Why Food, Agriculture and Nutrition should be at the Top of the Agenda for G20 nations?

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As India takes up leadership of G20 in 2022 it would be most appropriate to bring food, nutrition and agriculture to the centre stage for this elite group. While the world would perhaps be recovering from the ravages of COVID-19 by 2022 it would be very important to bring the attention of the world back to the most essential things of life like food and health and create enabling conditions for their promotion.

Some of the Sustainable Development Goals are intrinsically linked to food, nutrition and agriculture. Zero Hunger (2), Good Health & Well-being (3), Responsible consumption and production (12), Climate action (13) and Life on land (15) are in this list. In the Post-COVID situation these goals assume more importance as the emphasis would shift from GDP driven economic goals to the Well Being driven social goals. Agriculture, Nutrition and Food form the bed rock of the well-being of people across continents. Governments of G20 countries have a responsibility to make the SDGs achievable by 2030. Food, nutrition and agriculture will play a crucial role in that endeavour. Such an important topic deserves to be at the centre of the agenda of G20.

As COVID-19 exposes the fragility of the supply chain of food and agricultural produce around the world the nations are exploring means of being more self-reliant, especially with food. Small holder farmers who dominate agriculture in many of the G20 countries, many of them being women, need to be protected and nurtured for the sustainability of the local food production system. Hence, it is an important topic for the G20 nations to debate and find answers to.

Agriculture has made great progress in many countries in the last 50 years, starting with Green Revolution followed by hybrid technology and biotechnology. Yield increases helped the world to feed the ever growing population. However, tragically hunger still exists in the world. More than 5 million children died last year due to lack of food, clean water

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and health care. About 160 million children of below 5 years age are found to be malnourished in the world. These numbers can go up if immediate action is not taken.

Diffusion of knowledge and technology have not been uniform across the world. Progress has not benefited people in different countries uniformly which has resulted in a fractured social fabric of the world. This is to be addressed urgently by the world leaders by paying specific attention to the following specific subjects.

Equity is a victim of our growth so far. Lack of purchasing power has deprived certain sections of the world community from accessing food while on the other hand there is abundance of food in most of the advanced countries. Inequality based on gender, geography, income and other parameters needs to be addressed. Lack of equity in access to food is a major issue, especially in disaster situations like pandemics when it gets exposed more due to the failure of food supply chain and the natural advantage the rich have in accessing food in such situations. This needs the attention of world leaders.

Food security deals with availability, accessibility and affordability of food for all the citizens of each country. It is imperative that epidemics, pandemics, politics, natural disasters and wars do not disturb the food security of any nation. Sufficient safeguards are to be put in place to ensure that affordable food is made available to the poorest of the poor in every country irrespective of other obstacles.

Nutritional security of the citizens of the world assumes significance now because the food choices of the people will be increasingly dictated by the need for healthy diet that gives them immunity to diseases. The realization that consuming the right food will avoid expenditure on medicines and hospitals makes people look for affordable healthy food. Shifting people to plant-based nutrition is a key task in front of the world. Sustainable dietary habits of people lead to sustainable food production systems which in turn promotes environmental sustainability and nutritional sustainability.

Small holder farmers and their welfare needs to be at the top of the priority list for governments around the world. Unprofitable agriculture, in many parts of the world, has left the farmers poor and vulnerable to several risks. In most of the developing countries more than 80 per cent of the farmers are small and resource poor and many of them are women. They lack access to high quality inputs, finance, technical advice and access to markets. They are unable to practice sustainable and good agricultural practices. Distress among farmers leading to increased suicide rate is a big challenge for the world. Can agriculture survive if farmers die? If youth does not have interest in agriculture how will the future of agriculture look? Leaders have to look at this serious problem that cuts across most of the world and G20 countries. They have to find answers that can improve the financial wherewithal of the farmers and increase their risk bearing capacity.

Depletion of natural resources has become a very serious issue in most of the countries. Soil, water and biodiversity have depleted due to continuous and intensive agriculture followed in the last 50 years. Our food production systems in each country have to be measured against a natural resource use efficiency index. Diffusion of technology across the nations to help them in improving their natural resource use efficiency index has

to be given priority as a humanitarian effort to conserve environment. The leaders have to take policy decisions to promote this collaborative approach.

Climate Change is the biggest threat to global agriculture whose impact is increasing year after year. Droughts, floods are increasing in intensity. Potential yields could drop and food availability could be severely restricted by 2050 due to climate change unless we start responding now. Sustainable agricultural practices and cultivation of climate resilient crops may help us in fighting this but how to make it a part of our life and how to handle possible immediate yield losses? Is it possible to have a collaborative policy across nations which helps the total global population? This needs the attention of the world leaders to find a collaborative effort.

Science & Technology is the way forward to find solutions to our problems in food and agriculture space as it is with the other fields. Scientific discovery and technological advancement have become islands of excellence in the world, thereby increasing the inequality in the world. Inadequate research infrastructure, lack of harmonization among regulatory regimes of different countries, lack of uniform intellectual property regime and inadequate access to funding in some parts of the world have made the development and adoption of technology unequal. Not having predictable commercial models for sharing of technological innovations among countries has not helped. Biotechnology can help in fighting biotic and abiotic stress in agriculture. Digital technologies can help in creating market linkages, transferring knowledge to farmers and supporting financial systems. Precision agriculture and micro irrigation can make a huge difference to the way we manage use of natural resources in agriculture. It is important for the world leaders to take this agenda forward and find regulatory and commercial structures that will make technological tools available for the benefit of food and agriculture field uniformly across the world.

Seeds and planting material need special mention among all agricultural inputs not just because this is the most important input carrying genetic potential that can benefit humanity but also because they become controversial in different parts of the world. It is vitally important that farmers use high quality seed every time they plant a crop. Unfortunately public institutions have run out of steam in funding crop development research and private industry takes interest in seeds where their commercial interests lie. This leaves large OP variety crops without adequate research funding leading to low genetic gain. Some of them are staple food crops like wheat, rice, millets, root crops and nutritious crops like vegetables, oilseeds and lentils, and forage crops for the livestock.

World leaders have to find a way of funding research in improving such crops and to make them resilient to climate change. Modern tools like genomics, gene editing in addition to traditional plant breeding have to be dovetailed to support these crops. Cropping systems in different countries have to be optimized by making seed the carrier of all the good things needed in our food. Seed systems have to be professionalized and augmented in the poorer nations who are struggling to reach the levels of stable food production and security that others have reached. This needs a major discussion among the world leaders so that institutional infrastructure is put in place towards this end.

There are several other subjects like biodiversity, international movement of germplasm and intellectual property management in agriculture which need special attention of the world leaders. These subjects have to be sorted out in such a way to facilitate smooth and seamless use of these resources for the common good while simultaneously protecting the biodiversity and proprietorship of biological resources of the communities.

Financial systems, consisting of credit and insurance products and services, have to be made available to farmers so that their risks are covered and their financial wherewithal is built over a period of time. Using modern digital technologies the financial institutions should be able to offer these services in a seamless manner to the farmers as they offer to their urban counterparts. Digital land records, collateral management, digital market linkages for the produce and similar infrastructure is essential for the success of this effort.

Farmers incomes have to be strengthened through diversification. **Livestock, dairy, fisheries,** b**irds** and other sources of non-farm income for the farmers are to be built on a strong platform with funding, insurance, technical advice, linkage to markets and digital support systems. This will reduce vulnerability of farmers' lives due to crop failure for reasons like abiotic and biotic stresses. A robust structure of farmers cooperatives and farmer producer organizations is to be built covering the farm and non-farm activities of the farmers in a comprehensive way.

India has a huge role to play in bringing all these aspects of food, nutrition and agriculture to the centre stage during its tenure of leadership of G20. India is a major contributor to the pool of agricultural land, number of small holder farmers, crop diversity, agro-climatic conditions and food systems of the world. India can benefit from bringing all the above aspects into a seamless stream of knowledge and experience sharing across countries but at the same time India can also contribute towards making this work for many other developing countries. India should take lead in getting some of the policy level decisions on the above aspects hammered out among G20 countries during its tenure.

The G20 leaders have to show unflinching commitment to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030, especially those impacting food, nutrition and agriculture - which kept the world going during COVID-19 pandemic. They have to build a more equitable world in the post-COVID situation.