

Regional Seminar in Eastern India

March 18-20, 2012

To be organised by
Agro-Economic Research Centre
Visva Bharati, Santiniketan
Birbhum, West Bengal
In Collaboration with
Indian Society of Agricultural Economics, Mumbai

Theme: Diversification of Agriculture in Eastern India

Diversification of agriculture is considered as an important strategy to overcome the challenges faced by many developing countries. Diversification of agriculture means developing a larger number crop- or enterprise-mix in favour of high-value and more remunerative enterprises. It may be of different forms such as supplementing farm incomes with non-farm incomes; increasing the number of crops grown and types of livestock reared; or use of resources in diverse farm enterprises. The main arguments in favour of diversification of agriculture is to increase the income; to generate additional employment; to stabilize farm income over the seasons and overtime; and to conserve natural resources. Diversification has been pursued in many countries as a way to improve the long-term viability of agriculture by enhancing the profitability and overall stability of the sector. The shift to other crops or economic activities, however, has not been an easy undertaking, particularly for small farmers. Government assistance in terms of more supportive policies and better infrastructure has played a critical role in the promotion of diversification programs. With globalization further stimulating trade, diversification of agriculture afforded greater opportunities for expanding the range of agricultural products that one can market abroad. However, expanded trade has brought with it increased competition, and hence the need to focus diversification programs on agricultural activities with competitive advantages.

Indian agriculture has been diversifying away from cereals and towards high value crop and livestock products since the early 1990s. With high economic and population growth, the dietary pattern in India is also changing fast. The food basket is diversifying in favour of livestock, fruits and vegetables. In response to these demands, the crop-mix is changing in favour of more commercial crops and from low- to high-income elastic commodities. Yet producing additional diversified food is a major challenge when resources are limited and degrading. To meet the challenge, the production strategy should be to encourage diversification of the production system without sacrificing the basic obligation of ensuring food security.

It has been well documented that such a diversification generates greater employment opportunities, particularly for women, and higher incomes for farm households. The area shift from cereals to vegetables, in particular, has enhanced employment opportunities in rural areas. However, the combination of a large number of small farmers, poor rural infrastructure, and fragmented and underdeveloped markets complicates establishment of efficient and equitable links between farmers and the diverse, emerging domestic market. Indian agriculture, in general and Eastern India in particular, facing the complex challenge of the new economic regime besides the usual problems of rising population, unemployment and poverty, declining investment in the agriculture sector and degradation of natural resources. Diversification of agriculture may help to overcome these overriding problems in a more competitive environment.

Diversification of agricultural production and marketing now offers the primary opportunity to strengthen lagging growth in farm output and rural employment in Eastern India. However, achieving diversified growth with equity also requires new measures to increase investment and provide the market institutions needed to develop Eastern India's inefficient food processing and marketing sectors, and to ensure that the transformation to higher-value agriculture is inclusive of region's large number of marginal and small farmers as well as land less labourers.

In this background, the regional seminar proposes to discuss various emerging issues about agricultural diversification in the context of Eastern India. The paper-writers will be asked to contribute only one paper in any of the following sub-themes.

1. The ***rationale for diversification*** in Eastern India. Why do farmers need diversification and under what context? This needs to be understood properly in the context of agriculture dominated by small and marginal farms.
2. The ***nature and extent of diversification*** of agriculture in Eastern India. It is hypothesised that the nature and magnitude of diversification varies across regions, production systems, livelihood groups and over time.
3. The ***scope for further horizontal and vertical diversification*** towards high value crops as well as non-farm activities in Eastern India.
4. ***Determinants of diversification*** in Eastern India. A large number of *price and non-price factors* determine the agricultural diversification of a region and their roles are changing over time with changing resource base as well as change in policies.
5. The ***constraints*** (agro-ecological/technological/socio-economic) in realizing the potential benefits of diversification of agriculture in Eastern India needs special attention. Identification and prioritization of constraints with respect to agricultural diversification may help the policy makers in deciding the kinds of policy interventions.
6. Possible ***impacts of diversification*** of agriculture on different livelihood groups in Eastern India particularly on food and livelihood security is a matter of concern now. The relationship between diversification and changing consumption pattern also requires special attention.
7. ***Institutional arrangements*** to promote diversification of agriculture in Eastern India. The role of contract farming, micro-finance, land acquisition norms, crop insurance and other new institutions on agricultural diversification in Eastern India need to be studied in depth.
8. ***Areas of policy intervention*** needed to promote diversification of agriculture in Eastern India. In this context public policies in terms of price protection, development of rural infrastructure particularly market, storage and cold chain system, land ceiling and tenancy act, etc needs in-depth investigation.

Contact: (1) Dr. Debashis Sarkar, Director, Agro-Economic Research Centre, Visva-Bharati
(2) Prof. Madhusudan Ghosh, Convener, Regional Seminar
(3) Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy, Secretary, Regional Seminar
Phone: 03463-261447, Tele Fax: 03463-261447