

Farmers and food safety at risk

Written by Lee Wu-chung 李維仲
Wednesday, 04 August 2010 08:25

The controversy over the expropriation of farmland for a science park in Miaoli County's Dapu Borough (大埔) may have calmed down for the time being, but there are many other cases involving the compulsory takeover of privately owned land for industrial expansion, including the Chengnan (成南), Yilan City base of the Hsinchu Science-Based Industrial Park, the third phase of the Central Taiwan Science Park at Houli (後里) and the fourth phase of the same park at Erlin (二林), all of which come under the authority of the National Science Council. These cases are likely to provoke a string of protests by farmers who want to keep tilling the land, and such demonstrations are part of an emerging new wave of civic consciousness.

Twenty-two years have passed since the landmark farmers' protest of May 20, 1988, and in that time control of the central government has changed hands twice. Still, the nation's agricultural sector has seen no improvement. Farmers are still on the bottom rung of society, and their cries of frustration continue unabated.

Years of misguided agricultural policies have prevented a genuine renewal of Taiwan's agriculture and farmers remain dependent on government subsidies to get by. The government has recently been pushing for greater cross-strait trade liberalization for agricultural products, seeing China as the main export market for Taiwanese farm produce. This seems to be the government's chief agricultural policy thrust.

We should look back and remember the heavy price farmers had to pay for Taiwan to enter the WTO. The NT\$100 billion (US\$3.1 billion) the government set aside to help those whose income was hit by competition from imports has nearly all been spent, but farmers' livelihoods have not improved and the rural economy remains depressed.

As young people continue to move away from farming, only elderly farmers remain to mount a last-ditch defense of their land. Farmers keep making their quiet contribution to the nation's food security and ecological sustainability, but they are not rewarded with the recognition and respect they deserve.

Based on the WTO experience, many people seriously doubt whether the recently approved NT\$150 billion rural regeneration fund will have the desired effect. There are no influential farmers' organizations in Taiwan such as those in Japan, the US and elsewhere that can push for laws and regulations to protect farmers' interests.

It is sad to see how local politicians often think it is acceptable to sacrifice agricultural interests for the benefit of other sectors, on the grounds that agriculture contributes less than 2 percent to the nation's GDP and farm produce accounts for only 20 percent of farming families' overall income.

Politicians think it is enough for the government to provide subsidies to make up for any damage done to agriculture. This train of thought is completely at variance with global trends in agricultural development. If agriculture is seen as just one of many sectors of the national economy, then of course its future should be decided by market forces — just as with other

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kinds of businesses. But it should be recognized that agriculture plays a different role in addition to the market role played by other productive sectors.

Food crises around the world have alerted people to the fact that relying on global commodity markets for vital food supplies is unwise and even risky. For that reason, developed countries generally count food self-sufficiency among their national strategic aims. They try to reduce their dependency on food imports, so as to safeguard national security and social stability. Why should Taiwan be any different — unless for ulterior motives? Rather than spending money on advertising to promote its policies or persuading the media to do it, the government would do better to try to talk with farmers and hear what they have to say.

Blossoms and leaves that fall from a tree will soon yellow and wither, and it is the same for farmers when their land is taken away. Without their land, farmers have no sense of belonging. We should also bear in mind that a large number of businesses have moved their core operations to China, so the industrial need for land has greatly diminished. Conservation groups point out that nearly a third of the land already expropriated for development by science parks around the country remains unused.

Excesses in land requisition in Taiwan have long been criticized by academics. The government should without delay review and amend the Land Expropriation Act (土地徵收法) and related laws to strengthen procedural safeguards and expand the public's right to take part in decision-making. The government should clearly demarcate areas designated for farming and invest resources in physical and institutional construction. Farmers' incomes should be raised to match those of general wage earners.

Taiwanese have suffered a great deal over the centuries — farmers above all. Colonized for a long time, the Taiwanese have learned forbearance, but they have little hope for a happy future.

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□ TRANSLATED BY JULIAN CLEGG

Source: [Taipei Times - Editorials 2010/08/04](#)