

**A brief report on the proceedings of the State-level Consultation on Impacts of SEZ policy/developments on Livelihoods of people in West Bengal
Golpark, Kolkata on June 17, 2008**

Background of the Consultation

A state level consultation on Impacts of SEZ on Livelihood of People in West Bengal was held in Ramakrishna Mission Golpark on June 17, 2008. This consultation was a follow-up of the preliminary field survey done by IMSe in six selected SEZ areas to develop a comprehensive understanding of SEZ related conflicts/issues in the state. The main idea behind organizing this consultation was to create a state-level space for various stakeholders associated with SEZ so that they can interact among themselves and can identify the key issues and challenges collectively. Therefore, in this consultation on the one hand the villagers from six SEZ areas took part and on the other hand the policy makers, representatives of key political parties, CS organizations, media, academicians, economists and social researchers also participated in an active way.

Participants' profile

The consultation was attended by policy makers and political persons like representative of the main opposition party Trinamul Congress Mr. Dipak Ghosh , representative of SUCI Mr. Biplab Chakrabarty (SUCI), state secretary of CPIML-Liberation Mr. Kartik Pal, reputed political leader and representative of RSP Mr. Manoj Bhattacharya. Among eminent academicians and social activists like eminent educationist Prof. Sunandya Sanyal, well known social activist and Executive Director of IMSE Mr. Biplab Halim (IMSE) and eminent sociologist Mr. Raktim Mukhopadhyay were a few. Various well known CS representatives also attended the consultation like President of Forum of Voluntary Organisations, Prof. Satyabrata Chowdhuri, senior activist of DRCSC Ms. Shukla Dev, Board member of FIAN, Mr. Arobindo Mukherjee, Few senior media persons like Mr. Deboprasad Lahiri & Mr. Manab Basu took part in the day long meeting. Besides the above participants, many grassroots activists from Kalyanbill Matiagacha, Midnapore, Birbhum and Bardhaman took active part in the dialogue. The consultation was facilitated by the IMSE activist Ms. Ujjaini Halim. Altogether around 35 people took part in this day-long discussion despite very poor weather condition and flooding in the city and in many parts of West Bengal.

Proceedings of the Consultation in brief

The meeting was planned in a way to listen from the grassroots representatives first about their feelings related to SEZ. Thereafter the eminent speakers were supposed to present their insights on the ongoing debate concerning SEZ & Development. The second half of the meeting was kept for more information sharing and developing future strategies for monitoring the SEZ development and for facing the challenges emerging from such development in the state (programme schedule Annex 1)

The dialogue was formally opened by Mr. Biplab Halim, Executive Director of IMSE. He welcomed all the participants and gave a small introduction of IMSE by saying that how IMSE has stood beside the common people during the past few decades in their struggle against violation of rights. He cited the example of Bhograi Baliapal in Orissa where in mid-80s IMSE's interventions were instrumental in stopping the development of a

missile base as planned by the central government, which if implemented, would have resulted into eviction of more than 100 villages. The key strategy was to make people aware of their rights and to mobilise them to defend their rights in a peaceful fashion. IMSE organized campaigns in support of those poor people in Bhograi and Baliapal in Orissa by creating pressure on the Government through mass mobilization and through building opinions in favour of the movement at the national and international spheres. In recent past IMSE supported and documented peoples struggle in Singur and Nandigram. To help the peasants in these places IMSE filed RTI applications to access information about the SEZ projects in those areas. IMSE filed PIL in Kolkata High Court in order to resist destruction of livelihoods of thousands of peasants in Singur in the name of 'public purpose' and 'development'. IMSE further documented the violations of human rights in those two areas and published reports, as well as facilitated developing documentary films to be shown world-wide to raise public opinions against destruction of livelihoods and violations of human rights. IMSE organized a Citizen's Convention in Delhi, a Peoples Tribunal in Kolkata and two Fact Finding Missions in Singur and Nandigram. He then focused on the SEZ policy of the central government and the state government and analysed the areas of concerns. He described how without any grassroots consultation the West Bengal Government decided to set up 22 SEZ areas in West Bengal, which would require thousands of hectares of land. According to him out of these 22 SEZs, 6 areas already received clearance from the Government. The land acquisition drive was designed by the state government in all these 6 areas but the plan did not have any adequate provision for rehabilitation and suitable compensation. It was evident from the plan that thousands of people, mainly poor peasants, and agricultural workers would lose their livelihoods due to expansion of SEZs in the state. But the Government was not concerned about the loss of livelihoods, neither had the government been able to present a clear picture of probable employment creation in these SEZ areas. Mr. Halim said that this consultation would provide an opportunity to the various actors associated with the process of development in the state to come together and to discuss the present SEZ policy and its probable impacts at grassroots. As acquisition of land and associated loss of livelihood were big concerns, he hoped that the consultation would be able to discuss these issues in length. Dr. Ujjani Halim, coordinator, FIAN West Bengal introduced , said they had started working on the SEZ policies and about their impact on the livelihoods of common people. IMSE has already taken up the initiative of visiting 6 SEZ areas where the Government has given clearance. Representatives from IMSE had conversation with different stakeholders in these 6 areas . She told that IMSE will be organizing Fact Finding Missions in two of those SEZ areas to understand the situation in depth.

Dr. Ujjaini Halim introduced the objectives of the consultation and described the design of the consultation. She narrated her experiences of doing research work on emergence of SEZs in Asia and the impact of the same at community level. She briefly described the initiative of IMSE to develop a comprehensive understanding of SEZ situation in the state and introduced the background paper prepared for the consultation. In doing so she briefly discussed the SEZ policy of the central and the state government and criticized the notion that SEZ would be the vehicle of development. Citing examples from China and other Asian countries she illustrated how the growths accrued from SEZs were short lived and how SEZ triggered off regional disparities. She further gave examples of violations

of labour rights, exploitation of women workers inside SEZ etc. However, she mentioned that in India the biggest concern related to SEZ expansion was loss of fertile agricultural land and destruction of livelihoods of farmers. She further narrated the six selected cases where SEZs would be established in West Bengal. She welcomed the representatives of these six areas as well as the eminent politicians and CS representatives in the consultation and expressed her hope that the consultation would be helpful to develop concrete strategies for future documentation of SEZ development in the state and its impact on livelihoods of common.

She urged the participants to share their opinion on SEZ debate.

Prof. Satyabrata Chowdhury presented his view on SEZ policy and mentioned arguments both in favour of and against SEZ development. He was of the opinion that both agriculture and industry were required for development. He said that only SEZ however, would not be able to ensure good development as this process bypassed the natural process of evolution of industry in a country. Though he strongly argued in favour of industrialization, as according to him industrialization would be able to create employment opportunities for millions, but he rejected the idea of establishment of SEZ on fertile agricultural land with equal vigor. He suggested that the Government must have a policy of 'development' which would take care of the interests of farmers and industrialists. "If the Government has to take away lands from the common people proper rehabilitation and compensation package must be provided to them" he opined.

Prof. Sunandya Sanyal criticized the present day development model as completely misleading and against the wellbeing of the common people. He further added that in the case of land acquisition in Singur both the Tatas and the Government had earlier said that the farmers would have good job opportunities in the industrial sites and car factories, but very few people got low skilled jobs. Prof. Sanyal also talked about the problems of the middle class people who became easy victims of this false paradigm of development. He said that the political scenario of West Bengal must be changed and for that different stakeholders should come forward. He expected that this consultation would try to give a meaningful solution to the above problems of development and he commented that SEZ was just a manifestation of the wrong development paradigm.

Mr. Dipak Ghosh, a leader of the Trinamul Congress (opposition party in West Bengal) started his speech with the history of SEZ in Bengal. It started from the British period and is still continuing in different forms. During the time of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru the issues of socio economic development were discussed. But today these discussions have taken a back seat in the agenda of the Government. During the First 5 year plan emphasis was there on agriculture and it was decided that the state would have control over the means of production. During the time of Dr. Bidhan Roy and Prafulla Sen issues like joblessness were addressed and modified rationing system was developed although emphasis was there on industrialization. But the present scenario is completely different. The Government is claiming to follow socialistic and democratic path but day by day they are acting against socialist principle. The rules of land acquisition state that a Steering Committee has to be developed if the Government acquires more than 5 acres of land. But in reality this is not happening. The Government is claiming that the acquisition of lands are meant for public purpose which is completely baseless. He also added that

the Government did not make any assessment regarding the position and fate of the farmers in Singur. He raised the question that who would be benefited by the SEZ. The answer is quite obvious-- the richer class, the multinationals and the Government and never the common people who were being forced to give away their cultivable lands. He concluded by saying that in a democratic- socialist republic country like India we were living under extreme fascism.

Mr. Manoj Bhattacharya, member of RSP said that during the time of Jawaharlal Nehru and Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy, people were evicted as a result of forceful acquisition and many of them were not properly rehabilitated. He gave the example of the development of Damodar Valley Corporation where the tribal groups like Budhia and Orao did not get any job opportunities as promised by the Government. The same trend has been continuing even today and it has become more devastative in the form of SEZ. The tax which was paid earlier by the companies to the Government will also be waived after the development of SEZ. This will worsen the situation even more. Thus we are living in a constant threat of international capitalism and SEZ is one of the forms of maximization of profit by the investors. He said the rules and regulations of a country have been serving the interests of a particular class of people depriving the people of the lowest strata of the society. The problem of SEZ is not the problem of any particular political party. It is a phenomenon of the neoliberal global order and tough task to the civil society which should come forward to address the problem and develop an alternative model of development.

Mr. Biplab Chakrabarty of SUCI talked about the problems of globalization and industrialization giving special emphasis on SEZ which were favouring the interests of the multinationals. He also said that the problems of industrialization were also present in the past but now the people had started protesting and the civil society had also come forward. Industrialization in all times did not serve the interests of the working class and common people and its whole purpose was to exploit the labour class. He also mentioned that before the Central SEZ Bill came into being the West Bengal Government drafted an SEZ Bill in 2003. In fact the Central Bill resembles the West Bengal SEZ Bill which shows that the Left Front Government and the Central Government were uniformly advocating for the SEZ proposals. The struggle for socialism is to eliminate individual ownership. The incident of Nandigram showed the way to struggle against the individual self interest. The civil society organizations should stick to political idealism and work accordingly.

Mr. Kartik Pal of CPI ML(Liberation) said that SEZ is a part of globalization. The people's representatives in our country are not aware of the global development. With the emergence of SEZ new developments are seen in different parts of the country. Land Reforms Acts are being amended. Land Ceiling is different from state to state. Peasants all over the country are protesting against this new development of industrialization. Even the Left Front Government in West Bengal failed to protect the interests of the farmers and poor people. In the name of SEZ the Government is serving the interests of the industrialists. People in Kalinganagar, Nandigram, Singur, Bijaywara and Ranchi had lost their lives while protesting against the forceful and mindless acquisition of land.

Nandigram spearheaded the movement against the paradigm of development accepted by the existing Government. Moreover it is imperative for the acquisition of land to take permission from the Panchayat or the Zilla Parishad. In the case of Nandigram all these were not considered. The political parties also failed to deliver their duties in protecting the rights and interests of the common people. Mr. Pal also referred to the slogans of West Bengal Government regarding the transformation from agriculture to industry and termed it as baseless. India is facing acute crisis of food production. The food production had decreased from 156 lakh metric to 152 lakh metric ton which is highly alarming. Incidents of starvation deaths have increased as a result of food insecurity. The implementation of SEZ Bill will further aggravate the situation.

Mr. Raktim Mukhopadhyay, representative of an eminent civil society organization found that the definition of development is ambiguous and from time to time it has been debated in various international conferences. Industrial development pattern is changing frequently from Industrial Zone to Export Promotion Zone to Special Economic Zone. In West Bengal the Government has identified 42 areas as SEZ and 16 of them have already got approval. In Nandigram the Central and the State Government had jointly taken up the same way of development and imposed it on the people. But for the sake of development the necessary tools of development such as mapping, land mapping and human resource development mapping have not been considered. Thus the development of SEZ is only to serve the interest of the economically powerful people by exploiting the wealth of our country. Even the opposition parties are not concerned about the development of people and are driven by self interest. Thus we should be transparent and have a clear view about the nature of development.

Ms. Shukla Deb Mitra of DRCSC expressed the same view as the earlier speakers regarding SEZ. She also stressed the definition of development should be clear and adequately elaborated. She is working in the documentation unit and has already collected lots of information and resources on SEZ which she would like to share with the participants in future.

Khondakar Gulam Kuddus of IMSE narrated his experience of visiting 5 SEZ areas in West Bengal. In Mahishadal (East Medinipur) the people were motivated by the struggle of nearby Nandigram. They thought their livelihood would be threatened if their lands were acquired. Till date no land has been acquired in this region. In Kharagpur (West Medinipur) some amount of land has been acquired. In Taltor (Birbhum) some people have been paid in advance by the brokers. People parted with lands in the hope that they will be engaged in the industries to be set up there. Kanksha (Bardhaman) is dominated by ruling party and most of the required land has been acquired there. Mr. Kuddus met Anil Biswas, a local inhabitant in Dankuni who told that people were resisting the move of acquisition. The Government has stepped back on the project and has decided to discuss the issue with the local people and institution.

Mr. Manab Bose of IMSE visited Kalyanbil Matigacha. Here acquisition notice has been served on 1080 hectares of land. Earlier the land was vested land. Thereafter the same land was distributed among poor people. Now at last the land is going to be

acquired for SEZ project evicting the poor people .Owing to the terror unleashed by the ruling party people are afraid of protesting against this forceful acquisition.

Shankar Behara , a social worker from the coastal belt of Orissa narrated his experience of SEZ projects in different parts of Orissa. He specifically mentioned about Keonjhar and Kalinganagar where people lost their lives while protesting against the forceful acquisition. He also raised his voice against SEZ projects in West Bengal.

Prasanta Sanyal , a representative from the civil society also highlighted the question of sovereignty in this SEZ areas. He also talked about the impacts of SEZ on environment and insisted on the production of bio diesel in South 24 Parganas and East Mednipur instead of going for industrialization.

Mahasweta Banerjee , a Full Bright scholar from Kansas University USA emphasized on value-based multiple models of development. In a pluralistic society we need to have multiple models of development to satisfy the needs of different categories of people. She was also against the policy of forceful acquisition of land without any provision of proper rehabilitation. She felt that the compensation are mostly inadequate and cannot fulfill the social cultural needs of the poor people. She also suggested that there should also be some provisions for the landless poor people in villages.

Dr. Ujjaini Halim, the moderator of the consultation added that public opinion in this regard was most important. Development is for the common people so they should participate while developing the multiple models of development. In this case the civil society will play the role of a facilitator. State intervention is always necessary but there should be a process of accountability.;

Mr. Dipak Ghosh here intervened and said that his party Trinamul Congress was against the SEZ Bill from the very beginning. Regarding oil economy he suggested to subsidise poor people and fix higher price for oil users as they are well off. In Singur Tatas were given entry for building car manufacturing factories while there is scope of development of agro industries in the state.

Suggestions by the participants are as follows:

- ✓ A Committee comprising all the participants should be set up
- ✓ An action plan should be prepared immediately
- ✓ A Statement on the consultation should be drafted and sent to appropriate authorities
- ✓ Awareness building of the common people regarding SEZ is necessary
- ✓ A Peoples Convention will be organized in future.
- ✓ FIAN West Bengal suggested to organize 2 Fact Finding Missions in the SEZ areas. The Fact Finding team will visit the affected places and will try to find out the alternatives of SEZ. It will also look into the issues of human rights violations as a result of the forceful acquisition of land.
- ✓ A resource base will be developed on SEZ
- ✓ A micro research on the impacts of SEZ would be taken up
- ✓ Discussions should be initiated with the Panchayat and Zilla Parishad .
- ✓ Human resource mapping is necessary for alternative development planning.

- ✓ An integrated report will be published after the implementation of the above-mentioned suggestions.