

# THINKING BEYOND FARM SOPS

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

The year 2019 witnessed a series of interventions and disruptions in the farm sector. The first half of the year saw the launch of a grand farm sop in the form of the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM-KISAN) with a record allocation of 75,000 crore. The second half, however, was a disaster for the sector as many parts of the country witnessed drought and floods. The economic slowdown and the spiralling onion and vegetable prices burdened consumers (including farmers), providing a short respite to only a section of farmers.

This clearly reflects two things: one, populist measures have a low bearing on the economy. Second, despite several measures to reduce vulnerability of climate-induced disasters, the farm sector and farmers continue to suffer losses. Therefore, taking cognisance of past experience and leveraging on opportunities that exist is a must to boost agriculture.

Agriculture is a crucial segment for inclusive development and provides stimulus to the economy, especially when it is not doing too well. Since the country has several targets and commitments to be achieved in the next decade, it is imperative to lay a strong foundation by launching measures that can stem falling farm growth. First, the disparity in agriculture expenditure and growth drivers, mainly the subsidiary sectors, must be addressed. Despite higher growth in livestock and fisheries sector, only moderate to low expenditure was recorded. Expenditure on livestock and fisheries must be increased, as they are mainly connected with resource-poor families in rural areas and also to raise the decelerating growth rate. Moreover, the expenditure on research and development in agriculture needs to be raised from nearly 0.40% of agriculture GDP to 1% as it pays huge dividends in the long run in ameliorating poverty and improving livelihoods compared to any other investment. Considering India's dependency on agriculture and recurring climate-induced disasters, it is imperative to expand the implementation of Climate Smart Villages of the Indian Council of Agricultural Research-National Innovations on Climate Resilient Agriculture (NICRA) across the nation.

Second, the Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs), which are currently facing operational and structural issues governed by different Acts and funded by various sources, may be strengthened by bringing them under one institution, preferably an FPO Development and Regulatory Authority. A structured impetus must be given to build block chain based e-market places connecting farmers, traders, agencies, institutions and exporters on a common platform to check price fluctuations and harness decentralisation. Further, affordable technologies must be developed and deployed particularly in rural and remote areas where digital literacy of farmers has improved considerably. Key farm institutions and organisations in the front line of farm service, dealing with perishables and low shelf life commodities, must digitalise so that they are efficiently managed.

Third, large-scale investment in agriculture over several years have encouraged monoculture, threatening the environment and soil health (mainly in green revolution areas). Thus small-scale investment measures or an incentive-based system is essential to scale up sustainable practices such as agroforestry, climate-smart agriculture, ecosystem services, conservation agriculture and others. Increasing corporate social responsibility will help to tap more private investments besides encouraging private players in potential areas where production sustainability is possible.

Fourth, the government must establish a farm data agency, which can consolidate, collate and maintain farm data available at various platforms. Ongoing efforts of digitisation of land records

must also include farmer-centric advisories. The farm data agencies can also facilitate beneficiaries identification, better targeting of subsidies, support systems of various developmental programmes. Access to farm agency data for scientific institutions and all other relevant stakeholders can hasten the process of technology dissemination and aid research systems for better policies.

Fifth, commissioning ease of farming index is necessary to ascertain the progress made by national and State governments on the key indicators of farming. Possibly, the exercise can be done with active involvement of proven private/public institutions or international agencies. This perhaps stands away from the conventional assessment of effectiveness of agriculture policies and programmes that are part of the farm support system. Moreover, the exercise may foster cooperative and competitive federalism besides encouraging States which are lagging behind to catch up.

Last, the need of the hour is setting up two institutions; one, a national agricultural development council on the lines of the Goods and Services Tax Council under the chairmanship of Prime Minister for effective coordination and convergence of States on key reforms and policies; two, farmers' welfare commissions (both at the Centre and State level), as an independent institutional mechanism which will act as a neutral platform for assessing all agriculture-related issues and schemes. Involvement of centrally-funded research organisations as knowledge partners would help to coordinate and refine existing developmental schemes in agriculture and allied sectors.

It is pertinent to deliberate on an 'Indian Agricultural Service' on the lines of the Agricultural Research Service of the United States Department of Agriculture. In addition, to deal effectively with increasing droughts and floods and other extreme events, transfer of some subjects to the concurrent list is of prime importance.

In the era of global uncertainty and domestic glitches, we need well-tailored farm measures beyond short-run sops to balance the national requirement with the farmer's aspirations. Moreover, the right mix of direct benefits and price support with focused investment on resource conservation will bring stability in a farmer's income. The promised *achhe din* for all must include farmers too which is only possible with steps engaging all stakeholders and sectors.

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