

## **WHY CIVIL SOCIETY INVOLVEMENT IS NECESSARY FOR AGRICULTURE DEVELOPMENT.**

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The goals of agriculture research today cannot be limited to the creation of products like crop varieties and farm machines. In fact the goals today cannot be restricted to tangibles like seeds or farm machines but must encompass the policy domain. After the Uruguay GATT Round of 1986 agriculture was brought on to the multilateral platform. With this it was subjected to interventions and negotiations so that it is no longer the jurisdiction of the national governments alone to decide agriculture policy and policies in other sectors like Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) that will have an impact on agriculture and food production. These policy dimensions are often difficult and complex and have to be understood and negotiated cleverly.

Scientists working in agricultural research have been by and large disconnected from the GATT –WTO issues and most have little knowledge of the respective agreements and what their content is. Many civil society groups on the other hand have devoted time and effort to understand the international negotiations and have developed advocacy positions protecting the interests of small farmers and national agriculture. They are internationally connected and have quick access to developments in particular negotiations through linkages with a range of governmental and non-governmental agencies in other countries.

At present, it is largely the CSOs, apart from a few officials in relevant Ministries that are analyzing and interpreting the likely impact of international agreements on domestic agriculture and food security . This kind of input is crucial for policy planners but there are no satisfactory channels to . Take for example the case of Geographical Indications (GI) . The National Biotechnology Committee of Thailand proposed a program to genetically engineer its Jasmine Rice and the department of Biotechnology also made plans to produce GE Basmati . Scientists in both organizations were ignorant of the protection offered by the provision for Geographical Indications that would stamp Jasmine Rice as uniquely Thai and Basmati as uniquely Indian ( and Pakistani). Genetically engineering either rice would destroy their uniqueness and deny the respective country protection under GI.

Groups working with local communities are better able to identify the needs of the community for agriculture and overall rural development. NGOs thus tend to frame different priorities for research compared to agricultural scientists. Many scientists in the agriculture research system do not visit farmer's fields, content to do their research in laboratories. When NGOs work in the field, they are in direct contact with the communities over prolonged periods regularly and this gives them a better understanding of local problems and needs.

At a stakeholder consultation organized by Gene Campaign in Jharkhand , the tribal belt of Eastern India., the rural and tribal men and women identified the following as priority areas for research and investment in agriculture.

- Water conservation and water bodies to irrigate a second, winter crop.
- Secure seed supply of traditional rice varieties
- Improving soil fertility
- Secondary income sources
- Easy access to credit and crop and livestock insurance

As we see, farm men and women do not identify Bt crops as their priority but the scientific establishment invests disproportionately large sums of money on this research, creating a range of crops that farmers never asked for. Similarly, rather than hybrid rice, farm men and women want assured seed sources of traditional rice. The reason is because they prefer the taste of this rice, they prefer it because they remain satiated for a longer period after eating it and it also fetches a better price on the market than hybrid rice. Yet the agriculture department promotes hybrid rice, the cultivation of which is risky under rain fed conditions.

Similarly, farmers place water conservation and the creation of water bodies right on top of their wish list. Despite this, irrigation facilities provided by the government do not even touch three percent of available arable land in Jharkhand. Instead of paying attention to rainwater harvesting, the agriculture department has launched a drive to plant mango and litchi trees.

The crisis facing global agriculture is acute but it is not unbeatable. To beat the challenge however, everyone's skills will have to come on board. NGOs can make a big contribution. The scientific establishment has no choice but to set aside its resistance to working with civil society. It must begin to work in partnership with stakeholders to find solutions besetting global agriculture today. GFAR- APAARI made a good beginning at the April consultation in Bangkok. This is the way to go.

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