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AGRI EXPECTATIONS

RIDING HIGH ON BUDGET PROSPECTS





Food Subsidy Critical For Achieving SDGs

India Required To Have 'No Poverty' And 'Zero Hunger' By 2030

As per commitment to the UN to meet SDGs, India is required to have 'no poverty' and 'zero hunger' by 2030.

Such a stupendous task definitely needs a determined action and policy support of the government.

The recent cabinet deci-

sion to extend food subsidy till the end of 2023 under the National Food Security Act (NFSA, 2013), also called Food Law, is indeed a bold step of the Prime Minister Shri Narendra

Modi towards achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs).

Thanks mainly to the Green, White, Blue and Rainbow revolutions, India is able to achieve household food security and reduce poverty from earlier 70.0 to now 16.4% and also help in eliminating hunger to a major extent. Despite this, we still have 5.7 million children (around 40%) below 5 years of age, who are mal-



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Economic And Ecological Access To Food For The Poor

The proposed free distribution of 5 kg foodgrains through the targeted public distribution system (TPDS) to 81.35 crore people, as pronounced by Shri Piyush Goyal, Minister of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution is indeed laudable. Additionally, the provision of 35 kg foodgrains (21 kg rice + 14 kg wheat) to very poor families under the Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY), is expected to cost the exchequer around 2 lakh crores annually. No doubt, these initiatives will ensure both economic and ecological access to food for the poor.

Globally, NFSA is considered a unique Parliamentary Act of Government of India to address the concern of the poor for their food and nutrition security, economic stability, long term health benefits, women empowerment, and environmental security. In this context, India is also fortunate to have a comfortable buffer stock position (ranging between 50 - 70 million tons during the last one decade), whereas according to the World Food Programme (WFP) availability of food is becoming a major concern for many developing countries.

During Covid, globally around 150



million additional people, above the earlier 800 million below poverty line, have become food-insecure. Prior to Covid, 815 million people were estimated to be hungry, and every third person was malnourished, reflecting a food system out of balance. Present distress migration is also at unprecedented high level in the past 70 years threatening the social cohesion and cultural traditions of rural people due to limited access to land and water resources.

Ripple Effects Of The War In Ukraine

According to the World Food Program (WFP), a global food crisis fuelled by conflict, climate shocks and Covid has emerged because of the ripple effects of the war in Ukraine driving rising prices of

food, fuel and fertiliser. As a result, millions of people across the world are at the risk of being driven into starvation unless action is taken on priority by the developing countries to respond together and at scale. Fortunately, in India, in addition to NFSA and AAY, we have a National Nutrition Mission, also called POSHAN Abhiyan, aiming to reduce the number of stunted children to 25%. Also, an effective implementation of the Mid-Day Meal Scheme (1995), with strategy around increased use of milk, pulses and also soybean having double protein (40%) than all pulses, will obviously help overcome the problem of malnourishment among children.

The decision of merging PM Garib Kalyan Anna Yojna (PMGKAY), started 28 months back owing to Covid with that



of NFSA, and providing now 5 kg grains free of cost to almost 81.35 crore is another step towards long term sustainability, presuming that NFSA is likely to continue till 2030 with an aim to achieve SDGs. At the same time, a critical review as to whether all 81 crore (around 58%) people proposed to be covered under the Act really need free ration is urgently warranted.

The Impact of MGNREGS

It is appreciative that support under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), started in 2006, with current outlay of Rs 98,000 crore, has helped reduce poverty by a third (32%). The smallholders and marginal farmers (with < 2 ha), accounting for nearly 86.2 percent of 146 million farm families, tilling around 47.4 per cent of total cultivable land and accounting for > 50 per cent of the total agricultural production, are vital not only for India's agrarian economy (10th Agriculture Census 2015-16), but also for alleviating current problems of hunger and poverty in the country.

It must be recognised that SDGs do present a unique opportunity for the agricultural sector to get aligned for achieving a better tomorrow as we do have the largest number of undernourished and poor people in the world. Therefore, the current pace to achieve SDGs will have to be accelerated through higher agricultural growth. Obviously, there is no room for complacency.

It is imperative, therefore, that high

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priority is accorded to agricultural research for development (AR4D), with enhanced budgetary allocation to ICAR, which unfortunately has remained stagnant for almost the last one decade. On the contrary, returns from investment in AR4D are 10 -15 times, much higher than any other sector be it education, energy, road, transport, infrastructure etc.

Well-Designed Strategy Warranted

SDGs are both an opportunity and a future vision for India. It is also quite evident now that for meeting SDGs at the global level, India emerges at the centre stage requiring urgent action to achieve them well in targeted time (2030), failing which, probably UN targets would not

be met globally. In view of this, a well-designed strategy with a well monitored implementation plan is warranted. Some suggestions are made below.

* Scaling agricultural growth in a Mission Mode approach around: (i) promoting nutri-rich high yielding varieties and hybrids, (ii) adoption of GM food crops such as Mustard, Soybean, Maize etc., (iii) crop diversification and conservation agriculture for sustainable intensification, (iv) promoting secondary and specialty agriculture, (v) using local food systems ecoregion-wise, with emphasis on farming systems around crops, horticulture, livestock, fishery, agro-forestry, etc.

* Providing enabling policy environment and institutional infrastructure for improving sustainable development index (SDI) in the regions that remained by passed by the green revolution, but otherwise offer great potential being rich in natural resources so critical for accelerated agricultural growth, and

* Revisiting and strengthening the on-going national programmes aiming to ensure rural credit, health insurance, crop and livestock insurance, housing for the poor, improved and efficient irrigation/micro-irrigation systems, construction of village godowns, youth skill development and self-employment, need based fertilizer use based on soil test analysis, linking farmers to markets, including eNAM, etc.

In conclusion, time is short and we need to act fast to achieve SDGs for better food, nutrition and environmental security for all.