

'REVITALISING THE RURAL: RETHINKING RURAL AND AGRARIAN POLICIES'

Summary Report

The Indian Institute of Advanced Studies (IIAS), Shimla, and the Network for Rural and Agrarian Studies (NRAS) organized a seminar, 'Revitalising the Rural: Rethinking Rural and Agrarian policies' during 27th-29th September, 2016. Participants included academics from educational and research institutes across India; members of farmers' groups and NGOs; and IAS personnel from the Himachal Pradesh cadre who came together to deliberate on key issues affecting rural and agrarian India. Addressing the conference the Director of IIAS, Prof. Chetan Singh, called attention to the urgency with which rural issues need to be addressed. He also recollected his observations from his own village in Himachal Pradesh that had over a period of fifty years changed from a predominantly agricultural community to one that housed polluting and failed industries. Prof. Abhijit Sen, formerly of JNU and the Planning Commission, stressed the need for policy making to factor in the challenges posed by global climate change and of the possible demographic transition that India would experience. Other speakers and participants included Walter Fernandes, Sarojini Thakur, Deepak Sanan, Vijay Thakur, Harish Chauhan, Devinder Sharma, Nirmal Sengupta, M. Vijaybaskar, A.R.Vasavi, C. Shambu Prasad, Rajeswari Raina, Shalini Bhutani, Kavitha Kuruganti, Pradeep Nayak, Namita Wahi, P.S.Vijay Shankar, Debal Deb, Richa Kumar, Sukhpal Singh, Ravi Chopra, Keshab Das, Ajay Vir Jakhar and Sudha Nagavarapu (as rapporteur).

Over the next two and a half-days, speakers discussed issues that ranged from overviews of the changing rural landscape, the non-synonymity of rural India with agriculture, the conditions of marginalised rural residents, the role of science in agricultural policy to specific analyses of seed policies, loss of biodiversity, land acquisition laws, developments in the Northeast, water governance, agricultural markets, appropriate rural technologies, land titling, disaster management, approaches to sanitation and the plantation and crafts sectors. Multiple speakers analysed the current situation of agriculturists, connecting it to skewed

agricultural and food policies that have led to agrarian distress and advocated for policy shifts that could address the multiple gaps and problems. The loss of biodiversity and depletion of natural resources, especially as a result of Green Revolution practices, the looming impact of climate change and the increasing power of markets were commonly raised issues.

A critique of the dominant policy narratives related to agriculture and rural India emerged as a key issue during the seminar. Some of the limitations of most of the existing policies stemmed from the deployment of the spectre of burgeoning population and agricultural productivity failures, emphasis on productivity and monetarisation rather than attention to the structural deficits of agrarian society and conservation of natural resources and ecological sustainability. The continued adherence to Lewisian logic and 'inevitable urbanisation' as part of globalising the economy compounded the distortions that have been induced in rural India. Policies failed to recognise the fact that the 'farmer' or agriculturist does not have a singular identity and there is increasing differentiation among them. Women farmers are often not accounted for and the needs of small and marginal farmers and the range of risks (production, capital, knowledge, resources) that they face are not addressed. Most of these policies were accompanied by the promotion of uniform and centralised programmes that overlooked regional specificities and were promulgated through undemocratic processes. A result of such deficits and limitations in mainstream policies meant that the structures of disadvantage and of accumulation (by a few) were reproduced. This accounted for the fact that despite the plethora of programmes to alleviate poverty and disadvantage, a vast majority were in conditions of deprivation. Concerns were also raised about the new legal regimes that sought to assert new international priorities and the problems they posed if and when translated into ground realities. Along with the critique, there was acknowledgement of some changes at the policy level, such as the new policies on biodiversity and groundwater management. Alternative models such as local efforts at promoting biodiversity, new Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs), traditional rainwater harvesting, decentralised procurement and provisioning for government schemes etc., were discussed. Participants, however, cautioned against the insidious influence of the market in the guise of

conferring 'rights', providing 'choice' or as an alternative to corruption and inefficiency. Several of these strategies were noted to have resulted in further fragmentation of local communities and organising structures and to have given more power to big corporations. As the issue of the continued failure to have universal sanitation showed, there was need to go beyond the 'subsidy' syndrome and to focus on ways in which behavioural changes and community orientation could lead to more successful strategies of improving civic facilities.

The need to move away from a universal and homogenous policy pushed from the central government or from international agencies was acknowledged. That this could result in centralised planning that is prescriptive, considers states as merely agents and takes the one-size-fits-all approach which leads to standardisation and overarching regulatory frameworks was a concern among the participants. These go hand in hand with multiple institutions (often centrally mandated, such as 11 Ministries involved in water management) that lead to fragmented policy and lack of coordination at the local level. Given the lower planning capacities of states, districts and PRIs and their vulnerability to regional economic and political imperatives, new structures need to be set up. The participants made a call for agricultural and rural policies to have an inter-sectoral approach which could also enable flexibility for local bodies to be able to plan their interventions which could be combined with sectoral protection.

Participants deliberated on what the overarching approach or stance on policies for rural and agricultural issues that the participants could endorse. Concepts of livability and the need to endorse and uphold democracy (with voice and authenticity), justice, community rights, and diversity were discussed. The importance of recognising marginality, the diversity and plurality of the nation, and facilitating democratic processes of deliberation, inclusion of all actors and stake-holders, and accountability were considered important to all policy formulations. Nutritional diversity, necessary for food security, should include both farm and non-farm foods. This leads to the need to protect common lands and community forests, which can be used to promote biodiversity.

Simultaneously, the impact of Intellectual Property Rights on indigenous knowledge systems, the privatisation of the commons and the new notions of 'global value chains' should be confronted. The earlier vibrant non-farm rural sector, which supported a significant population of artisans, 'rural engineers' and trades-people, has now collapsed and must be revived. Since rural life was marked by drudgery and excessive self-exploitation, especially by marginalised producers, this should be addressed. The emerging patterns of closer rural-urban interlinks and relations which include commuting and seasonal migrations should be factored into rural and agricultural policies. All these understandings and analyses can form pillars of the overarching policy goal, which could be equality of opportunities and equality of outcomes in the rural sphere.

Assured income for farmers, given the increasing and sharp disparities between rural and urban incomes, was a hotly debated topic and consensus could not be reached on this issue. The arguments against providing assured incomes for farmers were that the state should not be supporting big farmers, income guarantee would kill competition, and the government could not afford it. These were countered by assertions for the need to recognise farmers as citizens, who have been disenfranchised by the policy imperative of high agricultural productivity and low food prices. The deep inequity between farmers and informal sector workers on the one hand and salaried workers on the other has been exacerbated by the Seventh Pay Commission. While some forms of redistribution were necessary, what forms would these take? A voice of caution was raised against considering subsidies, given the international laws that India is subject to. However, a case could be made for 'green box' subsidies given the need to support different agri-cultures and for recognising ecosystem services. There is a global discourse on the need to delink entitlements from employment, and these strategies could be used to support farmers. Also, the weakened public institutions in health and education must be revitalised as the commercial private sector is one of the main drivers for rural indebtedness and fall into poverty. The final discussion also focussed on identifying pathways and future engagements with which to develop and disseminate ideas for alternative rural and agricultural policies. It was suggested that the term 'partners' be used instead of 'audience' in

our search for possible fora for further engagements. There is a limited policy space to engage in, and the spread of ideologies of marketisation and privatisation with an increasingly centralised government and bureaucracy are trends that the group needs to bear in mind. However, there are political representatives who are willing to engage with these issues as well as a large number of field-level officials who have limited exposure to such discussions and will find such inputs invaluable. In addition, the group needs to share these ideas at academic fora at multiple levels and also disseminate it to the corporate sector. A crisp, to-the-point report with a few big ideas will always be well received, though in the current environment any uptake and significant alteration would take time. New media is opening up opportunities and these should be tapped into. Podcasts (audio content) are a possibility, with the potential of reaching new audiences and producing more local language content (which is relatively easier than written content). Engaging in meetings organized by different civil society groups can provide fora for further discussion and dissemination of these ideas. A starting point is to develop the proceedings of this seminar into a policy document which could be shared with a wider audience.