

Report of the Meeting on Agriculture

Venue: Conference Hall, Nagapattinam Collectorate

Date: 7th February, 2005, 4 pm

Introduction

Agriculture being one of the major sources of livelihood after fishery for the coastal population, the loss to agriculture in tsunami poses a major challenge for those who are in the forefront of relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction process. As any negative trend in agricultural production leads to the total imbalance in the food security of the nation and the livelihood of the concerned communities, the problem need immediate attention from all sides. In this context, the meeting discussed the damages on the agricultural front and the ways to handle them.

Nature of Damage to Agriculture

The nature of damage to agriculture as discussed in the meeting can be summarized as a) salinity in the agricultural land b) sand/mud casting on the land c) standing crop loss and d) salinity in ground water. In most of the affected areas up to 90 cm of the land is affected with salinity that made it unsuitable for further cultivation in the near future. There is sizable mud/sand deposit on the land the removal of which needs extensive efforts. In most of the areas JCBs are needed to remove this deposit. It is estimated that out of the 10,000 hectors of cultivated area, standing crops were in around 5,000 hectors. The loss of these crops was a big blow to the farming community. The salinity of ground water shall be neutralized only if the area is blessed with adequate shower. The monsoon seems to come only after summer and hence the showers can be expected only after 5-7 months from now. The cost for removal of salinity, digging of drainage and applying organic compost is around Rs.10, 000/- per hectare. In short, there are constraints like unfavorable weather, limited resource availability and limited effectiveness of popular technologies that we have to face while dealing with the issues of agriculture.

Approach

The approach in agricultural sector shall be guided on the following line:

Compensation Package

As the unprecedented nature of the calamity paralyzed the agricultural community, a special set of agricultural policies is needed taking into account the following affected populations - farmers, agricultural labourers and petty vendors and small-scale sellers of agricultural products. The compensation provided should be swift and must take into account the fairly long reclamation period to ensure the survival of the community

The Rehabilitation package

As the farming community would not be in a position to involve in production for a couple of years there should be a moratorium for the debts they have taken. The food-for-work program needed to be implemented in a manner that the remuneration should be a

mixture of cash and kind. Moreover the banks should step forward to provide new loans with zero interest/soft rates for future agricultural expenses. In the agricultural production front activities that have to be undertaken considering the long-term rehabilitation are –

- a) de-salination of the affected lands through the construction of drainage channels to wash away the salinity
- b) excavation of top sand to nullify the mud casting effect
- c) integration of employment generating activities like greening the coastal areas, agricultural field preparations etc. in the rehabilitation process
- d) new water sources like ponds making, channel building etc.

Disaster Prevention Package

The tsunami disaster should be an eye opener leading us towards taking adequate preventive steps. The green belt along the coastal line need to be rejuvenated as early as possible to prevent further disasters. As the sand dunes are protective structures against furious flow of water towards the interior areas, stringent measures should be taken to prevent the leveling of these sand dunes. The shrimp farms have leveled the sand dunes along the beaches.

Activity Area to be Strengthened

The role played by NGOs in relief process in agricultural front is appreciable. This need to be continued with a broader perspective in the rehabilitation and reconstruction phase. The steps to be taken here are:

- Chart out areas/villages each NGO should be allocated to avoid duplication and also to ensure no area is neglected
- Pool and share the available information with different organisations so that every organisation would get the information they needed
- Taking into account the fact that the agricultural labourers are largely being ignored in the rehabilitation process, their grievances needs to be tackled properly
- There should be a collective effort to build consensus periodically to have more clarity on the nature and level of involvement of partner organizations

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