

THE RIGHT CONVERGENCE

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

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The government has taken a long overdue measure by combining the Ministries of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, Rural Development and Panchayati Raj under the same minister. This will enhance convergence between programmes related to food, nutrition and livelihoods security of millions of rural households. It is a step in the right direction. But, it is not enough.

The large -scale of operations and degree of commonality between the agriculture and rural development ministries is evident from their 2019-20 interim budget estimates, and the fact that agriculture and allied activities consume some 70 per cent of resources under MGNREGA, the flagship programme of the rural development ministry. MGNREGA accounts for nearly half of the ministry's budget. Convergence of labour-intensive MGNREGA activities with productivity-oriented schemes of other ministries and states transforms MGNREGA from an essentially wage-labour safety-net programme to an instrument for rejuvenating land, water, agriculture and biodiversity.

Convergence were initiated in 2008-09 with the ministries of agriculture, water resources, land resources, environment and forests. This was to enhance the durability and productivity of the assets created under MGNREGA. Over the years, linkages have been forged with central programmes on food security, horticulture, agro-forestry, rural livelihoods, animal husbandry, fisheries, and state schemes such as Kapildhara, Sahastradhara, Bhumi Shilp and Vanya in Madhya Pradesh.

If the challenge of doubling farmers' incomes by 2022-23 has to be met, it needs to be emphasised that agriculture is a multi-dimensional enterprise. The sector is rapidly undergoing structural transformation, influenced by several factors. No longer limited to a commodity production system, the agriculture sector now embraces post-production activities like markets and value-chains in a holistic agri-food system. Simultaneously, farmer welfare, building resilience of vulnerable communities, rejuvenating natural resources, addressing climate change must be kept centrestage.

The complexities of handling an agri-food system can be gauged by the processes involved: Sustainable management of soil, water, biodiversity, climate change; input supplies such as seeds, fertilisers, plant protection, farm-machinery, irrigation, credit, insurance, extension; conservation production and agronomic practices such as soil-testing, zero-tillage, water and nutrient use efficiency; post-harvest activities in drying, sorting, grading, warehousing, cold-storages; marketing, related to village markets, mandis, contract farming, cooperatives, farmer associations, e-NAM, private markets, supermarkets; agro-processing linked to milling, preservation of perishables, transportation, supply-chain management; retailing, branding, labeling, certification of organics, bio-fortification; services for farmers' welfare such as pensions, insurance, health coverage; rural infrastructure; and rural non-farm income generation.

This requires convergence between not just two or three ministries but across at least 15 ministries bearing on agriculture and farmers. Presently the linkages between agriculture and agriculture-related non-production activities are weak. The missing links limit efficiencies accruing from coordination between agriculture, development and sustainability. There is a disconnection between agriculture and the sectors dealing with agro-processing, environmental

services, natural resources, rural non-farm livelihoods and urban and peri-urban activities.

The implementing agencies while spending their annual budgets and individually achieving their limited goals, are unable to make the desired impact on the collective outcome. Bringing agriculture and rural development under one minister is an important step but not enough. On the other hand, it is not feasible to place multiple ministries under a single minister. Overarching mechanisms and capacities need to be built that catalyse convergence between various agencies at all levels.

At the state level, the institution of agriculture production commissioner (APC) was created to coordinate between relevant departments. In the context of the holistic agri-food systems approach, going beyond commodity production, the APC needs to be reviewed so as to be aligned with the emerging realities. The district level agriculture technology management agency also requires restructuring that factors in markets and supply chains. Coordination is required between different implementing agencies, notably the district rural development agencies, krishi vigyan kendras, fish farmers development agencies, farmer producer organisations and private sector agri-service providers. The capacities of the panchayati raj institutions need to be re-oriented.

The NDA 2 government may consider constituting a cabinet committee on agriculture and rural rejuvenation. The target of doubling farmer incomes by 2022-23 is more likely to be achieved if a significant proportion of that income accrues from rural non-farm activities. There is much potential for employment generation in the holistic agri-food system. A separate agriculture budget taking into account the complementarities of agriculture-related components in various schemes will be a robust framework for an integrated approach.

The Niti Aayog's task force for structural agricultural reforms will know that while the central government can propel the nature and scope of agricultural transformation through its policy and programmes, the primary responsibility for agriculture development rests with the state governments. Partial remedies will not suffice. Comprehensive long-term measures are needed.

The writer is former secretary, Ministry of Rural Development and joint secretary, Ministry of Agriculture

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