

AGRARIAN CRISIS : THE WAY FORWARD

To provide long term solutions such agrarian problems, long term solutions are required:

1. Transition to a more ecologically resilient agriculture is necessary. This becomes even more urgent in the context of climate change. Large-scale evidence now exists that non-chemical agriculture has become a profitable alternative. As farmers reduce their dependence on synthetic fertilisers and pesticides, they slowly emerge from the ecological vicious cycle and are also able to dramatically reduce their costs of cultivation, without compromising on production.

In this regard the launching of Soil Health Card Scheme will have significant benefits. It potentially enables farmers to more carefully manage input regimes. The government must announce a comprehensive package to give a green direction to the nature of subsidies in the sector.

2. Reforms should be carried out in the management of both surface and groundwater to ensure that the water in our irrigation commands reaches the farmers for whom it is meant and groundwater is managed sustainably in a way that ensures that no one is deprived of their right to water for life. A new Model Groundwater Bill drafted by the Ministry of Water Resources is yet to see the light of the day. This landmark Bill seeks to replace archaic British Common Law from the 19th century, which has provided legal legitimacy to the over-extraction of groundwater that underpins the current agrarian crisis. The new law needs urgent adoption and advocacy with the States by the Government of India.

3. There is requirement to continued diversification to other forms of livelihood, such as livestock and fisheries, among the fastest-growing segments of the rural economy. Focus should be shifted away from water-intensive rice and wheat. This means radical changes in the way these crops (seed, water and input regimes) are grown. More over much greater encouragement to millets and pulses, which are nutritionally far superior alternatives in a country beset with the diabetes epidemic, should be given. The key change required here is aggressive and extensive procurement of these crops by the government. FCI procurement focusses only on rice and wheat although this year we saw some initial steps in the direction of procurement of pulses. This is a welcome move but needs to go much further. The best way would be to include millets and pulses in the massive anganwadi and mid-day meal programmes.

4. Investments in agro-processing infrastructure are urgently required that would enable farmers to move up the value chain. We cannot continue to have them dumping their vegetables and milk on the road. They should be processed before they are sold and farmers must get their due share in the value chain.

5. There should be ample provisions to ensure access to credit and crop insurance, especially to our 85% small and marginal farmers. The farm loan waivers destroy the integrity of the banking system and potentially undermine the extraordinary anti-poverty initiative led by Self-Help Groups (SHGs) of women across the country. So many of these extremely poor women, with more than 97% loan recovery ratios, have helped the banking system survive in remote rural India. All this great work of providing an alternative to the usurious moneylender-traders is threatened by loan waivers.

Finally, we need strong Farmer Producer Organisations, to overcome massive handicaps faced by isolated farmers and enable them to really benefit from market participation.