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**The right to food –
FAO honours model farmers from five countries in Asia-Pacific**



Bangkok, 17 Oct 2006 – Today, Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn presented FAO awards to five Asian farmers for outstanding achievements in the areas of horticulture (Bangladesh), aquaculture (Cambodia), agribusiness (Mongolia), home gardening (Samoa) and community forestry (Thailand).

In spite of significant gains, Asia is still home to the majority of the world's hungry people.

FAO estimates that some 527 million people in our region suffer from non-acute hunger and are still deprived of their right to food – 300 million in South Asia, 163 million in East Asia and 64 million in South East Asia.

Asian villages are still poor and technologically lagging. Rural populations – in particular agricultural households – are the poorest of the poor.

“The rise in inequality, of incomes as well as non-income dimensions such as education and health services, especially in rural areas of Asia, is a major cause for concern”, said He Changchui, FAO's Asia-Pacific chief, during the regional observance of FAO's 62nd anniversary in Bangkok today.

Clearly there is a need to address the policy bias against sectors and individuals in which the poor are engaged in, FAO said.

There is no better solution for securing the right to food for the poor other than empowering them with the capacity to enhance productivity and to eliminate poverty.

Five model farmers – from Bangladesh, Cambodia, Mongolia, Samoa and Thailand– are honoured today by FAO's regional office for Asia and the Pacific for outstanding achievement, and for proving that the right to food can pay off, although even more can be accomplished if the right policies are in place to address the problems faced by small farmers.

The citations read during the award ceremony are given below. Photo's of the ceremony are available on request or from the web site.

A horticulture farmer from Bangladesh
A female aquaculture farmer from Cambodia
An agribusiness farmer from Mongolia
A home gardening farmer from Samoa
A community forestry farmer from Thailand

Md. Abdul Kalam Azad, model horticulture farmer, Bangladesh



In 1990, after nine years of honourable service in the Bangladesh Air Force, Corporal Abdul Kalam Azad suddenly found himself discharged. The reason – a medical examination revealed he was colour blind.

With his education and military service, he might have followed in his father's footsteps and become a government official. Instead, he returned to his town of Adarsha Sadar and chose to become a farmer.

Mr Azad knew virtually nothing about farming. But the urging of a neighbour, coupled with a Rotary Club training course in aquaculture, convinced him that he just might be able to make a living at it.

He started with some fish ponds, and began growing vegetables around their borders. Later he would also grow rice.

Adarsha Sadar in Comila district is not a bad place to be a farmer. Situated on high ground, it rarely suffers the devastating floods that plague most of Bangladesh, taking lives, destroying crops and creating food shortages.

Yet most of the farmers in the sub-district, about 100 kilometres east of the capital Dhaka, were poor. The reason – most were illiterate. They had no knowledge of modern farming methods that could improve their productivity and their lives.

With his education, discipline and work ethic Mr Azad was the natural choice for secretary of the farmer's association. He took the job seriously.

He worked with government officials to learn new farming techniques and technologies, experimenting with new vegetable crops, and also a hybrid strain of rice called "Hira" that doubles the yields.

Then he shared his knowledge with his fellow farmers. "I want to teach and encourage them," he says. "My motto is 'our country free from hunger.' "

With their bounty of vegetables, increased rice yields and growing aquaculture output, the farmers of Adarsha Sadar will play an important role in the government's efforts to eradicate hunger by 2015.

And working as farmer, Mr Azad says, he's earning five times his Air Force salary.

But if the salary was low, the Air Force taught him some valuable lessons: That there is no real success unless it is shared by all. And that there is no shame in any work.

In fact, becoming a farmer has led to one of the proudest moments in Mr Azad's life – being named an FAO Model Farmer.

Upon learning he was selected, Mr Azad said, “for me, this award is as good as winning the Nobel Prize.”

Nget Sareng, model aquaculture farmer, Cambodia

Mrs Nget Sareng of the village of Trapaing Trach in Cambodia is a woman with little formal education and yet she's taught others how to be better farmers.

Farming isn't easy in a place like Trapaing Trach, located in Takeo province not far from the border with Vietnam. Mrs Sareng's small rice field, less than a third of a hectare, only yields enough to feed her family for five months of the year.



And so, Mrs Sareng's husband Khieu Sam would have to go work as a day labourer along the border, hoping to make enough to feed his wife and two daughters and two sons.

While at the border, however, Khieu Sam noticed that some villagers were feeding their families and earning a living through aquaculture. He sent Mrs Sareng 100,000 riel (about \$50 at the time) and told her to buy fingerlings.

Before she could actually do it, a local officer from the Fisheries Administration chose her take part in a pilot project for aquaculture. The fingerlings were now free.

She was chosen because her family was poor, she had just enough land and already had a small pond, she was an extremely hard worker – and she knew how to listen and to learn.

With close instruction and monitoring from government fisheries experts and local authorities in Takeo province, Mrs Sareng started by raising common carp, Silver carp and Tilapia. Around her pond she began growing vegetables and herbs used in traditional Khmer food and medicines. Soon she was selling them at market.

She did so well that she began to expand. Today, she has 26 fish ponds breeding common carp, Indian carp, Silver carp, big head carp, Silver barb, Tilapia, frogs and prawns. And the ponds were all built with her own hands.

Recently, her family has traded in their thatch and wood house for a two-storey home partially built from concrete.

But it's her giving spirit that makes Mrs Sareng truly shine. She's taught her neighbours and later farmers and students from provinces all over the country how to improve their lives through aquaculture and the necessary skills and techniques.

With her earnings from aquaculture, this woman who never saw the inside of a classroom has now sent her oldest daughter, Sok Dany, to university – the first in her family to attend.

She is enrolled at Build Bright University in Takeo where she is studying rural development.

“What I've learned has improved my life and the lives of my family,” Mrs Sareng says. “But when we all learn, we can help improve Cambodia.”

Ochirbat Ganzorig, model agribusiness farmer, Mongolia



Not long ago, Ochirbat Ganzorig and his family were simple herders on the steppes of Mongolia. The past decade, however, has seen great changes, both for Mongolia and the Ganzorig family.

The changes haven't always been easy. During the 1990s, this mainly rural country shifted from a centrally-planned to a market economy. The transformation was jarring. Businesses were disrupted. Jobs were lost.

Food supplies became scarcer, even in the capital Ulaan Baatar.

Once a self-sufficient food producer, today Mongolia imports over 70 percent of its food, and Ganzorig says the quality of that food isn't very good.

During the same time Ganzorig and his family saw their herds of sheep and cows steadily grow. As the people of Ulaan Baatar struggled through hard times, Ganzorig, who has a degree in Agronomy from Mongolia's Agriculture University, saw opportunity in adversity – opportunity to help his countrymen, and opportunity to help his family.

In 2002, with assistance from his father and older brother, he founded Holstein Mongolia. It quickly became the leading agribusiness in the country. Beginning with 900 sheep and 100 cows, today Holstein has 1,300 sheep and 300 cows.

Each day, his cows provide 800-1,200 litres of milk for markets in the city. And each year, Holstein Mongolia provides 20 tonnes of meat for consumers.

But Ganzorig's farm doesn't just produce meat and dairy products. He has also branched out into vegetable farming, working with the government on irrigation systems to turn rough, difficult terrain into fertile fields, despite the country's harsh climate.

Today, the Ganzorigs are growing a variety of organic vegetables for the people of the capital city, and also maize, sunflower, rutenica, barely and oats to produce feed for their livestock and those of other farmers and herders.

"Food is essential for our people. My countrymen have to pay so much for imported food, and the quality of the food is poor. That bothers me, and I think what we are doing can help," Ganzorig says.

The Ganzorigs also help in other ways, hosting study tours for students and other farmers so that they can learn from his company.

While that might create competition for his own business, Ganzorig says he doesn't mind at all. More important is doing good work and seeing that his fellow Mongolians are getting the food they need at prices they can afford. More important than worrying about competition is building a better, healthier future for his countrymen. "I want to play a role in that," Ganzorig says. Undoubtedly, he will.

Ponifasio Ricky Westerlund, model home gardening farmer, Samoa

Ricky Westerlund's father told his son not to become a farmer. The Westerlund family had been farming for generations in the Alaisa district of their Pacific island country Samoa. But Ricky was highly educated and already working as a civil engineer. That's rare in Samoa, where about 90 percent of the people till the land.



Ricky, however, is definitely a man with a mind of his own. He saw opportunity where others only saw hardship. Most farmers in Samoa are subsistence farmers. They cultivate enough to survive, but not much more than that.

Ricky saw a better way. With his engineering background he believed that if farmers mechanized their operations they could become commercial farmers – prospering by selling a bounty of goods to markets.

He knew becoming a farmer would be risky, but, he says, “When I decide to do something, nothing can stop me. I wanted to be a farmer, but in a big way.”

Starting with five acres of leased land, he used his meagre savings to buy an old used tractor from Polynesian Airlines. Mechanizing his farm made him more efficient and earned him more profits. And so he leased more land, and bought more tractors and other equipment.

He was also smart in what he chose to grow: vegetables. Subsistence farming and a high-fat diet have left many Samoans either malnourished, obese or even both. Ricky grew tomatoes, cabbages, all sorts of beans, lettuce, capsicum, bak choy, corn and ginger.

Today, his 45-acre farm is the leading supplier of vegetables in Samoa. He supplies hospitals, hotels and markets. At the same time, the government is promoting vegetable consumption to improve the health of the people.

Other farmers in Samoa now come to learn from Ricky. “I teach them modern farming methods. I teach them to become commercial farmers,” he says. While few have made the transition, he’s confident that in time more will. “If you want to reap, first you must sow,” he says.

That’s important to Ricky. Because this farmer, who is also a preacher, regards it as part of his mission to help his countrymen become free from malnutrition, disease and poverty.

And so while here in Bangkok, he’s been out shopping for seeds to grow heartier strains of vegetables, and researching organic farming methods and even fish farming. There are few limits to what a man can achieve when his spirit is strong.

“God wants us live in abundance,” Ricky says when talking about his vision for the future of Samoa. “When we have abundance we are not at the mercy of others. When we have abundance we are free.”

Pramuan Charoenying, model community forestry farmer, Thailand



Like many Thais, when Mrs Pramuan Charoenying and her family began farming they mainly grew rice. But her home province of Buriram is typical of many areas in northeastern Thailand: Drought is a problem. When the rains came, the family did well. When the earth was cracked and parched, they suffered.

Then one evening about 15 years ago, Mrs Pramuan listened as His Majesty the King

addressed the nation on television. His Majesty, who has dedicated himself to uplifting his subjects, and especially rural people, outlined what he called his “New Theory.” It urged farmers to divide their land and diversify their crops, by planting vegetables, fruits and digging ponds to raise fish and irrigate fields. In this way, farmers could become more sufficient and protect themselves against the uncertainties of climate and other misfortunes.

Mrs Pramuan followed the King’s advice. “He is a great teacher, and a model for everyone,” she says. Today, her family always has food on the table, thanks to the diversity of crops and the fish they raise. And her vegetable gardens, irrigated from the fish pond, never lack for water. Her family cultivates enough rice to sell on the market.

His Majesty the King’s philosophy has been broadened over the years into the “Sufficiency Theory of Economics.” Among its principles are valuing community and using resources wisely.

Those are things Mrs Pramuan knows something about.

Her small village of Khoakok borders a forest called Pha Kok Kruat. The forest is part of the sufficiency structure of the community. It provides villagers with food and its plants and herbs are used as traditional medicines.

But forests have been steadily disappearing in Thailand. A few years back, it looked as though Pha Khao Kok would be lost too. Companies came to clear the land and build poultry farms. Other villagers were cutting trees to claim fields for crops.

Mrs Pramuan knew something had to be done. She organized her community and confronted the company and the villagers. At first she was afraid. Some villagers threatened her. But she and her neighbours persevered.

When the company saw the community was united, it decided to find a new location. And slowly the villagers came to understand that Mrs Pramuan and her neighbours weren’t trying to keep the forest for themselves, but were preserving its bounty for everyone.

Because of her wisdom, courage and determination, she has been elected twice to the Tambon Council, a local government body. She is the only woman officer in the Committee on Natural Resources Management for the Northeast.

Mrs Pramuan says she doesn’t serve for the salary. “We need the forests for our lives, and so I am working for society,” she says. “The forest is for everyone, and it is our duty to protect it. I hope more will join us in our efforts.”