

Criticism around Food Security Bill

23 August 2013 | Features | By Rahul Koul Koul

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Starting from the India's first green revolution, the agriculture biotechnology has played a great role in increasing the quality and productivity of important crops such as rice and wheat. Of late the overshadowing of the tremendous benefits offered by the sector due to various controversies have made it difficult for this industry to expand its base. Now the introduction of food security bill has also renewed debate on how can the sustained flow of food grains be maintained through increased production. Whether the bill can meet its purpose or not is a different case but most of the experts seem to be on the same page as far as its importance and revamp of agriculture system is concerned.

More food means more agri-output

Ram Kaundinya, Chairman, ABLE AG (Association of Biotech Led Enterprises - Agriculture Group) feels that this is surely a very progressive and socially relevant legislation. He says, "Despite being a welfare state, it is a sad fact that large number of our people has to suffer the depravity of hunger. With the stated objective of the Food Security Bill being addressing this malaise of society, if implemented well, this will redefine poverty and hunger. For the agriculture sector, this Bill will have huge implications. Clearly, there will be need for more food grains and pulses (if the new recommendations are factored in) which shall have to be met by enhanced productivity of land and increased profitability of the farmers." Mr Kaundinya in support of his view mentions that role of biotech has been exemplified by over 170 million hectare used for biotech crop by over 17 million farmers in over 28 countries worldwide.

However, there are counter arguments too. "The very idea of this populist measure looks gloomy," says Prof. P. Balasubramanian, Department of Plant Biotechnology, Centre for Plant Molecular Biology and Biotechnology, Tamil Nadu Agricultural University. He adds, "One can figure out well that the Government is desperately trying to treat for the superficial symptoms while conveniently forgetting to stem the rot lying within. The food is plenty in this country and problem is with its distribution. The lack of coordination between the state and the federal governments on this score adds insult to the injury."

Noted food and trade policy analyst, Mr Devinder Sharma while articulating his point of view mentioned, " The path to hell is

always paved with good intentions. The 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."

Mr Sharma also talks about the focus on food security system based on local production, local procurement and local distribution. He says, "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. Karnataka can't go on creating land banks, displacing farmers and then importing food."

Rajesh Krishnan, Sustainable agriculture campaigner, Greenpeace thinks that Food security Bill was a landmark opportunity for the govt to ensure sustainable food security to the country. But by truncating it to the levels that it has come to and by pushing it as an ordinance it has become more of a 'limited grain entitlement Act' and a political gimmick. If the govt was serious about food security, they would've ensured that there are provisions in this legislation for ensuring sustainable production of diverse food crops. Unfortunately the Food security ordinance has nothing new to offer. It is just old wine in new bottle. The only thing that is appreciable is the statutory right of Right to food for those covered under the already existing food entitlement schemes.

Agricultural research holds key to productivity

"Without the right price, why farmers should go in for producing more and more of it?,"asks Prof. Balasubramanian. "How many food crops which came to fruition through biotech research have been permitted by this government? As long as our food policy is going to be decided only by the external forces and not by the pressing needs of the masses, the Indian biotech industry whose hands remain tied cannot deliver the goods. Bioscientific methods have a lot to contribute in terms of yield and quality (The best example is Bt cotton) only when the vested interests like Green Forces are going to be kept away."

Ram Kaundinya, strongly believes agri biotech sector will have an important role to play. "Biotech can help in addressing biotic and abiotic stresses that our crops undergo and help the farmers to increase the productivity of the land in the face of such stress factors. We have 100m ha of rainfed land in the country and there is a need to mitigate the risks of these farmers and help them to produce more if we have to address the supply side of the equation involving the food security bill. It is important to address the supply side if we have to ensure the sustainability of the measures being proposed on the demand side. The seed and biotech industry can help in propelling the growth of Indian agriculture. By enhancing productivity, the agri biotech sector will surely be in a position to contribute to realizing the objectives of the bill."

"While Agri Biotechnology has some scope in increasing productivity, one also needs to ensure that risky biotechnologies like Genetic Engineering and its products like GM crops are not promoted." opines Rajesh Krishnan sustainable agriculture campaigner, Greenpeace. He adds further, "Data shows that biotechnology techniques like marker assisted breeding are actually delivering on ground and these should be promoted. Here again one needs to ensure that this does not lead to monopolies over seeds. However Mr Krishnan is of the opinion that any technology that leads to control of seeds being taken away from farm communities should not be promoted."

Striking a different note, Devinder Sharma feels that 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."

Despite neglect, the sector can still deliver

Many agriculture activists believe that instead of suggesting technological solutions, government and industry must help in providing farmers an assured monthly income. Few also suggest a shift in the paradigm towards ecological farming, which ensures livelihood security for farm communities, sustainability of natural resources of water, soil, biodiversity and climate which are essential for farming and food security for the country. Agreeing with this point of view, Devinder Sharma says, "Forty two percent of farmers want to quit agriculture if given a choice. Business as usual will only add on to the prevailing agrarian crisis. The focus must shift immediately on increasing farm incomes through State Farmers Income Commission."

Giving a different perspective, Ram Kaundinya mentions, "Agri-biotech, by its sheer dynamism, and potential to arrest yields losses stand to significantly enhance the incomes of farmers, provide sustained food supplies and strengthen country's standing in the world market. There is no doubt that more investments are required in creating more infrastructural support for agriculture (roads, power, storage facilities, etc) and we need more investment in research."

One of the critical factors that will ensure long-term success of this bill would be on the creation of an enabling environment for enhancing the productivity of our agriculture through the adoption of modern technologies and practices. Apart from that the increased research spending in agricultural research in seeds, crop protection and plant nutrition will help in creating sustainable agriculture that can meet our future food demand. The farmers have to be empowered and encouraged through much better system in place. Most important are those who are at the receiving end of the chain who most often don't get the benefit. The bill will be relevant only if there is proper corruption free system to feed them. These are the areas that the government needs to focus on.