Towards a holistic view of our agriculture

Cross Currents

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Judging by media coverage and pronouncements of politicians on either side of the political divide, fertilizer subsidy seems to be the pivotal point on which the whole future of our agriculture and the welfare of the peasantry rests. It is nothing new. Our politicians and even trade union and solidarity organizations have often concentrated their attention on politically current and rewarding factors rather than taking a holistic view of our agriculture and deciding on policies and priorities for its development, which includes the well-being of the peasant and the agricultural proletariat too. Our attempt here is to raise certain questions answering of which would elucidate the complexity of the issues facing agriculture and draw attention to the need for a holistic approach to them instead of isolated and piecemeal approaches.

For purposes of developing such a holistic view, it is necessary to consider several factors such as climate, land use, technology, human resources. This list, however, is not at all inclusive but merely a guide.

Sri Lanka is one of the few countries with abundant rainfall. Yet we have been unable to conserve our water resources and are experiencing alternate spells of flood and drought. Sadly, the only remedy that has come to the minds of policymakers has been the commodification of water with disastrous impact in the livelihood of the peasantry. Large sums are spent on flood relief and drought relief which could be avoided by judicious water management and irrigation development.

The contamination of ground water has made water purification and distribution of potable water a costly exercise. Rainwater harvesting though viable is yet almost untouched. Large scale deforestation and introduction of alien species of flora on pencury interests and misguided foreign advice have damaged the ecological balance. In addition global warming and other global climate change phenomena too affect or weather patterns which have to be considered in developing our agriculture.

Private sector

The extent of land available for agriculture is dwindling except for those that were abandoned during the war. Growth of human settlements and development activities as well as urbanization tends to shrink it further. Hence it is impossible to provide every family with a plot of land as some politicians promise. The way out is to develop intensive farming.

This requires the uplift of productivity of labour both in subsistence agriculture and in plantations. An impediment to the improvement of productivity is the inability to mechanize subsistence farming due to the small size of the land plots. The only remedy that has been so far practised is the selling of state land inconsiderate for commercial agriculture to the private sector. It is necessary to look into cooperative forms of collectivization with the assistance of farmer organizations so that the peasant’s right to land is safeguarded.

Much also depends on the development of R & D. The prolific use of chemical fertilizers through several decades, especially encouraged by the fertilizer subsidy has degraded the soil and is supposed to have contaminated ground water in the NCP and other areas which has resulted in the appearance of yet another unidentified chronic kidney disease among the population. This makes it imperative to revert to organic farming practices. It is also necessary to develop seed and crop varieties that are best suited to such farming as well as climatic and weather conditions prevailing in the country.

Use could also be made of traditional knowledge in many aspects including the preservation of harvested crops. Another impediment to the development of agriculture is the low technological base.

Scientific planning in agriculture

However, care should be taken in introducing foreign technologies without verifying their suitability for local conditions. For example, four wheel tractors were imported for farming during the 1970s and it was soon apparent that our paddy fields were too small for them to be operated profitably. So they were used for transport purposes with its concomitant hazards. It took a long time for us to realize the viability of single wheel and two wheel tractors. Introduction of new technology as well as the application of information technology would not only improve productivity but also attract youth to agriculture. It can generate new agri-industries which could absorb unemployed rural labour. There is much potential in this sphere, especially if one opts for production of value-added agricultural products.

There is a strong need for scientific planning in agriculture. Production is almost entirely dependent of market factors but there is a serious lack of market information. The alternate glut and abundance in the vegetable market is not only a result of alternating weather but also a reflection of the operation of blind forces that do not take into consideration the size of the market.

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Among the agricultural proletariat a significant component comprise plantation workers who live in abject poverty with worse living conditions and wages below decent subsistence level. They are denied many rights that are enjoyed by other sectors of the working class. Though they represent one of the earliest working class they still suffer from archaic pre-capitalist relations of production that are mixed with capitalist relations.

The above questions need attention of economists and politicians. It is high time they approached agriculture in a holistic manner.