



## International Farmers' Dialogue in South Korea: 21<sup>st</sup> - 28<sup>th</sup> October 2018

Twenty participants from ten countries (in Asia, Africa and Europe) joined the traveling Dialogue organised by Initiatives of Change Korea and by South Korean farmers. The original plan for a four-day conference with three days of farm visits had to be reorganised ironically because of severe drought, a cyclone and heavy rains delaying the harvest with Korean farmers being fully occupied on their farms. The only possible way to meet with them was to visit them on their farms.

The Dialogue took the international visitors to many places, giving them a chance to see the country, to discover its history both ancient and recent including a visit to the border area with North Korea, to enjoy some tourism, but mainly to visit farms, for discussions with farmers in their fields exchanging experiences and talking with groups of farmers in the evenings.



The theme of the Dialogue was: **“The Role of Family Farming for a Sustainable Biotic Community”**. The visit happened as a result of the participation by two Korean farmers in the Farmers' Dialogue held in Cambodia in November 2016. Consequent exchanges between Cambodian and Korean Farmers and some consultation with the FD International Committee (including a meeting in India last January) confirmed the value of this initiative.



The invitation mentioned the hope **“to foster solidarity and facilitate communication among farmers. While Korea has risen from the ashes of war to achieve unprecedented economic growth, we have failed to safeguard our agricultural system. We hope to share our experiences in trying to pave our new path towards protecting Korean agriculture”**. Participants were keen to discover what still seems to be a success story in South Korean agriculture. **So what were these discoveries?**



These included **the establishment of the cooperative movement** – The economic development in South Korea happened through conscious efforts from the Government, and also from other social movements. The result has been a mobilisation of communities addressing the challenges of the needs both nationally and at the local level. For agriculture, it meant an effective development of teamwork among farmers, of cooperatives dealing with conservation, processing, transportation and marketing. Today, these cooperatives have become very important, with a network

of shops in towns and cities. A challenging factor with increasing the size of a cooperative may lead to a decreasing involvement of local farmers.

One secret of the success of Korean Agriculture has come from two other factors: the consumers have also organised themselves in cooperatives and there has been a strong link between them and the farmers' cooperatives. In 1980s the farmers' cooperatives needed to explain to consumers why they needed to buy organic farm products, even though they were more expensive and often misshapen. This partnership seems to be, part of the Korean culture, and it obviously has positive results on the management of farms.

The founder of the main cooperative in Korea, a pioneer, had this motto, which explains the spirit of the members and their commitment to the development of the country: **“we will do it, we can do it, we must do it”**.

**The voice of the farmers** – The spirit of teamwork and commitment among farmers is also a great asset in terms of putting their ideas and requests forward to the authorities. The farmers' voice is heard and respected, even though it was the result of major demonstrations. These were not just opposition, but a search for global and common solutions. The respect gained by farmers and given to them is obviously a key (see text in frame in the last page)

**Farmers happy and successful!** – This was a clear reality seen on many of the farms visited, whether big or small. Obviously, the points above explain this situation. Farmers are hard-working, some hire seasonal workers, mainly foreigners! Many farmers in other countries would be jealous of the profit made by Korean farmers!

**Organic Agriculture** – The organisers wanted the participants to see the importance of organic farming. This is a development that grew with the cooperative movement from the beginning. But it is not only a technical practice. The choice of organic farming is rooted in a desire to produce good food, to respect the land and the soil, and to adopt a system of life better tuned with nature. One farmer even said that it was a spiritual choice!

**Community life, social responsibility, young people, urban or rural life** – The different visits helped the participants to understand some important aspects of Korean life today. There is a strong move of urban people back to the countryside. There are programs, run by private projects or farmers' groups or local communities, to help young people wanting to come back to rural life, even to help them with starting a farm. The cooperative movement has developed at a local level with health care, children and older people, building needs or composting. One afternoon, we had contacts with bigger cooperatives in town dealing with banking services and health care. It is inspiring to see that most of these initiatives are grounded in a concept that life has to be more tuned with nature and with a sense of belonging to a community. It is also interesting to see that the farmers consider this aspect of their life as an essential part of their identity. Culture, faith, and the global approach of human beings are an integral part of nature. The multifunction of agriculture and social dimension of rural life are all part of it.



**What conclusions** did the participants draw from the traveling Dialogue?

- Need of teamwork between farmers
- The challenges farmers need to address in order to improve prices are: to have clear aims in terms of volume of production – to get good quality products (including quality control) – to have access to processing activity – to discuss with the authorities about imports creating surpluses and to prevent any “political” use of the agricultural sector – and development of “brand” names -
- The need for the organisation of transport facilities and partnerships with other stakeholders
- The development of cooperatives (good seeds and inputs, transportation, processing, marketing)
- Organised links to the consumers (open days for visits, farm tourism, presenting farm products...)
- The importance of organic farming
- Stimulation and training of young people – including those coming from urban areas – to settle in farming
- The importance of community life at local level and the part to be played by farmers in it (training, exchanges) and long-term vision for the community
- The importance of the farmers’ conviction to believe in their task, beyond the point of sustaining themselves in terms of food production. This faith is the key to overcoming difficulties and Korean farmers have demonstrated it.
- Exchanges between farmers have a key role in stimulating good practices and development
- “The farmer farms not only to make money: he sows the seeds of love and care towards society”.

### **Concrete decisions taken after the Dialogue:**

- “I have written 10 stories of people I met in Korea. This story book will be published in Tamil first, and then translated into English.” (**Joshua**, Sri Lanka)
- “I will share with my team in Kenya what I learnt in South Korea, especially in terms of capacity building for farmers and mobilisation of women for self-help groups.” (**Dominicah**, Kenya).
- “Commitment to make: to help the rural world around me to get organised and to work as a team in order to solve the different problems that destroy efforts. For this to happen, one needs to reflect first on the vision of the seed as a divine and living body that needs proper care to come to fruition. Farmers must love their work. Without passion and love for one’s activity, there is no way to succeed. Only determination and love can help us to make the world a better place!” (**Pierre**, DR Congo)



● The important part of the Korean farmers in the development of their country over the last 50 years gives them some authority to share their experiences abroad, especially with developing countries: diplomatic lobbying to encourage donors to address global food need, exchange programmes to share with other farmers, lessons from the consumers' movements in Korea. **Tongo** (South Sudan), while expressing these hopes, is working on the design of the International Farmers' Dialogue planned in November 2019 to make sure that the Korean experience will be present, maybe even with a visit of Korean farmers to his country prior to the Dialogue. He also wants to develop a farm that would be a base for training farmers in sustainable practice and rural development.

● **Nun and Borey** (Cambodia) were impressed by what they saw and received great inspiration for the development of the cooperative that they run, with 105 farming family members.

● **Virak and Savuth** (Cambodia) hope to help farmers develop more cooperatives and adopt organic farming.



**Spiritual reflection of Ilmato, Lee Dongyeol, farmer and one of the organizers:**

Respect for farmers can be influenced by faith. Two ingredients are essential for farmers: Faith and commitment! Farmers need to believe in their task and mission in order to get fully respected. This faith leads to a full commitment that is not meant to oppose or to confront others or others' opinions, or to fight for selfish or personal interests, but that will search for the way to overcome the opposition in order to reach a common solution. This process will be stimulated with the respect gained and received.

**Lessons shared by a farmer pioneer in organic farming:**

To overcome challenges and to have perseverance (not to give up on the way)!

**Reflections of the Director of a Catholic farmers' group:**

A seed is a potential and full expression of life. In this sense, we, human beings are exactly like a seed, part of the same nature and part of the bigger purpose of life on earth.

***“Farmers’ Dialogue International” is a legal association under Swiss law based in Geneva. It is an associate member of the International Association of Initiatives of Change, an NGO in Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) of the United Nations and Participatory Status with the Council of Europe.***

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