

Addressing Barriers to Rice Seeds Trade between India and Bangladesh

Message from the Study

Rice is a staple food for people of Bangladesh and India, and therefore, food security in the two countries is largely dependent on its availability. Availability of rice, in turn, is dependent on accessibility to inputs, more particularly high-yielding variety (HYV) and/or hybrid seeds. Going by the current seed scenario of the two countries, it is observed that the seed industry is infested with several issues relating to technology, production, marketing and distribution. Considering the present imbroglio on the one hand and the user (farmer) friendly nature of HYV seed (as it is relatively easily accessible at affordable rates to small and marginal farmers) on the other, it is critically important for both the countries to take initiatives to improve availability and accessibility to HYV seed. The present study indicates that availability and accessibility of rice seeds can be significantly improved through cooperation between the two countries.

Lack of cooperation and its implications

At the moment, it is noted that cooperation between India and Bangladesh in the area of rice seed is almost negligible. Despite several instances of informal movement of HYV rice seed across the border, formal trade is conspicuous by its absence. In addition, both the countries are yet to take any concrete step towards promotion of knowledge sharing.

In the absence of formal trade, the issue of timely availability and accessibility to HYV rice seed persists. This leads to informal flow of substantial quantity of HYV rice seed. Besides, this, along with other factors, pushes farmers to use 'farmer saved seeds', compromising crop yields and consequent to this their food security. Absence of technical barrier has not helped nor contributed in converting this informal trade into a formal one.

Factors responsible for lack of cooperation

Several factors are responsible for this lack of cooperation in HYV rice seed between India and Bangladesh. Some of the most important ones include:

- *Inclusion of HYV rice seed in the list of notified crops:* This requires that HYV rice seed can be imported only for trial purposes, and the quantity of import is limited. After successive trials for three years, a particular variety can be released by the concerned national body or the respective governments for local production and use.
- *Issues related to Intellectual Property Rights (IPRs):* Seed is a medium of transfer of scientific knowledge and technology to farmers, who could benefit from this for a long time. Since development of a particular variety of seed requires time and resources, issues related to patent and royalty have become important. These seemingly make cooperation between the two countries more difficult.
- *Lack of harmonisation in seed laws, policies, regulation and standards:* Both India and Bangladesh have their own set of rules and regulations. These are not complementary in most cases. In addition, there are also issues such as lack of recognition of certifications and quarantine certificates. At the bilateral level, this issue remains unaddressed.

Facilitating Cooperation

Potential channels for improving cooperation

Two channels which can boost cooperation are: *first*, formalisation of trade in HYV rice seeds, and *second*, a framework of cooperation between governments and research institutions of the two countries.

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Cooperation in HYV rice seed can be increased in a number of ways:

1. There is a need to understand the state of development and release of varieties rice seed and also its usefulness in terms of yields. This can be achieved by conducting a joint study covering identified areas in both the countries.
2. There is a need to identify and test HYV rice seed available in one or both the countries that could be adaptable in the two countries.
3. It is also important that the adaptability of the developed varieties in the two countries is tested by the national authorities in both the countries.
4. There is need for collaboration between research institutions in the two countries. Such collaboration can help joint development of varieties adaptable in both the countries. More specifically, institutions like BIRRI and BADC in Bangladesh and CRRI and ICAR in India can collaborate. Areas such as stress-tolerant varieties could be potential areas for collaboration.
5. Research institutions in both the countries could undertake research to jointly develop varieties that are suitable and adaptable in different agro-climatic conditions. A joint expert group comprising of scientists from agriculture universities and institutions can be established to start the process of knowledge-sharing and new HYV development. This could help in resolving IPRs and other related issues.
6. If found useful and adaptable, release of the tested varieties should be allowed in one or both the countries. Released varieties could reach larger number of farmers in two ways: (i) by direct import and (ii) by production of released varieties within the country. The later could be a direct offshoot of the former.
7. Once all or some of the preceding conditions are fulfilled, national seed associations, seed producers including NGOs, seed importers and exporters in the two countries can extend cooperation and collaborations.

8. Harmonisation of seed laws and regulations is another important area. It is observed that there is not much difference between the seed standards set forth by both the countries. Some adjustments in these standards can facilitate greater cooperation.

The following arrangements could be made to bring in the change. *First*, governments of both the countries should accept HYV rice seed as a potential area of cooperation. *Second*, there is need to bring in necessary changes in policies and regulations. For example, both the countries have put rice seeds in the list of notified crops. Import of notified crops requires adherence to a given processes, which looks cumbersome and unfriendly both for importing and exporting. De-notification, with strong adherence to quarantine and Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) standards, as followed in other crops, could be a useful initial step.

How would cooperation in HYV rice seed be useful?

Formalising HYV rice seed trade between the two countries will take agricultural cooperation to a higher level and would also make quality seed available and more accessible at an affordable price to farmers. At the more specific level and considering the diverse requirements, there is great scope for developing and releasing stress-tolerant varieties in both the countries. Such efforts could help to effectively address the adverse impact of climate change on poverty and food security.

It needs mentioning that any policy shift, even short-term ones, can have significant impact for a large number of people in India and Bangladesh. Such cooperation will also be useful in making food accessible even in the context of volatility in the global food grain market. Both the countries, being huge consumers of food, cannot continue to be insensitive to the dynamics of change in the food market and the potential role of cooperation between the two countries in this area.

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