

REDEFINING PRIORITIES IN AGRICULTURE DEVELOPMENT

R.Dwarakinath

*Agricultural performance in recent years has been a cause for concern.
It is affecting the rural livelihoods and impeding the economic growth.
The expectation that as the economy expands the surplus rural population
will get reduced is not coming true. For the foreseeable future at least,
the bulk of the population will be stuck in farming for a living.
As such, the obvious course of action is to find ways to intensify agriculture,
remove constraints to growth and build employment opportunities
around agriculture.*

October 2005, the Prime Minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh, repeating a Jawaharlal Nehru's statement that "Everything can wait but agriculture cannot wait", declared that the government attaches the highest importance to achieving a four percent growth rate in agriculture, to support a ten per cent growth rate in the economy. Accordingly, the outlays for agriculture, including credit supply, are being raised year after year. Very recently, an additional central assistance of Rs.25000 cr was offered to the States for a range of agricultural programmes. But, it is noted, in the meanwhile, that for many years in the Tenth Plan, the growth rate remained around just two percent. Obviously, the complex problem in agriculture development is defying an early solution.

Disturbing Trends

In the wake of the green revolution, some of the dynamism in agriculture sector began waning, with crop yields and farm incomes declining. Naturally, farmers get disheartened. In the meanwhile, rural poverty continued to persist and the agriculture share in the GDP started shrinking. In many regions, farm livelihoods became unstable.

Thus, the agriculture sector is seen sinking in many ways --in its production, in its per capita incomes, in its size of holdings, and in its ability to support a larger population. At the same time, on the part of the successful farmers, certain amount of greed in resource utilization, particularly the groundwater and natural vegetation, began showing up. Also, climate changes on one side and the WTO on the other seem to have added to the woes in the farm sector.

Development – Necessary and Sufficient conditions

For the last two decades, constant efforts are being made to find ways to restore the dynamics in the farm sector. Ranging from diversification of farm enterprises, expansion of exports and agro-processing industries and setting up small farmer consortia, many ventures have been initiated.

Mean time, we hear a refrain from everybody who sympathize with the lot of the farmers, that we need a second green revolution, or an evergreen revolution. Of course, it remains more as a wishful thinking, since no revolution will be ever lasting, nor can it be ordered at will.

But, there have been several serious academic efforts, also. A couple of years ago, at the instance of the Planning Commission, premier institutions like ISEC undertook the preparation of State Reports on the status of and scope for development, including agriculture. Such studies and recommendations commonly include suggestions like enhancing public and private investments, expanding irrigation, strengthening research and extension systems, improving infrastructure facilities, creating better market arrangements, and increasing economic incentives including credit availability. But more of the same does not seem to help.

A close look at these recommendations will reveal that these are essentially products of valid macro economic perceptions. As such, they are seen as tenable suggestions and amount to “development prerequisites” for agriculture .For, under the impact of liberalization and globalization, farming, which was mainly a subsistence pursuit, has become a business venture, depending upon many external support facilities. Thus, as the barter system in rural life yielded place a monetary economy earning a money income in faming has become inevitable for supporting both family life and farm operations. But, a significant point is that all these amount to only “necessary conditions,” and not to “sufficient conditions” for development. This seems to be the missing link in development planning.

If we put the focus on building the “sufficient conditions” as well, a close look at the farm sector as the “production situation” and the farmer as the “producer,” become essential. This, in fact, would amount to adopting the micro economic view for agriculture development. This in reality is the inescapable next step in agriculture development.

A Look at the Ground Realities

Production Situation --There are several features of the agriculture sector at present, which count in development planning. With the population growing relentlessly, the **land-man ratio** has enormously narrowed, marginalizing the operational holdings. Also, there is a considerable **degradation of the farm base**, particularly under rainfed conditions, due to erosion and ground water depletion. The **removal of natural vegetation** around farmlands, for a variety of reasons, is affecting the micro-climate, availability of biomass for fodder and green manure, and the bio-relationships in the local areas. In recent years, **diversion of farm lands** for other purposes has become a profitable business for all concerned, at least for the moment.

More than everything else, the **purpose in farming** itself has undergone a tremendous transformation. What was traditionally **family pursuit** for subsistence, got moved into **surplus farming** during the green revolution for food security, then moved into **market farming** as the barter economy yielded place to money economy, and finally into **business farming**, under the influence of WTO. All these factors have an implication to agriculture development.

Farmers' Aspirations -- It is the third generation of farmers in position today, since Independence. They are quite different from their fore fathers, and have lost touch with much of the traditional practices in farming. They are no more isolated from the outside world. Their literacy levels have gone up. The media impact too has been tremendous. As a result of all of this, their world-view has changed enormously. Most of them are madly after urban life styles. But, they are still in farming since **they have nowhere else to go**

Hierarchical Society -- Rural families vary in social status, economic power, political clout and managerial abilities. Hence, they vary vastly in their adoption of new technologies also.

% Holdings (Land area)	Adopter Categories
Large -1.2% (14.8 %)	Innovators – 5%
Medium - 6.1% (25.3%)	Early adopters – 15%
Semi-med – 12.3% (23.8%)	Early majority – 35%
Small – 18.7% (18.8%)	Late majority – 30%
Marginal- 61.6% (17.2%)	Non-adopters – 15%

Thus, their socio economic conditions as well as the power structures in the social systems in which they live tremendously influence their adoption behaviour.

Critical Rural Complexities -- Rural population has increased more than three fold. Nearly 70% of our farming is dry farming. About 80% of our farmers are small and marginal farmers. The rural population, which is about 65% makes up only 20% of the GDP. The rural per capita income is very low, and rural-urban disparity is widening. As a result, we have a persisting rural poverty. And, agriculture has become a drag on the national economy.

Some Relevant Observations

Special Features of Farm Sector – Over the years, the agriculture sector has come to assume some significant socio-economic features. They become the corner stones in planning.

Farming has a two-fold purpose, today

-- Wealth creation and providing livelihoods

Agriculture Sector is made up of two segments

-- Production segment and Support segment

Agriculture development is a Joint responsibility today

-- Farmers as producers and Government as Enabler

Farming is done only by Farmers – Production activities on the farms are conducted only by farmers, and nobody else. As such, only they can bring about certain changes in farming. Hence, they have to be purposefully brought into the development process.

*Farmers are the end users of natural farm resources,
new technologies and development opportunities.*

Elite farmers are quick to avail the development opportunities

*They are also good managers. Systematic development
has entered only a part of their farm lands.*

Non-elite farmers are relatively lagging behind.

*They are good in using traditional knowledge,
but poor in using new technologies and purchased inputs*

What Development Implications, Here?

There are some obvious conclusions that emerge from these observations. They have to be given due consideration in setting new development priorities to enhance the pace of growth.

Certainly, agriculture growth rate needs upgrading.

*For, at stake are the farm livelihoods, rural poverty,
support to economy and resource conservation
in fragile eco systems.*

*Elite farmers, who brought glory to Indian agriculture,
must be supported adequately – They create wealth.*

*Non-elite farmers who have to gain in resource use ability;
hold large land resources – Need systematic training.*

*Production costs in farming are high with purchased inputs
Some inputs like seed, manures and water resources
can be locally generated – Issue requires attention.*

*People's own initiatives are emerging from sixty years
of democracy -- An opportunity with potential.*

So, What Development Priorities Do We See?

1. Reaching the Un-reached – Since the farming communities are not homogenous systems, the development opportunities are not utilized by all farmers uniformly, or at the same pace. Therefore, the development strategies must devote adequate attention to the issue.

Farmers have evolved into two distinct segments
-- **A small group** of out-going, venturesome, resourceful and ambitious farmers capitalizing emerging opportunities -- **Elite farmers**
To be supported fully
-- **A large majority** who are inward looking, resource poor and conformist farmers, there to make a living – **Non-elites**
Need handholding

Non-elites need guidance, organization and capacity building. Their large numbers and land ownership helps even incremental improvements make a large impact.

2. Focus on dry farming – A substantial potential for increasing production and productivity lies in dry farming segment. LEISA (Low External Input Sustainable Agriculture) seems to be an appropriate starting point, here.

Dry farming makes up nearly 70% area in farming. –
Provides livelihoods for many – Productivity proverbially low at present
– Given only fragmentary attention, so far.
Average annual rainfall, adequate to grow a single crop
– Dry spells is a problem – Management of soil moisture, soil fertility and proper cropping practices are the crux
Research results in dry farming are substantial
– But, not in farmers' hands, in right combinations – Need of the hour

3. Alternative Farming Practices – A considerable amount of useful research results have yet to reach the farmers, particularly the resource poor farmers. Whatever has in fact reached, it is in bits and pieces and not in proper combinations to make the necessary impact. This seems to be more true in the case of dry farming.

Task – Combination of three strategic farming operations
In-situ moisture conservation – in the root zone
Upgrading soil productivity
modifying crops and cropping systems along with production of more manurial bio mass

Approach – Helping people to help themselves
Begin with what they have, what they know

Strategy – Participatory Technology Development (PTD) and Farmer Field School(FFS)

First step – Yield stabilization in dry farming,
Better resource productivity will be the first source of farm income

4. Prepare Farmers Groups, Enablers – The days of the “top down” approach are gone. Durable changes can be expected mostly from what farmers accept and adopt voluntarily.

Changes in land-use practices are made only by farmers.
Most farmers want a change, to survive. Change agencies working with farmers are making a valuable contribution as Enablers. .
Both of them need to be trained to begin with.

*Starting from PRA interactions,
they are involved in intensive learning processes like
Participatory Technology Development (PTD)
and Farmer Field Schools (FFS).*

*In the process, simple Alternative Farming Practices,
Relevant, Acceptable and Affordable,
are evolved, adopted and shared
by Farmers Groups and Enablers*

Thus, they become change agents in local communities.

5. Forge Multi Agency Extension Systems – There is wide spread recognition that the extension system today has become unequal to the task. It is true that it rendered a commendable service during the green revolution. But, the subsequent developments witnessed that the extension organization came to suffer irreparably for want of due attention. Hence, today it is necessary that the matter is given a new thought.

*Development situations in rural societies
have outgrown the single extension agencies of the past.
The development needs have become too many, too varied
for any single intervention agency to handle.*

*Also, the days for promoting and fostering
people's own initiatives are very much with us now.*

Naturally, the extension task of the future
has to be a shared responsibility, a team work

Future Extension Team, A Model – Several agencies interested in agriculture development as well as the well-being of the farmers have to come together to work for a common goal with shared responsibilities. Each of them will play their unique role in the team, contributing to a synergic whole.

- # The existing extension systems of the government departments have to be revived and strengthened to serve as the **Policy Delivery Mechanism**.
- # PRI bodies, wherever they take initiative, have to be assisted to serve as the **Local Support Agencies**.
- # NGOs, Social Service Organizations have to be involved, encouraged as the **Development Intervention Agencies**.
- # CBOS like SHGs and Farmers Groups have to be engaged to play a critical role in accepting, adopting and sharing innovations as the **Local Receiving Agencies**.

Conclusion

A second front in agriculture is warranted in the form of deliberately associating the non-elite farmers in the development process by organizing a variety of capacity building activities. The focus is on rebuilding the dry farming systems as a means to securing farm livelihoods, improving farm eco systems, enhancing economic growth and coping with the climate changes.