

# Drought and food security options



**SHASHANKA  
BHIDE**

**T**he suffering caused by the drought in Somalia depicts not only the inability of the weak or poor economies to deal with the failures of rainfall, leading to disappearance of food supplies, but also the aggravating actions of man in stymieing supplementary support. The fact of millions of people suffering from lack of access to food is startling, after all the experience across the world in dealing with droughts.

Droughts have occurred before, caused misery and the general response in the long-term has been to push production frontiers, conduct more research to achieve higher productivity, and push for higher productivity in crops production under varied production conditions so that the benefits are widely available.

But it is also the case that as farm output turns out to be competitive because of higher productivity, demand for farm output continues to rise from the other non-food sources such as energy. Producing more grains does not necessarily mean availability of more food.

India obviously has to do all it can to help the needy. The challenge posed by extreme calamities and the current phase of persistent high food inflation requires policy responses from a longer term perspective. Our ability to build up the stocks of foodgrains, while being economically inefficient, is an assurance of availability of food for a country of more than a billion.

However, holding the stock by itself is no assurance of either the ability to distribute it when needed and hold it to a quality standard. Will large international foodstocks restrain further investments to improve productivity in this sector?

## **GLOBAL STOCKS**

There is also the argument that we probably will not be able to hold enough reserves to meet all emergencies. International reserves are more efficient than each country building its own reserves, provided there are fair rules on access to such a reserve. While this issue of an international grain reserve is important in the realm of understanding uncertain future scenarios, the importance of immediately available surplus food for meeting emergencies can hardly be ignored.

Lack of such surpluses leads to knee-jerk reactions of trade bans and high tariffs in countries — where such surpluses are, in fact, available — when demand in the international



**There are** no easy ways to provide safety nets to farmers hit by drought.

market increases. If the markets are to ration the available supplies it is likely that poor would be left out.

There are probably no easy ways of providing safety nets for the failures of rainfall, or for that matter other calamities, other than collective support provided by other nations. Fortunately, nature has been considerate in India's case. More widely distributed production and varied agro-climatic conditions in which food is grown also mean that if there is crop failure in one place, it may not be the case everywhere.

Large countries have the protection of such diversified production conditions within themselves. For smaller countries, access to trade

supplies is the only recourse in the case of crop failures. Predictable or reliable channels of trade are as important as raising production to even out deficits and surpluses.

The path India will take in its agriculture would be significant for the supply of, and demand for, farm commodities in the global markets.

The emergence of large foodgrain stocks even as there is a large proportion of population that is poor and vulnerable should not lead us into believing that the problem is only on demand side of the equation. If the high stocks are a result of low consumption demand, the scenario is likely to change as the production pattern begins to reflect consump-

tion pattern: rising demand for high value output. The margin of stocks now seen may begin to decline. Strategies for ensuring access to food at the global level will require that global trade in food also remains an effective tool for this purpose. Trade should ultimately lead to larger supplies, and not only to higher prices.

## **GROWTH STRATEGY**

The push for higher agricultural growth in the next Five Year Plan is important when we consider the implications of the alternative of low growth in the global context. Higher growth also has to be sustainable in the medium to long term, given the experience so far that demand for farm output will come not only from food requirements, but also from other requirements.

The large deficits in farm productivity when we compare ourselves with developed and some developing countries are an assurance that there will be significant rewards for new investments in agriculture.

Warnings of droughts and crop failures in any part of the world should catalyse strategies for improvements in access to food at the global level. It is less clear if droughts will lead to measures to mitigate the effects of conflicts.

*(The author is a Senior Research Counsellor, NCAER. The views are personal. [bfeedback@thehindu.co.in](mailto:bfeedback@thehindu.co.in))*