Concluding Statement

The Role of Parliamentary Agricultural Committees in the Asia, India and South East Asia Regions

A Workshop by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and the Natural Resources Institute of the University of Greenwich, hosted by the Legislature of Punjab, India

The CPA Punjab Branch hosted a Workshop on the Role of Parliamentary Agriculture Committees in the Asia, India and South East Asia regions on 29-31 of October, 2014 at the Legislature of Punjab, India.

The Workshop brought together members of Parliamentary Agriculture Committees with the objective of releasing their potential for increasing productivity and food security in the Asia, India and South East Asia regions, through their leadership of their committees.

The importance of the agricultural sector to economic growth, the reduction of poverty and elimination of malnutrition was stressed by representatives from Bangladesh, Malaysia, Maldives, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and India1 (with observers from Tanzania and Uganda) throughout the programme. The Workshop itself was resourced by the CPA Secretariat, the Natural Resources Institute of the University of Greenwich and agricultural specialists from various institutions2.

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1 Including the Indian Federal Parliament and India’s State Legislatures
2 Resource Persons (in order of presentations):

- Mr Naveen Kumar, Director, Monitoring and Evaluation, Landesa, Rural Development Institute, India
- Dr Neelam Grewal, Director, Directorate of Research on Women in Agriculture, Bhubneshwar, Orissa, India
- Dr Krishan Katoch, Vice Chancellor, Himachal Pradesh Agriculture University, Palampur, India
- Dr (Ms) Rita Singh Raghuvanshi, Dean, College of Home Science, G.B. Pant University, Pant Nagar, Uttarakhand, India
- Dr P. S. Birthal, Director, National Centre for Agriculture Economics & Policy Research, New Delhi, India
- Ms Nandini Bhardwaj, Software Development Manager, Digital Green, India
- Mr Bhagirath Choudhary, Director for Strategic Initiatives, ISAAA & Director ISAAA South Asia Office
- Prof (Dr) I. S. Dua, Former Chairman, Department of Botany, Punjab University Chandigarh- India & Executive Director, Society for Promotion of Science and Technology, India
- Dr B. S. Dhillon, Vice Chancellor, Punjab Agricultural University, Ludhiana, Punjab, India
Delegates recognised that agriculture offers great promise for food and nutrition security, economic growth, poverty reduction and the empowerment of women as well as the attainment of national and international development goals. Failing to meet the current challenges would result in severe consequences for the populations of the Asia, India and South East Asia regions and the rest of the planet.

The Workshop noted that:

- 80% of the population of Asia lives in rural areas and depends on agriculture for their livelihoods.
- Agriculture accounts for 20% to 30% of GDP in South Asia/East Asia.
- 87% of the world’s 500 million smallholder farmers (farming less than 2 hectares) live in Asia.
- Since early 1960s, Asia has grown richer faster than any other region in world.
- The green revolution in Asia, India and South East Asia produced spectacular increases in staple crop yields between 1970 and 1995, but growth has, as expected, slowed down since then.
- Post-harvest crop losses in the Asia region range from 20% to 40%.
- In 2013, East Asian economies grew by 7.1% and South Asian ones by 5.2%, faster than any other part in the world. However, over half a million people in Asia still go to bed hungry every day.
- Investments in agriculture have four times the economic impact of investments in other economic sectors.
- The urban populations of India, Asia and South East Asia have been increasing with time.
- Out of 429 million people active in agriculture in the Commonwealth, 38% are women.
- Two million children die due to malnutrition every year and 40% of all children have their growth stunted in South Asia.

The delegates noted that agriculture was mostly measured on the basis of production quantity; however, not enough attention was being given to the availability, accessibility, affordability, quality and usage. As a consequence, imbalanced development occurs, which leads to depletion of natural resources, hidden hunger and health hazards. It was observed that food wastage is a major concern due to the lack of post-harvest infrastructures, such as cold chain facilities, transportation and proper storage.

Agriculture also had to be considered very broadly to reflect its importance to good governance and society as a whole.

Rapporteurs:
- Dr Jaswider Kaur Sangha, Dr Harmeet Singh Thind, Dr Sukhpal Singh, Dr A. S. Dhatt, Dr Sandeep Bains, Dr Poonam Sachdev, Dr Vishal Bector, all from Punjab Agricultural University, Ludhiana, Punjab, India
Technical innovations in agriculture focus on enhancing productivity, improving quality, managing natural resources, improving input use efficiency, food processing and value addition. The economic viability of small farmers was discussed in detail, and it was established that there is an urgent need to develop cost-effective farm technologies and policy support for their sustainability and livelihood security. It was observed that consumption of high-value food items such as vegetables, fruits and meat has increased more than the consumption of cereals over the years.

Institutional and policy innovation also play a critical role in the adoption and dissemination of technical innovation. Technical improvements, along with development of infrastructure, favourable policies in terms of minimum support prices and procurement of wheat and rice, helped raise food production and reduce poverty in India from more than 40% of the population in the 1960s to 29.5% in 2011-12, for example.

Land ownership was recognised as the best way to empower women and girls. If women own land, family incomes and nutritional levels rise and enrolments in schools increase. A micro/livelihood plot (the size of a tennis court) can sustain a family. Land leasing is practised by a large number of landless and smallholder farmers without any legal rights or tenancy. Despite legal provisions, girls almost never inherit land due to patriarchal social practices. Agriculture boosts the status of women, empowering them to make decisions about themselves and their families and ensuring nutrition for their children in the first 1000 days of their life.

Committees with responsibility for agriculture (whether explicitly called agriculture committees or not) need more essential resources (research personnel, legal and communication expertise) to perform their duties more effectively, according to the delegates. They felt strongly that it should be made mandatory to establish Parliamentary Agriculture Committees in every country. These committees should be given financial powers to enhance the effectiveness in all agricultural activities. Participants emphasized that there was lack of effective agriculture policies to address the problems of quality inputs, marketing, pricing, land ownership rights and institutional and policy support to agriculture.

Participants agreed that there was a significant mismatch between policy formulation and execution, particularly in the areas of effective seeds policies, supplying and distribution of fertilizer, faults in staple food markets, lack of equity and security of access to land (including by women), the need to build smallholder farmers’ resilience to climate change and the failure of commercial banks to provide appropriate credit to smallholder farmers.

In order for members to fulfil their parliamentary roles of legislation, oversight and representation, they need an increased amount of professional assistance, strong parliamentary infrastructure and the ability to interact with civil society and academia to support their crucial role in promoting parliamentary democracy.
In light of these challenges, participants agreed on the following recommendations:

Committees of parliament concerned with agricultural matters should in the areas of:

Law making and enforcement:

- Effectively assert themselves in introducing and ensuring the passage of laws with the aim of protecting the interest of the small-scale farmers and women as well as the agricultural sector as a whole. Hereby child welfare and humanity should be a priority for all law-making.
- Press the executive to review outdated, inefficient and sometimes conflicting policies of government, such as the laws concerning land inheritance for women.

Budget process:

- Play a more effective role in ensuring that sufficient funds are allocated in the national budget for the protection and advancement of agriculture and actively monitor related expenditure.
- Ensure that government spending in the area of agriculture is effectively scrutinized through audit reports and its own inquiries.

Policy formulation:

- Define agriculture to include areas such as fisheries, forestry and livestock, and encompass the increasing growth in aquaculture. The delegates deemed it vital that committees should also pay attention to issues such as climate change and environment, gender, nutrition and water.
- Perform a significant role in the formulation of policies on issues on the subject and involve agricultural interest groups as well as the farmers themselves to protect their interests. This involves dealing with issues such as climate change, environment and gender. Other issues include:

  1) The conservation of water to counter the depletion of water resources around the world.
  2) Measures against post-harvest crop losses which range from 20%-40%.
  3) Fair and equitable prices for farmers for their produce/crops, including a minimum support price for both staple and other crops.
  4) Availability of quality seeds, fertilizer at affordable prices, subsidies on agricultural implements/machinery/diesel/electricity to increase accessibility by smallholder farmers (dispersed in instalments); this should also involve the private sector.
  5) The integration of smallholder farmers, especially in value addition and marketing.
  6) The assessment of toxic soils, misuse of pesticides and other inputs as well as crop losses due to wild animals.
7) The intensification of extension services with enhanced participation of the private sector and other probable sources of funding; there is a need to adopt modern and effective methods (digital videos, internet and mobiles) for extension services.

8) The requirement of technical innovations for sustainable and competitive agriculture in the Asia and the South East Asia regions. To develop innovations, there is a need for massive increases in investment in research as well as exchange of technologies and human resources.

9) Access to good credit facilities from the private and public sector at low interest rates.

10) The requirement of interventions to protect the shifting of agricultural lands for non-agricultural sectors.

11) Strengthen outreach programmes concerning agricultural research at district/block level.

12) Enable regulatory systems to deliver to the benefit of newer technologies to farmers.

Expertise and knowledge sharing:

- Consider ways of strengthening the institutional memory of committees by adequate induction courses and information services.
- Recognize the essential role of parliamentary support staff in strengthening the committees by enhancing their knowledge capacity and provide training opportunities to facilitate the committees’ demanding tasks.
- Consult experts with technical and social knowledge to provide guidance in areas of agriculture.
- Make use of its convening powers by forging linkages with relevant actors from the public and private sector such as local government, universities, scientists, donors, civil society groups, decision makers in the agricultural industry, other local stakeholders, consumers and farmers.

International cooperation:

- Further collaborate and develop these linkages, including with parliamentary colleagues in their own and other jurisdictions. Special consideration should be given to the setting up of a small support body to develop the strength of committees responsible for agriculture, in order to tackle the issues raised in this report in a coherent way.
- Frame international trade policies in view the economic scenario of developing countries and rationalise subsidies.
- Recommend to the CPA to continue to take an active interest in the field of agriculture, keeping in view the significant results of this Workshop which proved to be very meaningful.

The Parliamentarians offer these proposals for the consideration of Commonwealth Parliaments and Legislatures, the Natural Resources Institute of the University of Greenwich,
academics and the wider global community, to address the issues around agriculture and development. They recognize that the responses to these issues will vary in each jurisdiction to reflect local circumstances. However, Parliamentarians see great advantages in strengthening Parliamentary Agriculture Committees in the Asia, India and South East Asia regions and suggest that Parliaments consider these proposals to maximise the social and economic benefits that can be gained from agriculture.