

Building Sustainability in Rain-fed Agriculture Production System: Challenges and Opportunities to bring Bundelkhand in Agriculture Growth Path

Consultation Report

28th September 2018, Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh



A one day Stakeholder Consultation was organised to bring together Government, Civil Society, and Farmer Groups from Madhya Pradesh's Bundelkhand Region. The objectives of the consultation were to understand the conditions and challenges in practising agriculture in Bundelkhand region; and also to throw light on possible approaches to build a comprehensive agriculture system in Bundelkhand, that enhances farmers' income, nutrition security and is environmentally sustainable. The consultation is amongst the first steps to bring multi-stakeholders together to develop and design Vision of Agriculture for Bundelkhand; and identify key priority areas and strategy for bringing Agriculture in Bundelkhand to a growth pathway.

Context and Expectation Setting



The consultation was initiated with an expectation setting session. The session was opened by remarks from Prem Narayan Ji, an organic farmer from Bundelkhand region; Mr KP Aharwal, Additional Director, Department of Agriculture and Sandeep Khanwalkar, representing Development Alternatives and civil society perspective.

Prem Narayan Ji identified three major areas to focus to revive agriculture systems in Bundelkhand: Water management; soil conservation and seed conservation. He says, "Water is the most important and constrained resource because of high run off rate in the region. Farm bunding and other means to prevent soil run-off and quality management is second important area for agriculture rejuvenation. Original local seeds are now missing from the markets and farming systems of Bundelkhand at large. There is an urgent need to make efforts on seed conservation to bring back the once nutritious spread of seeds' variety." Prem Ji also asked some pertinent ground and policy questions, and urged the consultation to explore answers to the same. Some of them being: "What if seeds, fertiliser and pesticide subsidies to farmers, are invested directly/indirectly into enhancing the organic matter of the soil? Why do we not assess the relation between mechanised agriculture and soil quality; and relation of pesticides use and death of livestock? With his experience, he reiterates the adverse impact of mechanised input based agriculture on the soil-water-livestock health of the region.

Sandeep Khanwalkar, DA further adds the need to delve deeper on subject of farmer incomes in Bundelkhand region, especially the small and marginal holder farmer. In doing so, he mentions it is very critical to study what are the endowments of the region; and to capitalise the same in building livelihood and nutrition security of the region.

Shri KP Aharwal, Additional Director of Agriculture, identifies un-captured knowledge systems and disintegrated social fabric of Bundelkhand society as key impediments to growth and development of the region. He highlights the need to promote natural resource conservation; organic agriculture and biodiversity conservation for sustainability on agriculture systems. Shri Aharwal ji further adds that there is potential collaborations that NGOs can have with ATMA scheme of the Government; and the consultation must try to identify similar opportunities of partnerships with State department schemes such that the collective agenda of Bundelkhand's agriculture development is realised.

Expectation setting session was followed by two brief presentations. Ms Seema Ravandale from People Science Institute presented on an overview on the Status of Bundelkhand Agriculture. This was followed by a brief presentation by Sabyasachi Das, RRA Network on an overview of Rain-fed agriculture systems in India and RRA's strategy of working in these areas, dedicated towards small holder farmers.



Seema's presentation highlighted some of the key features of agriculture systems in Bundelkhand. With only 33 – 35% of the agriculture land under irrigation, agriculture in Bundelkhand is highly susceptible to changing weather and climatic conditions. Low farmer incomes of INR 6000 per month (2016); and increasing debt, an average of INR 32,000 per farmer (2016) highlight the glaring concerns to livelihood security in the region. Poor agriculture situation is also reflected in poor human development index, severe cases of malnourishment and mass seasonal migration from the region. Seema's presentation further highlighted the current status of water and seed issues in Bundelkhand.

Sabyasachi Das (RRAN) highlighted some of the distinct features of rain-fed regions in the country. He highlights "Major poverty landscapes of India overlaps with rain-fed areas; and with high density of tribal population. Rain-fed regions are generally characterised by a mix of fragmented topographies, varied agro-climatic conditions, marginal soils, crop loss due to dry spells, remote locations with poor access to institutions and distant markets with un-uniform agri-product range. The policies and programmes of the government are much more focussed on productivity and input driven fertiliser based agriculture. The comparative investment of government in watershed programmes is miniscule in comparison to the subsidies provided for fertilisers. The purpose of the RRA network is to re-configure the nature, amount and delivery of public investments for productive and resilient rain-fed agriculture. It aims to do this via policy, research and practice; especially in the areas of protective irrigation, extension livestock, community based seed systems, soil health, inland fisheries, millets and crop diversification, agronomic innovations, community institutions and access to market and credit.

What works, what doesn't work in practising agriculture in Bundelkhand?

Farmers' voices



Four important themes on which farmers in the meeting raised concerns revolved around seeds, water, crop –production choices; and food diversity. Some highlights of the discussions include:

- ***Access to Seeds***

Ramshay Kushwha, a farmer from Tikamgarh district shares the concern in distribution of seeds. According to him, seeds and subsidies on seeds through government departments are usually available only to few villages, closer to the district headquarters. There is no institutional mechanism for seed distribution and seed subsidies to reach on time to all the farmers, across the district.

It was also mentioned by group of farmers from Umaria, that initially, seeds were only available with large farmers and most of the large farmers refused to sell it to small farmers. One of the initiatives by small-farmer group was to collect cash to start procuring seeds for small farmers in a collective. This enables good quality seeds to be available to the small-holder farmers of the region.

- ***Water management***

It was highlighted that there in-adequate rainfall is not the biggest challenge in Bundelkhand. High water run-off due to sloppy land is the key issue that needs to be address to adequate measures to contain, capture water in the region. According to Prem Narayan ji, Bundelkhand does not need dams to solve its water problem; alternatively, it needs investments in building small ponds. Mithila Yadav, a woman farmer from Bundelkhand region, further added the needs to focus on small ponds through village planning processes. Karan Singh Rajput, a farmer from Orchha added to the story. According to him, building canals help only a small proportion of the farmers;& benefits are not incurred to the community at large.

- ***Production (crops, practices) choice, protection and livestock***

The common grazing land has shown a stark decrease over the last two decades. 10% of agriculture land in the region is to be officially allocated as grazing land. In practice, this land ranges from 2-3%, according to some farmers. There is a need to identify, consolidate these grazing lands. They are also a source of crop safety from stray animals and thus benefit the farmers.

Improving soil, according to Prem Narayan Ji, is a primary responsibility. Once the organic matter of the soil is improved, improved seed varieties and production can follow from other parallel actions. Phoolchand, another farmer from the region, highlights the changing behaviours and nature of farmers. According to him, farmers prefer less labour intensive means of production; and are also not very positive on rearing animals and doing organic practices – considered them long, physically tiring and dirty. This attitude needs to be understood to explore solutions.

- ***Food Security through diversification and fish cultivation***

Fishing initiatives in farm ponds, according to Mithila Devi, has led to availability of fish almost every week against an otherwise rare food. Similarly, a potential is seen food diversification, enabling a much diversified and nutritious dietary options for farmer HH.

What works, what doesn't work in practising agriculture in Bundelkhand?

Civil Society Voices



The voices from civil society primarily came from grass roots organisations working in Bundelkhand region. It also included NGOs, media professionals and subject experts who shared experience, understanding and perspectives of agriculture situation in Bundelkhand:

- ***Cultural Context of Bundelkhand – Past and Present***

- Rakesh Dewan, Senior Journalist covering issues of Bundelkhand highlights the forgotten strong and fierce culture of Bundelkhand. He further substantiates by reminding the participants that this is the same region which was least conquered by Mughals and British. Adding to this, he insists that the people and region of Bundelkhand are known for their endurance and government and us must prevent ourselves from calling it a region – poor and in need. More importantly, it is facing the challenges because of the inappropriate state development policies, resulting in poor consequences.
- Santosh Kumar Dwivedi, Sarvodaya Mandal, Umariya highlights the concern that most of these dialogues and conversations are not in farmers' language. While discussions may be in *Hindi* (close to the local language - Bundelkhandi), the usual 'terms' and nature of conversation exclude the farmers. It is important to find ways of bridging this communication gap. He highlights the importance of *lok-vigyan* (public local knowledge) in the area of agriculture that does not get integrated in the public policy discourse.

- ***Possibilities of re-thinking current government programmes***

- R Ravindra, from Wassan and RRA Network, shared his experience & understanding of agriculture policies in India. The premise of green revolution was to get water to places where soil is most fertile. Most of the agriculture policies focussed to providing fertilisers and water to make farm irrigated. There have been minimalist investments and policies on seed and input systems in rain-fed regions, despite the fact that more than 500 districts in the country are rain-fed. This skewed focus to only 160 districts is one of reasons than 500 districts have become dependent on Public Distribution Systems for food security. In this way dryland agriculture was replaced with irrigated land and ruined in its basic structures and systems. Many voices where farmers are demanding seeds are oblivious of the fact that there were traditional systems where seeds were locally produced, preserved and distributed. Instead of seeking for seed procurement from government, it is imperative for farmer groups and collectives to revive the traditional practices of preserving seeds. In addition to that, investments by the state on reviving the soils of the region and the country as a whole is not just a demand from farmers; but is the responsibility of the state; as soil is one of the critical public goods and plays an instrumental role in taking farmers towards sustainability. Sabyasachi Das further adds from his reflection of Government Programmes that most of the flagship programmes like RKVY support irrigated lands, without emphasis or focus on rain-fed farmers.
- It was shared that under one programme of Jaivik Kheti, 66 villages identified for organic village to prevent fertilisers to flow in lakes. The indicators to map progress

for the government should be the decrease in fertiliser sales by government department in these villages. This has not shown the desired results yet.

- Rakesh Dewan reflects on the inordinate focus of the government of increasing productivity and production of the farmer and present it as a solution to both livelihood and food insecurities. Evidence documented validates that increasing productivity does not necessarily increase income of the farmers. It was also noted that despite large areas under irrigation and high production, Punjab has one of the highest statistics of farmer suicides; and hence the answer to livelihood security of farmers may not lie in government's heavy focus programmes and schemes on irrigation and increasing production.
- Basudev ji from Bundelkhand Sewa Sansthan, Lalitpur asked some principal questions on Government's strategy of agriculture. He questions on why large farmers are not questioned for the extent of soil deterioration they cause because of high fertiliser use. And why does the burden of producing nutritious food only lies on the small holder farmers; and that too, on the cost of suffering excessively at the hands of resource constraints, changing weather and market fluctuations? He emphasised the need for government to re-think their strategy to bring sustainability in agriculture and livelihood security of small farmers.
- ***Substantive endowments – Seeds, Water, Soil***
 - Soil interventions by the government are primarily focusing on soil health cards. There is a need to check whether soil health cards are capturing the most relevant information on the quality of the soil. For instance, organic matter of the soil is not measured for assessing the health; and that being one of the most primary indicators of soil quality. The Government needs to design a system such that farmers are incentivised to work towards increasing organic matter of the soil. Ravindra, further adds to say that more than focusing on organic food; it is much more important to focus on organic matter of the soil. The purpose is not from the nutrient perspective but more importantly from the ability of organic soils to conserve and hold water.
 - Rakesh Dewan showers ray of hope saying that time is not gone yet. India can still save its soils and small farmers, unlike western countries America, Europe. There are local varieties of seeds and practices that are still in people's memory. There is a need to ensure we don't forget it. Focusing on traditional seed distribution systems, and local nutrient food profile is the way to go ahead.

How do develop way forward?

Strategy for Collective Action

The group of participants felt the need to come together as a network and build a strategy for Bundelkhand's agriculture development and prosperity of its environmental systems and small farmers. A Strategy document highlighting some of the key focus areas was presented; opening it for review and comments to add or change objectives. Some of the critical inputs include:

- Research and Assessments of the Status Quo: A need to study major initiatives; especially by big players like NABARD, TATA, Jain irrigation and Pradan in Bundelkhand is felt in order to have a clearer picture of strategies and actions that have worked and not worked.
- It is important to deliberate and identify what is the change we are seeking as a group? It is specifically important to identify what are outcomes expected at the village level. This will help the group to track its progress with initiatives to be uptaken in future.
- Non-timber based Forest Produce should also be considered within this intervention as it is an important source of livelihood and nutrition to the small farmers; especially in the tribal belts of Bundelkhand.
- An important aspect of the approach is that we are not looking to solve one farmer's problem. The idea of this initiative is to design a systemic arrangement where all farmers in the village get access to critical irrigation; similarly seed demand of the region is addressed for everyone. Also, the initiative prevents itself to be prescriptive to the farmer; instead it aims to work with the government departments and support them in designing better and more appropriate policies for the welfare of small holder farmers and environment sustainability and overall prosperity of the region.

DRAFT STRATEGY

“Sustainable Rainfed Agriculture development for MP Bundelkhand region”

Background

Bundelkhand region in India has often covered the news for extremes distress. Seasonal migration for work, extreme forms of malnourishment; and insecurity of stable income and decent livelihood are some of the key development challenges faced by the region. Some of the facts that corroborate these trends include:

- **Serious malnutrition** in the form of stunting, undernourishment among young children has been recorded in almost all 6 districts of MP part of Bundelkhand region as per the AHS-CAB survey 2014. HDI in five districts out of six is less than 0.45, well below the national average of 0.625 (UNDP, 2012).
- The period from 2007- 08 to 2011-12 has seen a large amount of ‘**distress migration**’. People often, at least in the initial years of this mass phenomenon, went to places unaware of the possible employment, kind of employment and wage rates at the destination. The main causes of migration are poverty, marginal or no land holding, low and non-assured irrigation facilities, uneconomic returns from agriculture due to small land holdings, below average returns from farming (INR 15,000 to INR 20,000 per year), reduced demand for agriculture labour during drought, very few alternate employment opportunities, and attraction of higher earnings elsewhere. ([NITI Aayog, 2015](#))

80% of the population directly depends on Agriculture for their livelihood in Bundelkhand region. It is also risky and vulnerable due to many factors:

- Bundelkhand region has faced an unending spell of natural disasters—continuous drought between 2003 and 2010, floods in 2011, late and deficient monsoon rains in 2012 and 2013; droughts again in 2014 and 2015, and erratic high intensity rains in 2016, 2017 leading to meteorological, hydrological and agricultural droughts almost every year.
- Farmers in the region are distressed with evident trends on sales of cattle, heavy indebtedness, high level of migration, starvation deaths, and farmers’ suicides¹.
- Four out of six districts are mostly rain-fed with irrigation potential below 45%.

The long-term structural problems of socio-cultural relationships, policy push for intensive farming in blanket approach, lack of proper mechanism to compensate crop losses, lack of new strategic vision for the region to cater the local need have had a cumulative effect over the years.

¹ India TV news, 24 July, 2014, “Impoverished children in Panna, MP mortgaged for food-grains”

Government of Madhya Pradesh's Effort: Policies and Programs

Bundelkhand Package, a three year programme starting from 2009, aimed at mitigation of progressively increasing drought by inclusive integrated development with the investment portfolio of INR 7,266 crore (INR 3,760 for MP). Additional central assistance of worth INR 3,450 crore (INR 1854 for MP) was also provided to implement above package (NRAA). This was one of the largest programme carved for development of this region. The progress of the Bundelkhand package has been rather slow, even though Government has invested on large projects.

Beside this, flagship program like PMKSY, RKVY, National Mission on Sustainable Agriculture, PMFBY are also in operation. State Government's projects are also being implemented in Bundelkhand. Several projects in Bundelkhand focused on major and minor irrigation schemes to provide irrigation water to farmers. Their success has however been insignificant compared to the grave socio-economic needs of the region. The quality of irrigation services is poor and most of the cultivated area is still dependent on rainfall (NIDM, 2014). It is now time to rethink on an alternative approach for agriculture in Bundelkhand; most of it is rain-fed.

Based on experiences of civil societies, farmers groups, there is a need of paradigm shift in order to realize the potential of rain-fed agriculture in securing livelihood of the farming families. It requires bottom-up planning process in which community prepares their plan which is facilitated by other stakeholders.

Proposed Framework of Action:

In order to address the issues related to migration, food and nutrition security, and livelihood security of small and marginal farmer households in Bundelkhand region – Madhya Pradesh, we propose three-point agenda is:

I. Reduce the risk associated with agriculture incomes of the farmers

Smallholder farmers face high production risks due to the variability of water use, quality of soil and weather aberrations. The proposed interventions for risk reduction are move from curative means, like insurance, to preventive means. Six key aspects to focus on risk reduction include:

- **Securing Water during Critical Crop Growing Stage** -: Unavailability of water, during critical crop growing stages, is one of the highest risk factors resulting in crop failure. Large scale irrigation systems have not been able to provide benefits to the last mile farming population. We propose to ensure critical irrigation at least twice to every small-holder rain-fed farmer, in case of dry spell or drought to ensure food security.
- **Soil health**: Soil is considered only through the availability of macro and micronutrients, the chemical composition of its nature; ignoring other aspects of a healthy soil for example – soil biodiversity, soil ecosystem etc. For healthy production systems, good health of the soil is primary. 3M strategy focusing on organic matter, microbial activity, moisture management is critical areas of work.
- **Seed diversity**: There are only seeds of few selected crops are available through government and markets; further timely availability of seeds is a concern. Given

the rain-fed conditions, diversified set of seeds and contingency seed availability are critical factors for timely sowing of the crops.

- **Crop diversification & Millets:** Production driven monoculture based models degrade the overall health of the soil and are also highly sensitive to climate change; thus increasing the risk in agriculture. Diversified crop system (less water intensive crops) including millets, pulses, oil seed will build systems that are congenial, adaptable and productive for rain-fed regions. These crops would also provide nutritional security.
- **Livestock and fisheries integration into agriculture systems:** Agriculture systems are directly linked for their inputs and sustainability with livestock and fisheries. These systems collectively are also the source of diversified incomes for the farmers. It is critical to, therefore, develop an area based, integrated approach towards agriculture, livestock and fisheries development.
- **Early warning systems:** There is a need to build systems and mechanisms such that timely weather information is accessible to farmers that can prevent the crop from severe damage.

II. Systems for Ease of Doing Farming

Farming is not an attractive sector, especially to the youth – given the high risks factors; highly labour intensive and with low returns. Systems need to be in place such that the youth can find decent livelihood option in the agriculture sector. For this, the following are some basic aspects:

- **Credit:** Systems for timely availability of credit for buying of seeds, other inputs.
- **Market:** Accessibility to markets and ensuring the price of the produce, at the least higher than the cost invested by the farmer is critical.
- **Support Services:** Extension services and availability of new technologies for enhancing the value of the produce should be made available to all farmers.
- **Technology/Innovation/Agronomic:** Technologies that reduce labour intensive work and make agriculture an easier and sustainable option needs to be explored.

III. Enhance incomes of the farmers

- **Remunerative price:** Increase in production by securing water, improving the soil quality, assuring quality inputs, innovations in agronomic practices and diversification in agriculture including livestock, fisheries and collective marketing through farmer's institutions. This would lead to higher remuneration to rainfed farmer's families from agriculture.
- **Gross added Value:** With comprehensive investment in agriculture, livestock and fisheries production system and its value chain will enhance agriculture output thereby gross added value would be 3-4 times more than the public investment.

Institution: Levers for Change

Bottoms up approach by operationalizing most of the government programs - right from planning, fund management, monitoring etc. through various farmers' institutions. Increased efforts towards capacity building for government officials and agencies, non-governmental groups and communities to encourage decentralized planning and manage the rainfed agriculture systems efficiently.

From beneficiary to a collective approach to agriculture development

Strengthening farmers based institutions and building them to become a mediator for small holder and marginal farmers, to engage with government, markets can enable a more holistic approach towards agriculture solutions in rain-fed regions of Bundelkhand.

Proposition: Design of Rainfed Agriculture Programme in Bundelkhand MP

A special programme needs to be designed or existing programmes need to be re-organized in the form of package for rain-fed farming to bring rain-fed farming families into the growth story of Madhya Pradesh.

A special Rain-fed Program can be taken up in 4 districts of Bundelkhand based on higher rain-fed areas (more than 50 %), climate vulnerable (very high and high categories). Out of these 4 districts, 2 could be aspirational districts which dragging the state in development indicators.

In each district, 5 most vulnerable blocks (Rain-fed, low HDI, High poverty, higher migration rates, more percentage of tribal population) could be taken up in an area approach (2 clusters, each having 1000 acres, 1000-1500 farmers). The programme may be taken up in 40 clusters covering around 50,000 farming families having small and marginal land holdings.

The programme would thus help in designing an alternative framework of investment in the Bundelkhand for rain-fed agriculture. Broadly such special programme on rainfed agriculture in Bundelkhand requires around INR 200 crores for a period of 3-4 years which can be routed through ATMA/Agriculture department, implemented through farmers' institution.

Annex 2: Agenda

Building Sustainability in Rainfed Agriculture Production System *Challenges and Opportunities to bring Bundelkhand in Agriculture Growth Path*

28th September 2018

Venue: Hotel Palash Residency, Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh

TIME	ACTIVITY
09:30 – 10:30	Tea and Registration
10:30 – 10:45	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Expectation Setting• Brief Introduction of the participants in the round table
10:45 – 11.45	Session I: Presentation: Status of Agriculture <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Rain-fed regions in India (Country Perspective)• Bundelkhand Region<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Status and Trends– Water management– Soil and land systems– Livestock– Seeds and other inputs <p><i>Followed by discussion</i></p>
11:45– 13:30	Session II: Round-table: Sustainable agriculture systems <p>Farmers' Perspective and Civil society Perspective</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Based on your experience, what are the challenges for small holder farmers in the region?• What are the possible models, solutions, cases that provide perspective to designing sustainable agriculture systems in Bundelkhand (MP)? Insights on relevant models on Zero Budget Natural Farming, organic farming, comprehensive agriculture systems, etc• What should be Strategy for Agriculture Development in Bundelkhand?
13:30 – 14:30	Lunch
14:30 –15:30	Session III: Presentation of Bundelkhand Agriculture Strategy <p><i>Followed by discussion</i></p>

Annex 3: Participants List

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