

FOOD SYSTEMS DIALOGUES (FSDs)
DELHI, 25-26 OCTOBER 2018
CO-ORGANIZED BY BHARAT KRISHAK SAMAJ

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*This Summary Report was developed by the FSDs Secretariat, and its contents have not yet received agreement by the co-organizer. The format of FSDs Summary Reports is under development. This report may be subject to change

Executive Summary

Over two days on 25-26 October 2018 a Food Systems Dialogues (FSDs) event took place in Delhi, India, co-organized by Bharat Krishak Samaj. A broad number of issues were discussed, specific to the food systems context in India. For example, focus was given to how to address the urgent issue of poor farmer livelihoods in India, where smallholder farmers are frequently unable to produce adequate yield to provide for their families and make a living, leading to an alarming rate of suicide in the farmer population.

Approximately 100 participants attended, from field workers in farmer welfare, to government officials, to NGO representatives.

In respect of local expectations, the FSDs format was adjusted. The event took place in the form of a series of presentations from participants nominated by Bharat Krishak Samaj, followed by question-answer sessions with all participants, and interspersed with opportunities for discussion.

As is the norm at FSDs events, all ideas outlined in this Summary Report are not attributed to any particular individual or organization. Each idea did not necessarily receive universal support from all participants at the event; rather, the aim of this report is to capture recommendations made at the event, in order to allow continuity and consensus - a 'red thread' - to emerge across all FSDs events. In particular, given the fact that this event consisted in large part of a number of presentations by individuals, the proposals and views in this document often reflect the opinions of an individual, rather than consensus from a group.

Proposals

Proposal 1: Farmers could form collectives to increase their influence

Farmers will be empowered if they work through producer organizations and there is scope for more: such cooperative arrangements enable farmers to pool resources and increase their agency and bargaining power both at the marketplace and in exchanges with authorities.

This approach has been successful in India. For example, milk farmers have successfully exerted influence over monopolistic market players to overcome their price dominance.

More could be done to support individual farmers so that they can band together to become serious players in the market.

Proposal 2: The Minimum Support Price scheme could be reviewed

There is evidence to suggest that Minimum Support Prices (MSPs) are not achieving their original purpose, and therefore this scheme should be reviewed, reconsidered or reformed.

MSPs, i.e. a protection from market price fluctuations which hurt growers, are only helpful if the farmer actually produces a surplus of grain which can be sold on the market. Given the small quantities of food which most Indian farmers produce on their smallholder farms, for many agriculture households (~40%), the majority of food is consumed by the farmer and their family, with only trivial amounts sold for profit.

In the cases where farmers do produce a surplus, the usefulness of MSPs in protecting livelihoods in India depends on the combined effect of international prices and market prices in India; if the international market price is lower than the MSP in India, then it will be more difficult to sell Indian produce. Therefore, MSP policy should consider strategies to mitigate the risk of stockpiling of unsold goods in India. In this area, lessons could be learnt from China's experience with MSPs.

Proposal 3: Technology could be leveraged to improve livelihoods

A new approach could be taken to using technology to support farmer livelihoods, given that trials of advanced technologies have not always worked in the past.

The government should consider whether it is worthwhile developing new technologies, modelled on what is being used overseas, or whether it is in fact more suitable to encourage time-tested practices which have been developed for success specifically in the Indian context.

Given the high penetration of mobile phones among farmers, there is a lot of potential in leveraging mobile phone technology to deliver messages to farmers.

Proposal 4: The government should invest in the infrastructure that is needed for farmers to achieve their potential for income and prosperity

A key part of reforms should be increased investment in infrastructure to enable farmers to sell their produce for a good price. Significant investment is required to ensure that all farmers (both grain and livestock) have fair access to markets. For example, a greater number of cool storage and transport trucks are required in order for milk to make its way to the consumer without curdling. Consumers are now often 1000s of kilometers away from the location where food is produced.

The government should consider different models to support investment in infrastructure, including the use of government funds, public-private partnerships, or incentivizing private investment.

Proposal 5: The visibility and significant role of women farmers should be increased

Numerous studies have shown that 70% of labor that goes into producing crops in India is women's labor. Despite this, farmers are generally referred to as 'he' and imagined as men, not women.

The first thing that needs to change is the visibility of women farmers. We need women farmers to be explicitly talked about, acknowledged and identified. Gender disaggregated data needs to be collected and utilized in policy discussions and decisions.

Only once we acknowledge the existence of women farmers can we turn to the substantial issues that need to be addressed such as land ownership and ownership of other resources.

Proposal 6: There is a good case for India's agriculture and food policies to be managed centrally so as to have a greater focus on nutrition, ecosystems and livelihoods

Agriculture policy should be managed by the central government. At present, some components are managed by states and some by the central government, and this is creating inefficiencies.

The primary justifications for moving to a centrally managed approach are:

- The fact that differences in agriculture taxation schemes in the different states cause market distortions

- The ability to implement uniform standards in production and marketing, helping both producers and consumers. On the consumer side, this could give people more reliable tools to differentiate between real healthy food and food which is simply being marketed as healthy
- The ability to promote a strong grasp of key principles across all actors in food systems, given that it is easier to disseminate standardized information than piecemeal information

Proposal 7: There could be increased access to technology that permits more precise use of fertilizers, and adjustments to fertilizer subsidies

Farmer productivity could be improved by enabling farmers to access technologies that permit the use of precision fertilisers (eg nano-fertilizers). Patterns of subsidy must be changed in regards to fertilizers. There are currently certain subsidies given in the fertilizer industry; these could be transferred from industry to farmers to empower farmers to better manage nutrients and soil themselves.

Proposal 8: Farmers could be encouraged to adjust their practices to use water more efficiently

Measures should be put in place to promote a change in behavior among farmers towards using less water. India is a water-starved country, and yet water is misused and not properly recycled. The government could create a system of fines to penalize those who misuse water, or promote drip irrigation for more efficient water use.

Proposal 9: Diversity of insects needs to be maintained on farms

Chemical farming should be better managed because at present it is leading to a decrease in diversity of insects and, relatedly, an increase in the incidence of resistant pests affecting farmers' crops. Currently, 75% of insects are gone as a result of chemicals used during farming.

Insects, left alone, regulate themselves, and do not become pests. Nature does not create pests, farming create pests; therefore, taking steps to maintain biodiversity ensures that you do not turn insects into pests.

Proposal 10: Actors working on food need to adopt a systems approach

Those involved in food production and consumption need to think in terms of systems, because sustainability and nutrition are outcomes that can only be achieved by different sectors working together.

In India, there is a shift in policy making from using food security as the primary objective to seeing well-functioning food systems as the desirable outcome, contributing to health for everyone, sustainable climate-compatible environments, and providing opportunities for prosperity for those who provide the food eaten by Indians.