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Challenges In Farming

The list of five important challenges before us in agriculture, and possible policy trends in 2011.

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Year 2011 will be a challenging year for the agriculture sector in India. Unfortunately, we will be starting the year with a steep rise in prices of basic staples. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has also given a warning about the impending price volatility. The poorer you are, the greater is the proportion of your income that goes to food. For example, a worker under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme gets Rs 100 as wages, but the cost of onions today is Rs 75 per kg. Government policies (in agriculture) are fragmented. One of the reasons is that there are many ministries and there is very little coordination amongst them.

Against this background, let me list five important challenges before us in agriculture, and possible policy trends in 2011.

Challenge 1: It is to manage the food budget and keep stocks properly. This will be important once the Food Security Bill becomes an Act, possibly by next year, and access to food would become a legal entitlement. This would make it necessary to have enough production. A government cannot run a national programme with imported food. In any case, international food prices are quite high.

Policy trend: The supporting policy regulations governing other ministries will come in place. Right to information has been successful because there are files available. Ensuring that food availability is not hampered would be a key feature.

Challenge 2: The increasing number of very small farms is a serious concern. There is a need to give Indian farmers the power and economy of scale. This calls for a small farms management revolution. In industrialised countries, farms are becoming larger and farming as a way of life is going out. But in India, for 700 million people agriculture is not only a livelihood but also a way of life. There is a need for group/contract farming. Assured and remunerative marketing is critical.

Policy trend: Small farmers' agriculture business consortium will be the focus. The thrust would be to offer opportunity, business and profit to small farmers. An agri-business movement with support of the government should get some shape this year.

Challenge 3: Environment is the third challenge. Land is a shrinking resource for agriculture. Those living near Delhi know it too well. We have to produce more from less land. Water has also become scarce. Biodiversity and forests are disappearing. Therefore, the ecological foundations, essential for sustainable agriculture, need to be conserved, protected and enhanced.

Policy trend: Measures to manage the land usage pattern and to secure and grow biodiversity will be critical. Hence, regulatory measures need a relook.

Challenge 4: It is important to attract and retain young people in farming. With more than 50 per cent of our population below the age of 30, the demographic dividend needs to be reaped. Indian youth will not opt for agriculture as a profession unless it is economically attractive and intellectually satisfying. This can happen only if there is an opportunity for technological upgradation that would give them higher returns. There is a need for marrying traditional wisdom with technology.

Policy trend: Special programmes needed to mobilise youth to undertake agriculture, along with revamp of agri-clinics and agri-business centres.

Challenge 5: To have adequate technology and infrastructure for post-harvest processes. Today, there is a mismatch between production technology and post-harvest technology. In the US and Canada, post-harvest management is highly developed, unlike India where food grains rot in godowns. There is also a need for value addition of primary products.

Policy trend: Setting up of revamped storage facilities. This has been debated within the government. A national grid of storage systems is inevitable.

The author is an agriculture scientist

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