

How India can give a boost to agri exports

The recent policy initiatives are helping expand the market, but more must be done on the quality and food processing fronts

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Global hunger, which was on the decline, has gone up steeply in the past few years. Almost 800 million people go hungry every day and 50 million in 40-45 countries are on the brink of starvation. Availability of wheat and other crops has fallen due to drop in production caused by extreme heat conditions and severe flood in several parts of the world, and compounded by the war in Ukraine—a major wheat-producing country.

If the war continues, there could be unprecedented food crisis engulfing the world next year. Less than 10 countries account for 90 per cent of food exports and hence when any one country faces a crisis, the consequences are felt across the world.

Given this scenario, what can India do to alleviate hunger and boost farmers' income? Our agricultural policies in the recent past have been in the right direction.

Farmers' income has risen around 1.7 times since FY18 with a decisive upward shift in mean income, especially where the farmers have engaged in cash crops. For the first time in 2021, agri-exports crossed \$50 billion, which is a commendable given the pandemic challenges.

Here are some of the policy measures that have helped increase exports:

Cluster development: As part of the Agriculture Export Policy, 46 unique product-district clusters have been identified for export promotion. Some of the success stories include: Banana cluster (Ananthpur); Pomegranate cluster (Maharashtra); and Rose onion cluster (Karnataka).

Country-specific strategy: An interaction was carried out with 60 Indian Missions and stakeholders to identify the products, their potential and way forward for preparing country-wise agri-export strategies.

Virtual buyer-seller meets: 24 of such meets were organised with various countries. E-catalogues were released, with details of participant exporters, importers and trade associations.

Virtual trade fair (VTF): APEDA took an initiative to develop its own VTF application. The virtual platform provides an opportunity for agri importers of several countries and our exporters to interact.

Agri cells at different embassies of India: APEDA is consulting 13 agri cells in our Missions in different countries, seeking inputs on real-time basis to further strengthen the existing market intelligence cell.

Farmer connect portal: This has been set up on APEDA's website for



Maintain quality standards

providing a platform for FPOs/FPCs, cooperatives to interact with exporters.

Focus on new products

Efforts are being made to expand India's export basket of agricultural products. The following are a few examples:

Organically certified moringa leaves powder and seven unique value-added products of vacuum freeze dried ethnic village rice from Kumbakonam, Tamil Nadu, to multiple destinations of Australia, Vietnam and Ghana.

The first consignment of red rice was shipped to the US. Iron rich 'red rice' is grown in Brahmaputra valley, Assam.

India recently gained market access for pomegranate in Australia; mango and basmati rice in Argentina; carrot seeds in Iran; wheat flour, basmati rice and soyabean oil-

cake in Uzbekistan; and oranges in Serbia.

Pesticide residue problems have affected basmati rice exports to the EU. Now, Export Inspection Council testing has been made mandatory for basmati exports to the EU, which has led to a decrease in the number of alerts. APEDA, in collaboration with trade bodies, has taken measures to create awareness in the basmati growing areas.

Despite abundant horticultural produce, India lags behind when it comes to the export of processed fruits/vegetables as well as processed food. They contribute merely 4 per cent of the total agricultural exports of the country. This is way below than those in Brazil (30 per cent), the US (70 per cent) and Malaysia (82 per cent).

In several cases, exporters in India source their raw materials from middlemen or *mandis* without having complete knowledge about which farm the product is sourced from. This makes meeting the food safety requirements of key markets a challenge.

A related issue in the food and beverage industry is the multiplicity of testing standards, with bodies like FSSAI for imports and the domestic market and APEDA and EIC for exports. This can create confusion among farmers when it comes to following standards for domestic

and external markets, and leads to ambiguity in food standards.

There is a lot of scope for R&D in agriculture, especially in the development of high-yielding seeds, creation of an efficient plant disease forecast system, and effective post-harvest management. While national food security is important, there's a need to focus on value-added exports in food processing.

Also, current technological innovations — including solar power for irrigation pumps and cold storage, genome-editing and digitisation along the value chain — have shown potential to reduce emissions while also raising productivity.

The government has rolled out several excellent initiatives such as 'One District One Product' scheme, upgradation of individual micro-food processing units, support to farmer producer organisations, the backward and forward linkages scheme, etc.

The efficacy and adequacy of these initiatives may be reviewed to see whether any additional support is required. It is equally important that the various stakeholders in the supply chain work together to make the initiatives a success.

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