

SILENT LAND, THE FIGHT FOR FAIR FOOD: A FILM REVIEW

Silent Land: *The Fight for Fair Food*, is a documentary film set in Cambodia directed by Jan van den Berg. His films often concern human rights, diverse cultures and the struggles faced with regard to society and the environment. In this film he attempts to illustrate the much needed discussion on how we will be able to feed the world with the ever growing human population. For four years he followed the life of a local woman Moon, and her efforts to secure and set up successful small-scale organic farming. In the same time he also followed how 'His Excellency' Mong Reththy, a wealthy businessman in the area, envisions his way of achieving efficient large scale agricultural production.

The plot

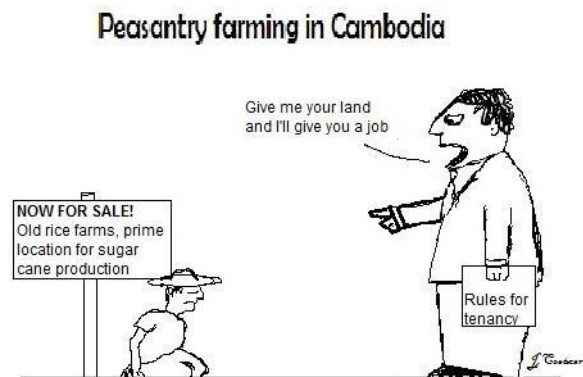
The film is focused around Moon, an independent female farmer. She had to overcome many hardships to be able own and farm rice on the land she has, but she also noticed that there are many issues in her country that threaten small-scale farmers like her. She sees that there is a small group of elites who have the power in her region, and that these elites are making huge profits through the unlawful sale of land which ultimately displace local people from their land. In the start of the film Moon said that where they live "life is all about rice", but due to the illegal sale of land more than 42 families have been displaced by sugar cane companies. In an attempt to ensure that she remains an independent small-scale farmer, who grows her own organic rice, Moon tries to cooperate with some of the other farmers against these companies.

Within the film the main adversary of Moon is Mong Reththy, who is one of the wealthiest men in the country. As a result of events in the past of Cambodia, the entirety of property rights fell to the state, when these property rights started to become recognized again it became easy for opportunistic business men like Mr. Reththy to gain rights over great expanses of land. He has the dream to build an eco-city based on various sustainable principles, however currently most of his investments are in modernized large scale agriculture. He is currently involved with large scale land acquisition ventures, where he is able to employ many people who live on his land; he does however enforce strict rules for the residents of his land.

Moon soon meets with Mr. Reththy to seek his council on the difficulty her village has to export their rice. He suggested that they do not worry about exporting and that he would purchase the rice and then use it to feed his livestock. This shocked Moon, she realizes that other solutions between the legal system and large corporates ought to be found for her village. She now follows classes and gathers legal advice in hope to improve the cooperation between small-scale farmers.

The great debate for the future of agriculture

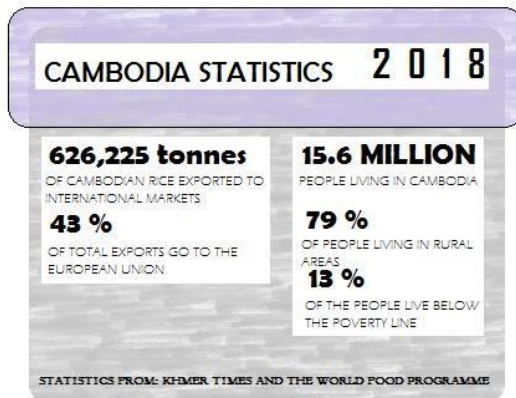
The film touches on a very serious debate that demands the attention of agricultural systems on a global scale. As the global population is still increasing, the level of food consumption is rising higher than ever before. Advances in technology completely altered the way in which we produced food; we were able to produce larger food outputs at faster rates that provided the nutrition needed to boost the population to levels reached today. This mass production agricultural system is still the choice of practice in many countries today, as larger and faster outputs are needed to address the current global food demands.



Yet, the present global food situation is not all that evenhanded. We are faced with many issues such as overconsumption, hunger, food waste, unjust food systems, land ownership, environmental degradation and other related issues. Within the film some of these issues are clearly underlined.

The need to produce more at a faster rate is driven by the need to keep profits up whilst attempting to stay ahead in the competitive market. In order for this to succeed in the agricultural sector it requires more land, advanced technology and a link in the global food market. As a result many local smallholder farmers are unable to compete with the cheap mass produced products and end up improving their systems, relying on the local markets or selling their land.

But is mass production still the way to go? Or does the pressure to keep up with the global market demands somewhat disregard the local food needs? By looking at some of the statistics of the Cambodian rice exports and socio-demographic data we can see that the challenges faced by Moon makes part of a large system, within which she has to function to be a successful rice producer.



The majority of the Cambodian population lives in rural communities where most of them rely on smallholder farmers as their main source of food resources. Nonetheless 13% of the population lives beneath the poverty line and face issues with poor nutrition and hunger. Yet, over half a million tons of rice is exported annually, where the largest market for the rice is the EU. For the local agricultural firms it has become profitable to export rice products, the export of rice also makes up a great contribution of the countries' GDP.

The debate is whether this means of agricultural production is the way food needs to be produced in the future. The mainstream commercial approach has been proven to be environmentally unsustainable in many cases, but when it comes to producing food for the global population this

approach might be the solution, if approached with fair and just trade initiatives.

Or is the solution to the global food demand rested in moving to more organic small scale agriculture, which supports the local communities and is embedded in fair food value chains. Recently many publications suggest that small scale organic agriculture could pave the way to environmentally and socially inclusive food markets, however shifting away from the current agricultural system would be a challenge.

More films like this?

The film shows the struggles that small-scale farmers face with regard to land rights and market access. However the film portrays it in such a way that the viewer can feel a relation towards the main character, Moon. In the film you follow her life for four years; you go along on her journey through many personal struggles and triumphs, from her wedding day to the birth of her first child. It is truly remarkable how the director managed to capture moments on film that left you as the viewer in awe, and completely connected with the story of Moon. With films such as this viewers around the world can be captivated with the spectacular photography and the emotional scenes, allowing them to see into world of other people in very different circumstances. Maybe through films like these the media consumed world will one day be unable to turn a blind eye.

Make your contribution, be part of the change these people need: <http://silentland.org>

SOURCE:

Khmer Times, 2019. <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/568039/rice-exports-down-slightly/> World Food Program, 2019. <https://www1.wfp.org/countries/cambodia>