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Food Crisis: Small and Marginal Farmers Hold the Key

The world is in the grips of an impending food and ecological crises. While the prices of food world over have skyrocketed during the current and previous years, the availability of food both for the producing as well as the importing countries have been badly hit resulting in deep food crisis. What is more disturbing that the food scarcity is here to stay. Different political systems and civil society has responded differently to the crises however all responses have been obscured by the food riots in more than 30 countries during the previous and current year. More and more countries are losing their food sovereignty and there is decline in the food production in many countries. This has as much to do with the changing weather patterns, as with neo liberal trade policies supported by flawed paradigms of development based on market mechanisms.

The manifested failure of and industrialized agriculture to support export oriented production in international trade framework has brought back focus on small and marginal farmers and family based farms in rescuing the world from an impending peril. Report after reports have penned paeans on benefits of small diversified farming systems in increasing food production, managing bio-diversity, providing employment and boosting local economy. The impact of climate change which threatens to put the agriculture out of track in developing countries is also seen to be best managed by small and marginal farmers as they cause less damage than large industrial farms and address both mitigation and adaptation aspects of agriculture more efficiently, effectively and promptly through continuous innovations.

However, the prime questions remains that how prepared are small and marginal farmers to respond to these SOS calls. They have suffered from a multiple indignity and lack of support from the national governments, throwing them into complete disarray and millions of them have been compelled to swell the ranks for menial laborers. The indifferent attitude of the government and declining public investment in agriculture has made agriculture economically unviable. Lack of institutional credit, extension services, non farm opportunities and safety nets have combined to push small and marginal farmers out of agriculture. In the circumstances, it is presumed that a number of policy and social imperatives are required to instill the confidence back in small farmers, make small

farming economically viable and profitable. Only then their contribution in making the world overcome this global crisis can be expected.

The intervention proposes a rapid assessment of policy and other imperatives to enhance the response of small and marginal farmers towards the food crisis” the rapid assessment will interact with a cross section of small and marginal farmers in the poorer states of India, along with wide variety of stakeholders who are key actors in local agriculture and economy and will include policy makers, agriculture universities, experts and farmers cooperatives to identify the major issues and role of possible role of small and marginal farmers in boosting local economy through improving agricultural production, employment and enhancing purchasing power in rural areas. The assessment would come up with a set of recommendation which would help small and marginal farmers achieve these goals and also take a stock of adequacy or otherwise of policy responses already available. The assessment would be conducted in collaboration with a number of organizations, universities, experts and agricultural scientists who have proved competence in conducting such exercises and add value to the process by their own experience and insights.

Agrarian and Food Crisis in India

Food production India has been stagnant for almost two decades since 1987. Rising marginally by 1.5-2 million tones a year, it has failed to keep pace with the rising population. In fact ever since economic liberalization was introduced in 1991, the compound growth rate of agriculture has fallen to that of the population growth rate. Most of the agricultural land has been diverted towards non food grain production agriculture and industrial purposes. The mammoth task of feeding the billions has been left to market forces. Economic policies must be re assessed to highlight sustainable agriculture and in the light of insights gained recently in global food crises.

In October 2008 India's states hunger index was released by the IFPRI as a part of global hunger index project. It for the first time disaggregated states from the national index and showed that widespread hunger prevailed in almost all the states of India. Despite economic growth, liberalization and industrial development. More progressive states like Maharashtra Gujarat and TN were better than others but evidenced serious decline in per capita availability of food. Poorer states like Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa, UP, Bengal and Assam were huddled along with countires like Ghana, Sudan, Kenya, Congo, Malawi, Rwanda etc. with a ranking of 20.0 on the index. While a number of states like Andhra, Bihar, CG, Guj, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Maharashtra, TN, UP, WB etc have alarming levels of hunger, Madhya Pradesh was categorized as “extremely alarming”. The state hunger report does not bring the agricultural crisis of last five years.

The story of Indian agriculture is one of utter neglect and oversight of established wisdom (at least after the liberalization of economy). The land available for agriculture has hardly increased over the decade while the per capita availability has substantially reduced. According to state level land

revenue records food grains is grown in only 121.5 million ha in India (2004-05) which has hardly changed over the decade land available for food grains has declined in 11 of the 17 states listed in the hunger index. Huge agricultural tracts have been converted to non-agricultural use purposes through SEZ and cash crop productions. Private investment in agriculture has increased modestly in recent years whereas the public investment has declined falling from the equivalent of 10% of agricultural output (1981-83) to just 5% (1998-2000)

Way forward lies with enhancing small and marginal farmers' response

The years of extreme food scarcity have also brought back into focus much cherished age old wisdom of giving priority to agriculture in national development strategies, increasing public investment in agriculture and regulating private investments. A growing body of authoritative studies and literature have castigated industrial and corporate agriculture and blamed international trade policy framework for deepening financial and food crisis world over. The shortlist of prescriptions from these voluminous texts is clear; revisit the economic policies to bring back emphasis on agriculture, enhance employment opportunities and revive the traditional knowledge systems, raise the purchasing power of the rural poor, recognize and build on the strength of small diversified farming rather than neglecting it.

More than 650 millions of India's 1.2 billion population depend on small landholding for their sustenance. The proportion of marginal farms have increased from 36% (1960) to 47% (2004) and the small scale farms decreased from 16% to 11% during the same period. The average size landholding is 0.2 hectares and will be close to 0.11 ha by the turn of the century. The current 89 million landholdings will be fragmenting into 100 millions by the same time. A steady decline of medium and large-scale farmers in India underlines the fact that small and marginal farmers have to be in the centre of policy responses if the food securities of the growing millions have to be ensured.

In April 2008 IAASTD launched its report which was approved by 57 governments. Co-sponsored by FAO, UNDP, UNEP, GEF and WB the study made a critique of conventional industrial farming and called for fundamental change in farming practices so as to better address increasing food prices inequities and environmental crisis. The report reflects a growing consensus among the scientists and many governments that the old paradigms of industrial energy intensive and toxic agriculture is outdated, while small scale farmers and agro ecological methods provide the way forward. The conclusion is that the past emphasis on production and yield brought some benefits but these came at the cost of environment and social equity. The global financial crisis also provided an adequate background for the critique of industrial agriculture and trade liberalization induced market mechanism.

The World Food Insecurity Report (FAO, 2009) says “small and diversified is responsible for lion’s share of agriculture globally. While productivity increases may be achieved faster in high input, large scale specialized farming systems, greatest scope for improving livelihood and equity exists in small scale diversified production systems in developing world. Small scale farms maximize return on land make efficient decisions, innovate continuously and cause less damage to the environment than large farms.”

The small farms must be at the centre of any strategy to tackle poverty and increase food security and productivity. They are vital for a number of reasons small farmers provide safety nets on subsistence living to the rural poor, small farmers tend to spend their income on local good and services boosting local economies and are more likely to employ people rather than adopt capital intensive technologies, small farms produce bulk of India’s food. We have innumerable evidences to show that small integrated farming systems can yield more per ha in the long run that large scale monoculture farms. They are ecologically sound managing large share of our water and vegetation cover, reducing soil erosion, use water more efficiently, protect biodiversity and preserve soil fertility.

There is an urgent need to re-orient the focus. In 2006 working group on Distressed Farmers report said “mostly small and marginal farmers, as well as tenant farmers and farm laborers bear the brunt of crop failures. Therefore, the target group for the preferential treatment should consist of small and marginal farmers as well as tenant farmers and far laborers. Inadequate farm income coupled with limited non farm opportunities have led to the distress conditions in most cases. Other contributing factors are increasing input costs, non-availability of quality seeds, increasing pesticide usage, de-skilling, and supplier induced demand in the input market, inadequacy of institutional extension services and research, market uncertainties, declining public investment and additional household/consumption requirements, the report added.

