

Market-driven strategies coupled with enabling regulatory regime key to greater economic gains in agriculture sector in the Brahmaputra basin

Guwahati, 25th June, 2016

“Market led growth strategies coupled with greater access to newer markets can be the game changer for agriculture in the region” said V B Pyarelal, Additional Chief Secretary (Agriculture), Government of Assam. He was speaking at a Sub-Regional Policy Dialogue on ‘**Fostering agricultural value chains in Eastern South Asia**’. The meet was organised by CUTS International in partnership with Rashtriya Grameen Vikas Nidhi (RGVN), Guwahati, SNV, Bhutan and Unnayan Shamannay, Bangladesh on 25th June at the Lily Hotel in Guwahati, Assam.

The event aimed to bring together government agencies, regulators, private institutions and private players engaged with agriculture sector, to understand and deliberate on how to best harness agriculture value chain and its potential in the sub-region comprising of the North Eastern states of India and its neighbours in the Brahmaputra basin.

Szarita Laitphlang, Vice Chairperson, Meghalaya Resource and Employment Generation Council said that Meghalaya and the North East Indian states as a whole have some unique products to offer to the world including turmeric with the highest content of curcumin (anti-cancer ingredient), ginger, other exotic fruits, etc., which have immense export potential across the world. However, it is lack of connectivity coupled with under-developed entrepreneurial skills at the producer level that such potential has not been exploited to the extent possible.

Taking on from where she left, Sudhir Chandra Nath, Programme Head, Seed and Agro Enterprise, BRAC, Bangladesh, stated that credit support, assured market linkages along with procurement and skill development really helped to build sustainable agricultural value chains in Bangladesh.

Arindam Chaudhuri, Regional Director, Agriculture and Processed Food Export Development Agency of India mentioned that APEDA has many schemes that can help build infrastructure towards facilitating a better supply chain and invited proposals from the Department of Agriculture, Assam to that end. Responding to that V B Pyarelal said that the Department of Agriculture, Government of Assam will be coordinating with his office to this end.

Bimal Kumar Dubey, Director (Imports), Food Safety and Standards Authority of India stated the positive development of a single window system that has now started functioning in all major ports of India, which will be operational in all ports in a phased manner. Under this system, traders will need to fill up a single document for customs, food safety, quarantine, etc., at the ports. He also responded to the issue flagged by the PRAN Group from Bangladesh and the Bhutanese participants regarding their concerns and requested them to share them with FSSAI through CUTS.

..//.. (Contd.)

Reiterating the CUTS findings about regulatory requirements coming in the way of consumer gains, P K Ghosh, Assistant Director, Regional Plant Quarantine Office, Kolkata opined that to overcome such hurdles, it is an imperative that traders know and understand market and regulatory requirements for specific markets that they wish to cater to. It is also important to build stakeholder capacity to this end, he added. His point was seconded by Dipankar Biswas, Regional Officer, Animal Quarantine and Certification Service, Kolkata.

According to Asit Kumar Kundu, Assistant General Manager, PRAN-RFL Group, Bangladesh, there is ample scope for further investment by PRAN in India, Bhutan and Nepal, along the lines of what they have already done in Tripura and, recently, in West Bengal. He, however, said that coupled with better physical connectivity and certainty in the domestic policies of Bangladesh, more enabling regulatory regime and higher cooperation between standard organisations across borders is necessary to facilitate easier trans-boundary investment.

Jahnabi Phookan, Director, Assam Bengal Navigations, flagged the importance of larger connectivity, particularly through inland waterways routes to help promoting better trade in the region. Asadul Amin, Managing Director, Premium Seeds, Bangladesh, said that it is important that agriculture in the region undergoes a transformation from subsistence to market driven mode. Dorji Rinchen, Senior Advisor, Ministry of Agriculture and Forest, Royal Government of Bhutan, stated that Bhutan largely follows organic/natural methods of cultivation and such products have huge export potential. It is through entrepreneurial development that such potential could be tapped. Krishna Saikia, Chief Executive Officer, Greencover Overseas, said that it is very important that primary processing is done at the farm level and, coupled with incentives for crop diversification, capacity building of producers are needed so that the food processing industry in the region can take off.

K C S Kurup, General Manager, North Eastern Regional Agricultural Marketing Corporation, seconded Saikia's point on primary processing at the farm level and said that agriculture value chains need to be developed by keeping in mind their economic feasibility. S K Das of Small Farmers Agro Consortium, Guwahati, stated that farmer producer companies can prosper if they are given handholding support for a longer period and professional managers are engaged to take ahead the business plans.

Amiya Sharma, Executive Director, RGVN, said that it is important that the larger deliberations on transboundary agriculture value chains are connected with the needs of small and marginal farmers, and they have to be included in the policy discourse.

Prithviraj Nath, Head, CUTS Calcutta Resource Centre and Policy Analyst, CUTS International, concluded the event by stating that CUTS will take on board the inputs and suggestions received from the day-long event and will advocate with relevant state, national and international agencies to help create an enabling and sustained discourse towards promoting trans-boundary agricultural value chains in the Brahmaputra basin.

For more information, please contact
Prithviraj Nath. pn@cuts.org, +91-98304-81370