

DHAKA MONDAY FEBRUARY 23, 2009

Food security

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Rewarding results

In some villages of Kurigram, Rajshai, Jamalpur, Khulna etc. small and marginal farmers had long been growing traditional paddy -- with pitifully low output -- when their counterparts in other parts of the country have already marched towards modern varieties. The land on which Pajjam was grown in Kurigram @ of 6-7 maunds per bigha, farmers now grow 12-13 maunds of BR33 per bigha. FoSHoL changed the mindset of these poor farmers and forced them to reshuffle their risk-strategy. Thus, from one bigha of land they can now manage additional 3-4 maunds (120-160 kg) of rice equivalent of paddy. Assuming daily requirement of 2.5kg per 5-member household, the resource poor household seemingly stands safe for 1.2 additional months of food. Line sowing, scientific preservation of seeds, links with extension also add to the quantum of food available and that remains to be recognised. So, to ensure food security, we learn that the prime propeller is technology and extension.

But modern crops also need expensive inputs. Where should the extra money come from? The poor households formed a group (of 20-22 members) imbued with the spirit of cooperative instinct. They deposit Tk.5-10/week to a common fund run by their elected members. The money is kept in banks. The members can borrow at very easy terms (say at 10-15 percent interest rate) with an accommodative installment payment policy. Monitoring, screening and servicing are done by the group. They now plan to raise group's savings by investing in fish culture, leasing in khas lands, transplanting trees on road side on

contract etc. By and large, apparently, access to credit is not a very big problem for them.

While access to technology and finance could postpone the pains of FS for a while, the question of capacity for coping crisis on a sustainable basis looms large on the horizon. That needs an overall capacity building within the household. To this end, women have been drawn to form separate groups (also they join with males). All the abovementioned activities are done by women themselves: group formation, deposit mobilisation, record keeping, technology adoption etc. To ensure FS for these households, FoSHoL prompted them to be prominent in terms of decision making, allocation of land, children's education and health etc. Thus, unused homestead land is now widely filled with vegetable cultivation for extra income and consumption. Again, note that one-third of respondents reported loss of livestock and poultry as shocks faced by them. Knowledge about vaccination, worming, fattening etc has reduced mortality rates of livestock and poultry birds and increased income and consumption. Thus, it is not surprising that these women now share 40-45 per cent of the household income compared to almost none previously. And by virtue of their contribution, they have become more empowered than before.

In Rajshahi areas, attempts are there to work on tenants' rights. In some places, tenants have got written contract to cultivate land for specified periods with stipulated win-win share of crops. As a result of this, the incentive problem has reduced with positive impacts on land productivity. In other places, khas land had been turned into



'bazaar' so that small and marginal farms get access to markets to produce surplus. Wholesalers collect perishable products from these bazaars.

The feel good factor

The feelings of the target households about the changes are very important. First, they feel that they have better FS than before: number of months without three meals a day came down. Second, land is more productively used than before and changes in cropping pattern and land use opened the doors for extra income. Third, they can now meet demands of children at ease

as women have extra income. Fourth, women have become worthier to husbands as they contribute to the household kitty. And finally, because of the knowledge gained from FoSHoL, they have become more respectful to the villagers who, sometimes, come seek their advice.

Conclusions

The bottom line of the discussion is as follows. Food Security is not a forbidden fortress. It requires neither heavy dose of dolls nor demands a creed of credit. Only agricultural and rural development can ensure FS for the

poor. In many cases, it is the ignorance of the households that, to an extent, ignites food insecurity for them. Even very poor households could improve upon FS provided they know how to best utilise the meagre amount of resources at their disposal.

FS thus rests on research on new crops and extension to disseminate findings, women's participation and innovative institutional arrangements. Let us facilitate FS for households rather than funding it.

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Agri development



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technologies, investing in agricultural research in collaboration with international organizations, developing rural infrastructure including reliable and expanded irrigation systems, bringing ecologically unfavorable areas under cultivation, strengthening extension services, improving marketing services, providing quality seeds through public-private partnerships and ensuring rural financial services.

Reevaluation of the food and agricultural strategies and policies in Bangladesh has therefore, become a top priority. Certain basic issues have

to be considered in this context. In particular, it appears in the light of recent developments in global market which are likely to persist in future that for staple food like rice, self-sufficiency rather than self-reliance is a more sensible policy to pursue. Various studies have shown that Bangladesh has a comparative advantage in rice production for import substitution, if not for export. So all efforts should be geared to achieve this objective. An increase in population by almost 2 million every year means that the country should target an increase in production by 0.35 million tons of rice every year.

Moreover, the current deficit of 2.5 million tons need to be met by incremental domestic production. Roughly a 3.5 per cent annual growth in rice production need to be targeted to ease the situation within the next five years or so. An increase in investment in research and development would take time to have its full impact on foodgrain production. Possible medium-term measures include, among others, (a) adoption of hybrid rice (b) use of quality seeds (c) reducing yield gaps through better crop management and (d) efficient operation of input markets to ensure timely availability of essential inputs at reasonable prices. An important area in which public sector involvement is critical is agricultural research, education and training for generation of knowledge, information and technology. Because of severe land constraint, sustainability of growth in crop production in the coming decades will depend on the government's continued support to developing agricultural technologies, improving farming practices, and transferring new technologies to the farmers. Resources for agricultural research and development have been made available by some donors and also by the government. Proper utilization of these resources and the institutional arrangements required for the same need to be examined and recommendations formulated. This will be extremely important in the medium and long term context. The NARS need to be adequately supported -- and their collaboration with the IARS strengthened.

Agriculture in Bangladesh has undergone major transformation, including changes in its structure, resource base, technology and organization of production. The changes were led by crop production, especially production of rice. The near-

stagnation of foodgrain production in the first half of the 1990s gave way to a significant surge in rice production during the later years, which not only drastically reduced the 'food gap' but made the country nearly self-sufficient in foodgrain production. There has, however, been some deceleration in growth of foodgrain output in recent years. In the context of these developments, there is a need to re-thinking of the agricultural and rural development strategies to cope with changed circumstances.

Except for a few import-competing crops such as sugarcane and oilseeds, Bangladesh has comparative advantage in the production of most agricultural crops. The exploitation of this potential will, however, depend on investment in developing infrastructure for storage, processing, marketing and financial services, for which public support is needed. Investment for reliable supply of power in rural areas, development and maintenance of an efficient transport network, and modern communications facilities for low-cost and timely exchange of information is crucial. The development of infrastructure will also reduce the cost of processing, storage and marketing of fisheries and livestock production which will encourage private sector investment in these activities. Investment strategies in these areas merit serious examination for formulating recommendations for the medium and long term.

In response to changing pattern of demand with growing income and urbanization, the future strategies needs emphasis on promoting non-cereals crops, fish, and livestock products. Faster development of livestock and fisheries will also contribute to equity and food security by focusing on disadvantaged social groups and regions where the crop production

environment is unfavourable. The promotion of rice-fish cropping system in the deepwater floodplain and saline-affected coastal areas (areas bypassed by the green revolution) could help improve economic conditions of the rural poor in these less developed regions. Agricultural diversification (with potential for exports) will also need to be considered in the new global scenario. To face the challenges of emerging global opportunities, WTO rules provide several opportunities which Bangladesh agriculture can capitalize under the Agreement on Agriculture (AoA). Bangladesh, as a least developed country, is exempted from reduction commitments on tariffs, export subsidies and domestic support to agriculture. In the present situation, Bangladesh can increase support to agriculture without violating the provision of WTO to avail emerging opportunities along several directions: geographically fast growing export markets; horizontally increasing the spread of export commodities; and vertically increasing value added of export commodities.

The priority for Bangladesh, therefore, is to ensure sustained rural development along with productivity growth in agricultural production, development of efficient markets to facilitate food distribution and storage, strengthening emergency preparedness to address transitory food insecurity, expanding income generating opportunities of the poor and food-insecure households along with targeted interventions to address immediate needs, and improving nutritional outcomes through raising consumption of safe and nutrient-rich foods among the vulnerable groups.

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