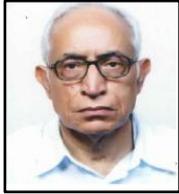


OPERATIONALIZING FARMERS WELFARE



In August 2015, the Government of India, renamed Ministry of Agriculture as Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare (MoA&FW), explicitly recognizing farmers' welfare as the core of agricultural development in India. The Government of India also initiated an ambitious program of doubling farmers' income by 2022-23. Mr Suresh Kumar in this blog suggests two steps to move forward to operationalize the concept of Farmers' Welfare.

CONTEXT

Renaming of Ministry of Agriculture as Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare (MoA&FW) on the 27 August 2015 has expanded the ambit and mandate of the ministry beyond the traditional mandate of production. Farmers' welfare depends on enhancing farm production and income. The Government of India declared an ambitious mission to double farmers' income by 2022-23. Ministry of Agriculture has appointed a committee on Doubling Farmers Income (DFI) under Dr Dalwai, Special Secretary (Agr.). The report brought out by the committee is structured through 14 volumes. Volume XI 'Empowering the Farmers through Extension and Knowledge Dissemination' (MoA&FW, 2017) has been uploaded on the website for suggestions. The committee has made a range of recommendations (Prasad, 2018).



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As brought out by the committee, farmers depend upon timely and synchronous delivery of various services across the value chain including timely supply of quality inputs at reasonable costs, supply of production inputs including water and power (as provided and promised), extension services for supporting good agricultural practices and dealing with farmers' problems including dealing with incidence of pests and diseases, tackling

contingencies of climate change and marketing support. He/she also needs support to address the increasing farm distress which has spread to several parts of the country. Though farmers suicides is the worst manifestation of farmer distress, distress has become a part of day to day struggle for the farmers which needs to be taken note of, even if the farmers are not agitating or taking the extreme step. This blog focuses on two aspects that need urgent attention.

Action 1: Farmers' Charter and Single Window Delivery of Services for Ease of Doing Farming

The different types of services required by a farmer are currently provided by a large number of departments and public and private sector enterprises. Standards for inputs and some services provided to farmers have been prescribed. The Central Ministries and State Departments have formulated citizens' charters providing standards of services to be provided to citizens by them. Many state governments have also enacted right to services legislation to enforce these service standards.



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Enactment of legislations and prescribing service standards are welcome, but they need to be carried forward, enlarged, enriched and; supplemented, restructured and reorganized as a Farmers' Charter, to ensure that farmers are able to access all the services required by them easily, without hassles and of the requisite quality through one platform.

Formulation of Farmers' Charter was recommended by the Working Group on Agriculture Extension for the 12th Plan:

"A farmers' charter may be adopted and declared by every organization (public as well as private) providing services to farmers. The charter shall indicate the quantity, quality, price and timeliness of services to be provided. This should be uploaded in the proposed "Farmers' Portal" and its implementation should be monitored. One officer in each organization should be designated for grievance redressal based on complaints relating to the farmers' charter. They should also file complaints with the Consumer Courts."

DFI Committee has mentioned the enforcement of Farmers' Charter as one of the 24 roles of the agricultural extension personnel. The concept of Farmers' Charter is not new. However its articulation by the DFI Committee has imparted a sense of urgency. The concept accordingly needs to be developed and operationalized.

Farmers' Charter requires ensuring that all departments and agencies, public and private, formulate Farmers' Charter and include every service required by the farmers and standards are prescribed for all these services. The quantities and schedule of supplies and services to be delivered by private service providers also need to be prescribed by the field officers as part of the farm plans, under respective licensing provisions and all these, incorporated in the Farmers' Charters of the private service providers. This obligation of the private service providers needs to be incorporated in the regulations governing the agencies.

Accessing these services by approaching the entire range of public and private agencies and within the framework of the respective Acts and the respective Charters is a major challenge for the farmers, being tedious, time consuming and sub effective, making major demands on the time of the farmers, already under pressure for completing various farm operations and tackling various constraints. DFI Committee eg lists 97 public sector extension agencies. Besides it will be difficult for the farmers to decide which agency to approach for specific service.

Single Window System concept has been successfully introduced as part of ease of doing business. This concept needs to be extended to the Farm Sector. There is accordingly a need to extend the concept of Single Window System to agriculture by developing the concept, compiling and declaring Farmers' Charter by the nodal department i.e., Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare, at the center and the Agriculture Departments across various states. The charter should include details of all services required by the farmers and also the responsible public and private sector agencies and the methodologies for ensuring compliance with the services. This should also require the department to facilitate grievance redressal. This could eg include approaching the statutory authorities in case of quality complaints.

What is mentioned above is only a concept. Operationalising the same shall be an immense task considering the very large number of agencies involved. DFI Committee eg The Directorate of Extension (DOE) under the MoA&FW may hold a workshop in collaboration with MANAGE (National Institute of Agricultural Extension Management) to initiate this process.

Action 2: Alleviating Farmer Distress-Real Time Connect with the Farmers

Continuing media coverage of farmer suicides has shaken the nation's conscience reminding the pathos of the movie 'Peepli Live'. But unlike the movie, farmers in every state have started uniting and agitating for their rights and these are being reported daily. The farmers are extending their demand for loan waiver beyond short term loans, to waiver off other loans and non-payment of dues such as electricity dues.



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Concerns are also being expressed about the impact of loan waivers on credit culture. Broad public support for their demands, gathering strength of their movements and the socio-economic dimensions of the problem has posed a major challenge before the government. The human dimension of the distress also affects the capacity of the farmers to undertake farm operations, which ultimately affects farm production and/or incomes.

Extension - the frontline interface with the farmers, needs to position itself towards alleviation of farmers' distress as its core mandate. Counseling for farmers' wellbeing, facilitation and feedback are also recommended as duties of the agriculture extension by the DFI committee. It provides for extension system to identify a distressed individual, provide necessary advice to overcome the distress and most importantly offer psychological counseling and where needed, guidance on actions to overcome the distress. Farmers, like any other societal unit, have aspirations, needs, concerns and problems which vary from area to area and farmer to farmer. Even if the extension is not responsible for various non-farm issues causing distress to farmers such as unemployment, health and drinking water, they may need to bring the same to the concerned authority. Different agencies are responsible for addressing issues related to inputs, marketing, water, power etc., but these need to be monitored and escalated by extension staff to the concerned authorities.

As a long term measure, extension requires a deep and comprehensive understanding of the concerns at both individual and group level before decisions are taken for individual concerns. Policy formulations require long term studies across farming situations and farmer groups and households. A team of researchers from Punjab Agricultural University (PAU), Telangana State Agricultural University and Marathwada Agricultural University are presently working on preparation of a "Stress Index" for farmers and a training manual for village level volunteers to counsel farmers. This initiative, as brought out by DFI Committee, is very important. However, going forward, there is need to provide an institutional framework. An All India Coordinated Project on studying farm distress and suggesting remedial measures shall be an ideal vehicle for such studies. There is a further need to designate an institution/center as coordinating center for such studies.

Working group on Agriculture extension for the 12th plan had constituted a sub group on Agrarian Distress and Conflicts, INSTA Response and Farm Studies (GoI, 2011). It had recommended establishment of such a center in MANAGE.

Beyond the long term studies, farmer distress needs to be addressed in the short term by escalating every concern relating to any component to the higher level for corrective action. Ideally, potential causes need to be identified after every farm season for corrective action in the following season. The ambit of SREP (Strategic Research and Extension Plan) also needs to be suitably modified and extended to include farmers' distress.

FINAL REMARKS

Comprehensive strategy shall be evolved and operationalized soon after considering report of DFI Committee. Above two aspects are brought out for consideration of the policy makers.

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