. This process of improving the world has thus to start with food. It is the small and marginal farmers and the hungry people, not able to destructively exploit nature, who can be the creators of this new vision of global restoration and recovery ensuring survival of all.

Main thrust of an alternative agriculture strategy

The main thrust of the strategy would be to develop ways in which the people with no capital could make optimal use of the free gifts of nature. This has to be done in a manner that would not further destroy, but would recover the

lost regenerative capacity of nature. This is where small farmers have the biggest advantage (without depending on dictates of those who control capital). Such a strategy can not go together with the competitive profit extraction and profit accumulation, which would necessarily go together with the "plundering of nature" and "plundering of human potentials" in a destructive and depleting manner. This strategy is linked with the reduction of wasteful and excessive consumption, creating hunger for the poor to feed the extra appetite of the rich in the market (such as more meat consumption, more urbanization, bio fuels, global warming, conversion of land, water and natural resources away from production of human food at affordable cost and the distorted direction of technology development etc.).

Such a strategy, which is necessary and only possible for the poor and small producers and poor consumers, in the immediate situation, would ultimately provide direction to a major transformation of agriculture and the use of natural resources for the future of the world as a whole. Thus eradication of hunger and poverty can combine with an effective strategy of fighting issues such as global warming / climate change and unsustainable consumption.

My personal practice as a model: the home garden

I have personally started this change for a better world in my home garden, which could serve as a concrete example of how the poor can take social change in their own hands.

Me and my family have a very small home garden, just 1/8th of an acre. That is a very small plot of land. Not being a real farmer myself, I still knew that tree planting is useful. So, we have planted all kinds of trees that are useful, trees that give us food, fruit and vegetables. Some of the trees give us fertilizer and there is one that gives us a lot of shade. The timber is useful, it is a good quality timber, but we did not plant it for timber. We just planted it for shade and beauty. Apart from that, we were also aware that food could be produced in trees, trees that grow to big, middle and lower heights in my garden, thereby absorbing as much sunlight energy as possible. Additionally, there are certain types of food that grow on the surface, such as creepers. There are also other types that grow on marshland and it is even possible to grow things underground, such as yams. So, nature provides a random combination of a wide variety of foods, free of charge and capital.

More specifically, we have two mango trees, one orange tree, two gwawa trees and a lime tree that yields very heavily. Sometimes we pluck about 50-60 fruits at a time. Then,

there is also a jack tree, which grows to large heights and it provides jack fruit. We eat this regularly and it even replaces rice when there is a shortage. In addition to that, there are a number of other, sometimes leafy vegetables. At the outlet from the kitchen, we have grown particular things on that kind of wetland. So, all together we have about 20 different varieties of fruits and vegetables on this very small plot of land.

We did not need to use any external fertilizer, because the soil is kept fertile through recycling. The leaves of the creepers on the fence and all the leaves that fall from the trees are used as natural fertilizers. Sometimes, we bring also creepers and leaves from the neighbouring plots and turn it into compost fertilizer by adding cow dung. The soil is very fertile and we do not need to use any agrochemicals because the natural diversity on our plot keeps away diseases. We also allow insects, birds, earthworms, micro-organisms and all kinds of animals on the ground. We promote this diversity as it keeps the soil fertile and soft. The earthworms particularly are of vital importance in this process.

Because of the variety of trees and plants, we get a constant yield during all seasons of the year. They do not even die in the drought season, because there is a little bit of water that comes out of the kitchen and also the soil, because of its very rich humus layer, can retain water. So, the losses caused by drought are little. We try as much as possible to keep the soil covered, always, by putting leaves and decaying material on top of it. We do not expose the soil to the sun and the rain, so that the erosion or the washing off of the top-soil is reduced or prevented. It is this process that allows nature to regenerate itself and provide us with food and fertilizer free of cost.

Generally we do not want and we can not sell these fruits and vegetables from our garden, but we can save quite an amount of money by using these as our own food. In order to get some understanding of the money value of this I will give an example. A papaya fruit in town will cost about 40 rupees. If one has three to four trees in the home garden and if one gets one fruit a day as yield, the value comes to 1200 rupees a month on papaya alone. This is significant, especially when compared to the monthly wage of tea plantation workers who earn around 4000 or 5000 rupees a month, assuming they work 20 days. When adding the other fruits and vegetables, the financial outcome would be easily more than 2000 rupees a month, although this would soon increase significantly as the food prices are rising very high and very quick: during the last year by 80%.

Let us compare this to the way paddy farming is done today. A person cultivating an acre of paddy is spending about 25000 rupees (200 euros) for input costs, including agrochemicals, seeds, labor and sometimes irrigation. Nowadays, the income is very often, much less than the expenditure, even when rice

prices have almost doubled to 80 rupees/Kg for the consumers. Many paddy farmers in Sri Lanka are having this serious problem of spending so much and not even getting an income out of it. But here is the possibility of turning the situation around and to cultivate at almost no cost when allowing nature to regenerate. So, that is what I am doing on 1/8th of an acre.

Furthermore, this small plot allows me to have even an excess of fruits and vegetables that we share with others. In the community that I live in, there are about 100 families who have equal plots of land. If all of them would start their home garden, we would certainly have an excess of fruits and vegetables in our community as a whole, much more than we could eat and this brings us to the issue of marketing.

In cases of excess, the community could give this to a seller on the road side and get an income from the limes, papayas, vegetables etc. While getting a fair share of the food needs at no cost, there is thus even the possibility of getting a small surplus. To do this, one does have to invest almost nothing, especially in terms of money. In order to maintain the home garden, no hired labor is required. One only has to cut the plants once in a while and pluck the fruit. There is no soil preparation and one does not have to keep the soil clean. We allow the grass to grow, because that helps also in the growth of insects that will have their homes there. So therefore, the home garden requires very little labor and practically no financial investment.

When having the knowledge that 70% of our people live in rural areas and are generally being poor, this home garden practice could tremendously alleviate part of their burdens. Now, they have difficulties in investing in agriculture or whatever, but they have their little plots of land, either land that they own or land that they can use, if they do not have the ownership. Many of them have these plots of lands, and these are often bigger than the plot that I have.

One can only imagine the change that can be brought about when everybody starts making a home garden. This diversified farming, with recycling of organic matter and conservation, can be applied in any part of the country and under any climatological and ecological condition. Through this process we can restore the regenerative capacity of our soil, further enhancing food production, and alleviate hunger, without the help and dictates of the large global institutions and their capital.

Another world is necessary now! This change starts in the home garden by restoring the regenerative capacity of the soil, making use of the energy of the sun on all levels. It is all given by nature for free and hence, should be accessible to the excluded who will change the world for the benefit for all.