

Regenerative agriculture must reach critical mass

Its resource requirements are very modest compared to sums spent on philanthropy. Scaling up is desirable and necessary

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Of late many expressions, 'organic/regenerative/natural/sustainable/agriculture', are often used interchangeably. A quick look at the subtle differences in meaning would help.

Organic agriculture avoids synthetic chemicals and GMOs. Regenerative agriculture (RA) improves soil health by promoting biodiversity, carbon sequestration, restoring entire agricultural ecosystems, and thus goes beyond sustainability. Natural farming (NF) is a sub-set of RA and is an Indian expression. Philosophically NF is minimalist in nature — reaching a stage of “doing nothing”, where natural processes are established. Sustainable agriculture balances environmental responsibility with productivity, encompassing both RA and NF.

An overarching expression, agroecology, defined by FAO, provides a 13-principles framework to usher in agriculture which balances local ecology with local economy. RA is a widely used expression globally.

The macro and micro picture for agriculture does not look comfortable. Mean surface air temperature in 2024

was 1.54 °C above the pre-industrial average. A recent study (IPE Global and Esri India), indicates 85 per cent of districts are prone to extreme weather events. Agri-input subsidies for energy-intensive farming are about 3 per cent of GDP, a concern to the government.

According to NAFIS (Nabard All India Rural Financial Inclusion Survey) report (2021-22), average monthly income of agricultural households was ₹13,661, debt ₹91,231 and only one-third of the income comes from agriculture. Yet, 57 per cent of the rural households depend on agriculture, indicating its importance and the necessity to make it resilient. Spread of RA through transformative processes is crucial.

CREATING EXEMPLARS

Many successful RA farms exist across the country, despite Green Revolution. They have demonstrated resilience to erratic weather patterns. These are promoted by champion farmers, civil society and philanthropies. Each parcel is of a few acres. Exact numbers are not known, as the produce is used for personal consumption, and a little is sold in local markets. These are exemplars, despite their small size, because of their signalling effect.



FARMING. The natural way

Of late, ‘natural shops’ are mushrooming in urban areas, selling trust-based agriculture products with no/less chemicals. For example, Indore based, Kamdar’s Organic Farmers’ Producer Company sells chemical-free staples, under a brand ‘Satvik’ through 300 local stores. Its gross revenue was ₹1 crore in FY2024.

Likewise, turnover of Bengaluru-based Sahaja Samrudha Organic Producer’s Company was ₹18 crore and Anantapur based Dharani Farming and Marketing Cooperative (Timbacktu Collective) was ₹5.2 crore.

These exemplars should be transitioned to the next level. Politically changing entrenched agriculture practices is not easy. Hence, Indian philanthropies have a big role to play,

through coalitions, pooling resources and reprioritization of investments.

Exemplars must be enhanced, in their depth, breadth and coverage, establishing a scientific basis for RA and creating a critical mass for transformation. A ballpark requirement for this programme is ₹2,500 crore (50 NGOs/4 different locations per NGO/2500 hectares per location/₹50,000 per hectare for 5 years). This is a very small investment in relation to ₹1.2 lakh crore invested by the private philanthropy in FY2023 (India Philanthropy Report: 2024).

Fifty civil society organisations, which have successfully demonstrated RA across geographies, may be invited to submit project proposals. Each project should be comprehensive, designed as per local ecology, requirements, saturating entire landscape, as per RA principles.

The programme must work on all three aspects of agriculture; cost reduction, productivity enhancement and managing markets. Existing community institutions like SHGs/FPOs/cooperatives may be involved.

The writer is former deputy managing director, NABARD. Views are personal