

Organic farming calls for policy changes

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THE recent decision of the government to expand organic farming announced by the finance minister in his budget speech should be widely welcomed. But it needs to be supported by wider policy changes. Otherwise organic farming will remain confined to a few patches. Also the government needs to consider seriously whether its concern for eco-friendly farming and healthy food is not contradicted by its support for GM crops and foods which are known to be highly hazardous. To avoid such contradictions the government needs to link organic farming with other changes for ecologically protective agriculture and safe food system.

In recent years as growing concern has been expressed about the hazards of excessive use of agri-chemicals, there has been increasing interest in alternative technologies which reduce or even eliminate the use of such chemicals while relying on various natural processes and organic materials to get good yields, thereby also maintaining long term fertility of land.

The United States National Academy of Sciences has published a report which examined 14 farms in the USA that had successfully developed natural production methods. This report on 'alternative agriculture' said, "Well-managed alternative farms use less synthetic chemical fertilizers, pesticides and antibiotics without necessarily decreasing, and, in some cases, increasing per acre crop yields and the productivity of livestock systems. Wider adoptions of proven alternative systems would result in ever greater economic benefits to farmers and environmental gains for the nation."

At the 290 hectare crop-livestock farm of Glen and Rex Spray in Ohio, USA, no herbicides were applied for over 15 years nor was fertilizer purchased after 1971. Yet in the 1981-85 period, this farm had 32 per cent higher yields of maize, 40 per cent higher yields of soybeans and 22 per cent higher yields of oats compared to the rest of the country.

In another experiment at Pennsylvania, analysis by the World Resources Institute showed that practices which conserve resources reduced production costs by 25 per cent, eliminated chemical fertilizer and pesticide use, reduced soil erosion by more than 50 per cent and increased yields after the five-year transition from high chemical-using systems.



Case studies of successful vegetable and rice farms using ecological methods in Philippines showed that in the largest set of adjacent farms totaling 1000 hectares using the bio-dynamic farming method there was a yield increase of 50 to 100 per cent and an increase in net income of 200 to 270 percent, compared to the green revolution methods. Nicanor Perlas, a Filipino agricultural scientist, said while presenting these case studies that a rapid transition from chemical farming to sustainable agriculture is possible if correct technical principles are followed.

An effort should be made to look at the entire agro-eco system instead of examining individual crops and grain yields in isolation. As an organic farmer of India G.R. Iyengar has said, "Few of us realise the havoc that modern agricultural practices are wreaking on our countryside. Farmers have forgotten the habits that supported a wide variety of wildlife and countless varieties of wild plants, flowers and trees that are essential for profitable and sustainable agriculture. What is happening in farming today is that the agriculture technology is acting in isolation, treating organisms in isolation, which leads to a disturbance of the natural system of checks and balances. It should be a sensitive balance of organisms in nature that should be allowed to spread. Few people realize today that there is a certain symbiosis between the various elements of nature like between flowers and pollen, soil and organisms. The role of the ecological balance in

managing habitat has to grow."

Reversing the degradation of land which has been continuing for so long will involve several bold initiatives, including some which can be expected to evoke a lot of resistance among powerful vested interests. Yet there is no doubt that such initiatives have to be taken and cannot be delayed for too long. Protection of our precious cropland and soil is too important a task to be neglected any longer, particularly keeping in view the needs of the next few generations.

As a Russian expert B.Z. Rozanov has said so movingly: "The task of agriculture is thus not confined to obtaining the biological product but extends to constant maintenance and augmentation of soil fertility. Otherwise, we will very quickly consume what by right belongs to our children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, to say nothing of more distant descendants. It is this giving - that our generation lives to a certain extent at the expense of the coming generation, thoughtlessly drawing on the basic reserves of soil fertility accumulated in the millennia of the biospheric development, instead of living off the current annual increment - that cause the increasing concern of scientists dealing with the state of the planetary soil cover."

The World Commission of Environment and Development had recommended that "the legislative, policy and research capacity for advancing non-chemical and less-chemical strategies must be established and sustained."

The World Resources Report minces no words in making a firm statement on this issue: "Current farm practices in industrialized countries have created incentives for farmers to use environmentally damaging practices and in many cases, penalized farmers for switching to more sustainable practices." For example, the report says, the system of farm programme payments in the USA has worked against long-term rotations and reduction of chemical inputs. In the European Community, price policies have discouraged production of pulses. Although mixed crop-livestock systems can be the basis for environmentally sustainable farming, distorted price structures have tended to push agriculture in the other direction, toward specialization.

A good food and agricultural system is one which makes available satisfactory livelihood to all members of the farming community and wholesome, nutritious food to all people in a sustainable way ensuring welfare of farm animals, protecting the soil and its fertility for future generations.

Arguing why this basic understanding of agriculture is so widely missed these days American writer cum farmer Wendell Berry writes, "The 'free market' - the unbridled play of economic forces - is bad for agriculture because it is unable to assign a value to things that are necessary to agriculture. It gives a value to agricultural products, but it cannot give a value to the sources of those products in the topsoil, the ecosystem, the farm, the farm family, or the farm community. Indeed, people who look at farming from the standpoint of the 'free market' do not understand the relation of product to source. They believe that the relation is merely mechanical because they believe that agriculture is or can be an industry. And the 'free market' is help less to suggest otherwise."

There are thus very strong reasons why several economists, experts and politicians advised by them are unlikely to see and appreciate the true nature of agricultural work. This also explains why governments are so reluctant to implement the really needed agricultural reforms, even though many experimental initiatives of farmers are providing strong case for much needed reform.

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