

Food security bill can't solve agricultural issues: Devinder Sharma

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Q: What is your opinion on FS bill that is said to critical for reaching out to deprived sections and ensuring food for all? ? What will be its impact on agriculture system?

The path to hell is always paved with good intentions. The Food Security bill is no exception. Although I agree that there is an urgent need to reach out to the deprived population, but what is more important is to ensure that the poor and hungry are able to fish for food rather than depend upon doles. Unfortunately, the people who designed the bill looked at only the distribution aspects, on how to reach food to the hungry millions. Where they missed out is the strong linkage food security has with agriculture. This disconnect with sustainable agriculture will add on to the hungry population in the years to come. On the one hand economic policies aim at pushing farmers out of agriculture, and on the other food security partially s being ensured through legal entitlements. It will therefore increase dependence on food imports in the years to come to meet the legal entitlements.

Take the case of Karnataka. It has launched a Re 1/kg rice scheme. newspaper reports tell us that Karnataka is buying rice from Chhatisgarh at about Rs 27/kg to distribute it to the hungry at Re 1/Kg. In my understanding this is not the right approach. The effort should have been to make agriculture in Karnataka profitable enough so as to increase production within the State. What Karnataka needs is a food security system based on local production, local procurement and local distribution. Karnataka can't go on creating land banks, displacing farmers and then importing food.

At the national level, land acquisition policies, encouraging commercial farming, privatising water resources, aggressive signing of Free Trade Agreements inviting flood of imports etc. have all a strong bearing on food security. By ignoring the inter-sectoral linkages, the bill has simply been designed keeping in mind the coming elections. It is a Food-for-Vote programme.

Q: Can Indian agriculture biotechnology companies/industry play a part in making its implementation a success? (through increased production/any other suggestion).

Agricultural biotechnology companies can only aggravate the agrarian crisis. There is nothing that the biotechnology companies/industry can do to ensure food security. Let us be very clear the biotech industry has failed to deliver on its promise of increasing crop productivity. All the promises it made some 30 years back, including developing plants with the ability to fix atmospheric nitrogen, have fallen flat. What India needs is to scale up the Non-pesticides management (NPM) programme that now covers approximately 10 million acres in Andhra Pradesh. As per the World Bank, NPM in Andhra has helped rejuvenate soils, groundwater, and has provided a safe environment. The yields have increased, soil health has improved, insect attack has come down, household food security has increased and of course there are no suicides in these areas.

Q: Do you think the agriculture in India unlike others has still not received its due share of attention it deserves? In what way can bioscientific methods help in propelling the growth of this sector?

Yes, agriculture has not received its due. Public investment has been on a steady decline. Area under irrigation has stagnated. Not even an additional acre has been brought under irrigation in the past decade. Canals are on the other silted. Intensive farming practices have destroyed soil fertility, mined groundwater and destroyed the natural resource base. Farmer suicides are on an upswing with over 3 lakh people dying in past 16 years. 42 per cent farmers want to quit agriculture if given a choice. And still all that the government/industry are suggesting is technological solutions. Business as usual will only add on to the prevailing agrarian crisis. The focus must shift immediately on increasing farm incomes. This will not come from any breakthrough in productivity but by providing farmers an assured monthly income. This is possible only by setting up State Farmers Income Commission.