

Agriculture in transition

Youths are turning away from farm work due to the emergence of new opportunities

OPINION

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NEPAL'S agriculture is now at a critical juncture. It is moving from traditional to modern practices. Indicators in the Nepal Living Standards Survey (NLSS)—percentage of households with land holdings, average size of land holdings and percentage of households engaged in agriculture—reveal that a huge section of the population has left the farm sector and moved to other areas in recent decades. However, the percentage of agricultural households using chemical fertilisers and modern agro equipment has increased notably. A shift in crop cultivation patterns and crop-wise share in the agriculture GDP illustrate that food crop farming has been losing attraction in the farming community.

The Tarai contains more than 55 percent of the country's farm land. It contributes 47 percent of the agriculture GDP. The region is critical for the nation's food security as most of the food crop cultivation is done here. However, in recent decades, a structural shift has been taking place there rapidly and silently. Such a shift could threaten the country's food security in the days to come.

Two decades ago, irrigation facilities, road access and supply of chemical fertilisers were poor. Subsistence farming was widely practiced, and the living standard of the farmers was miserable. Even then, about 90 percent of the household heads were engaged in farming because there was no other option. Now the scenario has changed. Expanded foreign employment and newly emerged sectors such as grocery, tea shop, vehicle repair, stationery, beauty parlour, private school, poultry farming and fresh house and construction which are being pushed up by the inflow of remittance are providing better options to youths on the farms. As a result, they have become disinclined to continue working in agriculture.

Three dimensions come together while issues of agriculture development are brought into discussion. One, it must be able to supply healthy food, as per the country's requirement, sufficiently and at cheaper rates. Two, it should provide a decent living standard to the farmers. Third, biodiversity as a whole should not deteriorate. The government of Nepal, with the idea that modernisation and commercialisation of agriculture will address the needs of the country, has implemented 11 periodic plans. In addition, it has also devised and enacted the Agriculture Perspective Plan, Agriculture Development Policy and other policies and programmes related with agriculture. However, progress has not been visible in any of the dimensions.

For example, growth and income levels are frustrating compared to other sectors. The success stories reported in the media have been only about cash crops and livestock. However, food growers have been facing hard times and getting no benefits due to a mismatch between increased wage rates and marginal revenue productivity of labourers. So youths from these households are disinterested to

continue farming. The little farming they have been doing is directed at protecting their parental property. It seems that they will leave the land fallow sooner or later.

Meanwhile, in the case of food security, 41 districts are suffering from a food deficit, compared to 38 districts in 1997. Moreover, food availability per person per year was 270 kg in 1997, and now it is just 272 kg. Farm lands have become polluted due to haphazard use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides, and food grain has become unsafe for consumption. In addition, traditional landraces and indigenous farming knowledge have deteriorated terribly which could be a threat to biodiversity and future food security. Studies show that eight out of 32 rare plants have already become extinct in Nepal, and about 80-90 percent of local rice varieties have been replaced in the Chitwan, Kathmandu and Trishuli valleys only.

Therefore, separate but objective policies are required for cash and food crops. In the case of cash crops, the country should move toward modernisation and commercialisation considering its comparative advantage and farmers' aspirations. In order to realise these objectives, investments have to be made in technological advancement, trade related infrastructure, human resource development and R&D. Programmes to increase the country's trade negotiation capacity and promote internationally prescribed agriculture practices are required to reap the benefits from enhanced market access.

Regarding food crop farming, government policy should address the problem of food insecurity, retain the required land for food crop farming and promote sustainable use of agro biodiversity at a time. As the opportunity cost of food farming is increasing, the objectives cannot be pursued without government support and protection. Particularly, the government should facilitate the use of modern farm equipment, support production of organic fertilisers and invest in irrigation facilities. Also, traditional farming practices of variety development and maintenance as well as conservation of local varieties need to be supported. This would contribute to reducing climate change vulnerability in agriculture, avoid the adverse effects of commercialised farming and keep biodiversity rich.

There is no doubt that the population has to be transferred to other sectors from agriculture in the long run. However, at the same time, adequate land has to be retained for food crop farming. In this context, Land Use Policy 2012 is praiseworthy. It has adopted a strategy to promote contract farming, cooperative farming and equipment-led cultivation and harvesting. It is also conscious about checking haphazard land fragmentation and urbanisation. But it has not categorised agricultural land further into food crop and cash crop. It has also ignored the normative analysis of land use while defining the methodology prescribed for land use categorisation. However, an urgent need is formation of legal mechanisms and institutions—conceived in the policy—that could ensure effective implementation of the provisions set out in the policy such as mutually exclusive use of land.

(Ghimire is associated with SAW-TEE. The views expressed in the article are personal.)