

'POLICIES BIASED AGAINST RAINFED AGRICULTURE'

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A new rainfed agriculture atlas released this week documents the policy biases that are making farming unviable.

Three out of five farmers in India grow their crops using rainwater, instead of irrigation. However, per hectare government investment on their lands may be 20 times lower, procurement of their crops is a fraction of major irrigated land crops, and many of the flagship agriculture schemes are not tailored to benefit them.

A new rainfed agriculture atlas released this week not only maps the agro biodiversity and socio-economic conditions prevailing in such areas, but also attempts to document the policy biases that are making farming unviable for many in these areas.

There has been "negligence" toward rainfed areas, which is leading to lower incomes for farmers in these regions, admitted Ashok Dalwai, CEO of the National Rainfed Area Authority. He also heads the government's Committee on Doubling of Farmers' Income.

Speaking on the sidelines of a conference on revitalising agriculture in rainfed areas, he said farmers in such areas are receiving 40% less of their income from agriculture in comparison to those in irrigated areas.

Sabyasachi Das, coordinator of the Revitalising Rainfed Agriculture Network, which published the atlas, laid out the stark differences in government policy and expenditure.

"Lands irrigated through big dams and canal networks get a per hectare investment of Rs. 5 lakh. Watershed management spending in rainfed lands is only Rs. 18,000-25,000," he said, adding that the difference in yield is not proportionate to the difference in investment.

"When it comes to procurement, over the decade between 2001-02 and 2011-12, the government spent Rs. 5.4 lakh crore on wheat and rice. Coarse cereals, which are grown in rainfed areas, only had Rs. 3,200 crore worth of procurement in the same period."

It's not just the quantum, but also the nature of investment that needs to change, he added.

Flagship government schemes, such as seed and fertiliser subsidies and soil health cards, are designed for irrigated areas and simply extended to rainfed farmers without taking their needs into consideration, said Dr. Das.

'No system'

For example, many hybrid seeds notified by the government scheme need plenty of water, fertilizer and pesticides to give high yields and are thus not useful to most rainfed farmers. Commercial fertilizers will simply burn out the soil without sufficient water. "The government has no system to channelise indigenous seeds or subsidise organic manure in the same way," he claimed.

Dr. Dalwai agreed that a more balanced approach was needed to give rainfed farmers the same research and technology focus and production support that their counterparts in irrigation areas have received over the last few decades.

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