

The Raghavan Report

Asia's Food Security – Asia's policymaking process needs overhauling

by Raghavan ('Ragha') Sampathkumar



Extending further from the points that were discussed in the previous columns, training and capacity building aimed at reaching hundreds of millions of farmers mainly, smallholders in Asia is certainly a daunting task but certainly not an impossible one. Considering the enormous diversity in terms of cropping pattern, agro-climatic zones, landscapes, transport infrastructure such as roads, communication infrastructure including phone and internet penetration, cultural diversity, social norms, hierarchies, and so on, Asia truly is a complex place to do business.

From the mammoth Alibaba to a local farmer in Vietnam who modifies his bi-cycle into a pesticide sprayer, Asia is one of the most happening places for innovations globally. The region is also hailed the engine of global economic growth for the next few decades. But, its food system remains highly vulnerable and primitive in terms of adoption of technology.

But the region faces huge challenges to keep feeding the burgeoning population with affordable, quality and safe food against fast shrinking cultivable land, growing water scarcity and increase in negative environmental externalities.

In this context, food and nutritional security for the over four billion people of the region can be achieved only through enhanced cooperation between the food chain stakeholders; necessary efficient and predictable regulatory framework; and a holistic and balanced approach for policy making that takes care not only of the current priorities but also future needs.

To give an example, what is the use if farmers are trained on good agricultural practices and responsible use of inputs (chemicals, water, and fertilisers) but have no choice in terms of innovative technologies or products to use?

They learn about new technologies but the policy and regulatory frameworks in a country do not approve the innovative products (e.g. a new chemical molecule that degrades faster and leaves less residues on food) or technologies including CRISPR and Genetic Engineering. This mismatch must be addressed through overhauling the policy and regulatory frameworks and making them insulated from unjustified claims and indiscriminate activism. Public perception had been awkwardly skewed against some truly innovative technologies that

help enhance livelihoods of farmers and also benefit consumers. But these are blocked by continuous propaganda by unscrupulous elements disguised as activists who have vested interests, borrowed ideologies and free-flowing funds from people who do not have a speck of understanding about Asia and its agricultural sector.

Similarly, policies related to food security are mostly focusing on a narrow-perspective of achieving it through increased domestic production as against leveraging the advantages of trade. There are still heavier roadblocks on food trade even within the region. Standards (e.g. MRLs for food products) and guidelines are far from being uniform to aid free flow of goods and services even within Asia. Again, indiscriminate and unjustifiable nationalistic policies do no good but push millions deep into poverty, hunger and malnutrition only to reverse any gains on these key socio-economic indicators made in the last few decades.

Further, agricultural sector remains highly politically sensitive for it is the cause and also the victim of policies that are not based on scientific data and unbiased evidences. Some examples and possible solutions will be discussed in forthcoming columns.

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