

NATIONAL COMMISSION ON FARMERS

Regional Consultation

New Delhi, 18-19 November 2004

1. India, in spite of the impressive progress made in enhancing food production in recent decades, is the home of a large number of chronically undernourished children, women and men. A recent analysis of the reasons for food insecurity in rural and urban India by the M S Swaminathan Research Foundation and the UN World Food Programme has revealed that inadequate purchasing power arising from inadequate employment/livelihood opportunities is the primary cause of under- and mal-nutrition. This situation is due to both high population pressure on land, and slow growth rate in non-farm employment opportunities. Maternal and foetal under-nutrition results in the incidence of low-birth weight babies, with serious long term consequences to the mental and physical development of the child.

2. Because of substantial grain reserves with the Government as a result of the operation of a minimum support price for wheat, rice and other cereals, the Government of India has introduced in recent years a wide range of nutrition safety-net programmes for those suffering from poverty. India operates the world's largest Integrated Child Development Service (ICDS) and nutritious school meal programme. In spite of all such innovative social support programmes, the incidence of both endemic and hidden hunger (caused by micro-nutrient deficiencies) is high. Recently, a National Food for Work Programme has been introduced in 150 of the 600 districts in India. The National Food for Work Programme provides 5 kgs of wheat or rice per person per day and 25 per cent of the total wage in cash.

3. The following steps need to be initiated to bring down significantly poverty-induced endemic hunger by 15 August 2007, which marks the 60th anniversary of India's Independence.

a) Implement all nutrition safety net schemes in an integrated manner on a lifecycle basis; fill gaps with reference to adolescent girls and pregnant women to avoid children with low birth weight, as well as infants in the 0-2 age group.

b) Enlarge the food security basket by encouraging the establishment of **Community Grain Banks** based on local grains (millets, pulses, etc.).

c) Organise a Food Guarantee Programme combining the principles of Employment Guarantee Scheme and Food for Work. The programme should be gender sensitive so as to assist women to undertake a wide variety of human and social development programmes, such as running creches, organising noon meal programmes in schools, etc. There is need to enlarge the definition of "work" in Food for Work Programmes, by including activities related to human and social development in the framework of socially meaningful work.

d) Sustain, strengthen and spread the on-going Self-Help Revolution (SHGs) by ensuring backward linkages with technology and credit, and forward linkages with markets. This will help to generate substantial numbers of non-farm livelihood opportunities.

e) Enhance the productivity of major cropping and farming systems by helping to bridge the prevailing wide gap between potential and actual yields, through mutually reinforcing packages of technology, services and public policies. Productivity improvement helps to enhance marketable surplus in small farms and thereby the cash income of the farm family.

f) Establish "Self-Employment Innovation Parks" by providing opportunities for farm, veterinary, fisheries, home science and commerce graduates to establish food processing and Biotechnology Parks, as well as Agri-clinics, Agri-business centres and Agri-export facilities in an integrated

manner at suitable locations in rural India. This will help to increase opportunities for both value-addition to primary produce and non-farm employment. At the same time, it will help to upgrade the technological underpinning of Indian agriculture.

g) Farmers will grow more, if they are confident of assured and remunerative marketing opportunities. Hence the use of food grains as currency confers double benefits – helps to increase agricultural production, and enables the use of food as engine of human and social development. India should become a world leader in fostering a Human Development Based Food for Work Movement.

4. The consultation brought out the need for urgent action in the following areas:

a) Conservation and enhancement of the ecological foundations essential for an evergreen revolution, (i.e., enhancing productivity in perpetuity without associated ecological harm), such as soil, water and biodiversity.

b) Bridging the productivity gap by attending to improving soil fertility and plant nutrition, with particular reference to micro-nutrient deficiencies and soil physical characteristics.

c) Double the productivity per unit of water; the problem in most areas is not water shortage but wastage. Avoid public policies which can lead to the unsustainable exploitation of ground water.

d) Help small farmers to organise compact Small Farmers' Horticulture Estates, involving decentralised production and centralised services in areas like water and pest management and post-harvest technology and marketing.

e) Organise biomass based power generation, particularly in wastelands involving Casuarina, bamboo and *Prosopis*, as well as bio- diesel production from Jatropha. Sugarbeet and sweet sorghum can become ecologically more efficient substitutes for sugarcane in areas with declining water resources. They can promote ethanol production. The Paradise tree can be cultivated in wastelands.

f) Agro-forestry and medicinal plant cultivation can be promoted based on marketing opportunities.

g) The livestock industry can become a major engine of both nutritional and livelihood security. There is need for greater attention to animal nutrition and disease management.

h) Organise the seed production in a decentralised manner through Seed Villages and specialised SHGs.

i) Enforce strict quality control of farm inputs. Adulteration of farm inputs is currently poisoning the rural economy.

5. Second generation problems in Green Revolution areas

Problems such as a decline in soil organic carbon and micro-nutrients, and soil salinisation are increasing, coupled with a lowering of the water table. **The fatigue of the green revolution** is due to land and water mining and non-inclusion of pulses and fodder legumes in the crop rotation. Haryana has developed a strategy for taking to the path of an evergreen revolution through practices like zero tillage, ridge and furrow method of planting and crop residue management. Development and adoption of agronomic techniques for improving productivity without ecological harm need high priority.

6. Globalisation of Agriculture

There is an urgent need to increase our agricultural competitiveness. A quality and trade literacy movement should be launched. Improved productivity and quality, as well as value addition to primary products will have to be promoted.

7. Participatory Research and Knowledge Management: Agriculture is becoming knowledge intensive. State Agricultural Universities and ICAR Institutes need to work more closely with small farm families. Farm schools can be organised in suitable farmers' fields to foster lateral farmer-to-farmer learning.

8. New Management Innovations:

SHGs should become sustainable Self Help Groups. They can undertake both on-farm (like IPM, Seed Technology, etc.) and non-farm enterprises. Federations of SHGs can be organised to confer the power of scale in marketing. SHGs and private sector industry can enter into contract farming arrangements. The Rural Knowledge centre movement promoted by the National Alliance for Mission 2007: Every Village a Knowledge Centre is an important initiative. The integrated use of the internet and Community (FM) radio will be a powerful tool for providing to farm families information on weather, markets, etc, at the right time and at the right place. The Organic Farming Movement needs scientific support in areas like soil fertility replenishment and plant protection. A Green Foods Movement can also be promoted, particularly for small and marginal farmers who may not have access to the required quantities of farm yard manure and compost, based on the adoption of Integrated Nutrient Supply, Integrated Pest Management Practices and cereal-legume rotations. Such green foods should have no trace of pesticide or other toxic residues and mycotoxins.

9. Special attention needs to be given to hitherto neglected areas like Ladakh, which have rich potential for fruit trees, nuts and wool production (Pashmina goats). Post-harvest processing facilities are urgently needed for apricot, seabuckthorn and other fruits.

10. Women in Agriculture

The All India Federation of Women in Agriculture (AIFWA) made a detailed presentation on the special needs of farm women (both farmers and labour). Some of the major areas, which need urgent attention are the following

a) Right to Land: Women should be entitled to land ownership, as promised in the Common Minimum Programme of the UPA. Immediately, they should be given *Joint Pattas*, so that they become eligible for credit, Kisan Credit Cards and other Government Schemes for small and marginal farmers. *Joint Pattas* or ownership will enable them to access various entitlements essential for commercially viable small scale farming, including horticulture and animal husbandry.

b) Multiple burden on a women's time and labour : Public Policies should take into account the multiple roles women have to perform in day to day life. Implements to reduce drudgery and enhance productivity should become available. Also, women should get the same wage as men, since they often work harder and longer.

c) Engendering Research and Training: The curriculum of agricultural universities and RAWE (Rural Agricultural Work Experience) must be gender sensitive. Experienced farm women should be assisted to establish farm schools, so that there is a multiplier effect from their expertise. Agricultural Universities should undertake participatory research with women farmers.

d) Market Facilitation Centres: Centres such as those organised by SEWA in Ahmedabad will be extremely helpful and will prevent exploitation by money lenders and merchants.

e) Support Services: Farm women need support services like creches, pre-school centres, etc. Health care services are particularly important. In remote areas, health support systems either do not exist or do not function.

f) Intellectual Property Rights: Women's traditional knowledge and their contributions to the conservation and enhancement of agro-biodiversity need to be given proper recognition and reward under the Protection of Plant Varieties and Farmers' Rights Act and the Biodiversity Act. There is need for special legal, genetic and trade literacy Programmes for Women.

g) Representation in Policy Making Bodies: Women farmers should be given adequate representation in all policy making bodies in the fields of agriculture and rural development, including the National Commission on Farmers.

h) Growing Feminisation of Agriculture, Poverty and Malnutrition: The commitments made under the Beijing Platform for Action adopted at the UN Conference on Women and Development held in 1995 should be fully implemented at least in 2005.

11. No time to relax: Dark clouds over the Agricultural Horizon

The States participating in the consultation, particularly Punjab, Haryana and Western U.P. constitute the backbone of India's food security and Public Distribution Systems. Unfortunately they are facing serious ecological, economic, social and institutional problems as well as policy constraints, which if unattended, will undermine India's agricultural progress. Public Investment in agriculture is going down, and State Governments are unable to take advantage of Central Government schemes, since they are unable to provide counterpart funds. Ecologically, soils are getting salinised and the once rich aquifer is fast getting depleted. Eighty percent of irrigation water comes from tube wells in Punjab. Climate change caused by global warming will further aggravate farmers problems. Already, in Ladakh the glaciers are melting and snowfall is decreasing. Anticipatory research on mitigation and adaptation measures should be undertaken.

India is importing over Rs. 12000 crores worth of pulses and oilseeds. Through diversification of land use based on ecological criteria, much of the needed pulses and oilseeds can be grown in this region. There are regions in Punjab where olives and Jatropa can be cultivated. Thus, re-orientation of land use patterns leading to a shift to high value and low water requiring crops, is an urgent necessity.

The agricultural strategy for the 21st century should be based on both the economic well being of farm families and the ecological sustainability of the farming systems.

Indian agriculture is now in a state of crisis. At a time when farmers are experiencing serious ecological and economic constraints, they will also have to face the onslaught of imports of agricultural commodities at prices much lower than the ruling market and Minimum Support Prices (MSP). The requisite investments in the area of sanitary and phytosanitary measures are not being made. Inaction now will undermine not only national food and ecological security, but also national sovereignty.

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