

INDIA MUST RE-EVALUATE ITS AGROFORESTRY POLICY

Relevant for: Indian Economy | Topic: Agriculture Issues and related constraints

India on Monday assured the ongoing climate change conference at Katowice in Poland that the country is committed to meeting its climate goals. In 2015, the country, as part of the requirement ahead of the finalisation of the Paris Agreement, listed a series of specific actions it would take to fight climate change. One of the important promises that India made was that it would create 2.5 to 3 billion tonnes of additional carbon sinks through extensive afforestation. A key strategy to achieve this goal will be to promote agroforestry or farm forestry, says a report in the Hindustan Times.

This focus on agroforestry, a judicious integration of tree species with agricultural crops and/or animals, is not unexpected since the practice is now recognised as an important one to restore degraded land and improve farmers' incomes. Trees are valuable and profitable parts of agricultural systems because they provide timber, food and fuel, make soils more fertile, and protect the ecosystem services that agriculture depends upon. Agroforestry, however, is not unknown in India; it is practised across the country. But many farmers are not keen to take it up because of a lack of information on tree rotation and also the legal aspects involved in the trade of matured trees. To streamline the process, the Centre came up with the National Agroforestry Policy in 2014 to bring together various agroforestry programmes of different ministries under one platform.

While the focus on agroforestry to meet the twin objectives of meeting climate goals and improving the livelihood of farmers is laudable, there are concerns. One of the strongest criticisms is the emphasis on involving private players in the afforestation efforts, which leads to the question of benefit sharing between them and the landowners/community. Second, experts say the policy is trying to convert agricultural land into a manufacturing enterprise, which is not an ecologically sound solution. This is because agroforestry, which has a commercial motive at heart, usually leads to planting one particular species of tree. Third, an agricultural plot is not about farming only; it also supports different kinds of wildlife and communities such as pastoralists. The moment a piece of land comes under any kind of plantation, there will be questions about issues of access and community rights.

If India wants agroforestry to be the route to meet its climate goals, these serious concerns need to be sorted out first.

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