

PMKSY anchorage : Agriculture port is a better bet

3 May 2016, New Delhi, Sanjeev Chopra



Agriculture departments in states are more or less in sync with Gol, but major issues between the state governments and the Union Water Resources Ministry persist.



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A caveat is in order. Yours truly was the Mission Director for the National Mission on Micro Irrigation and the Mission for the Integrated Development of Horticulture before the former was merged into the National Mission for Sustainable Agriculture, and later, a component of the Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchayee Yojana (PMKSY), "per drop, more crop". Yours truly has also defended the conception of the PMKSY, and its anchorage in the Agriculture Department in newspapers and TV debates. As such, there is a definite bias in favour of the Agriculture Ministry, and though this is based on the actual process followed in West Bengal, it would be true, mutatis mutandis, for other states as well, for the guidelines are common.



The immediate provocation for this article is news that the Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchai Yojana, the flagship program launched last year to ensure access to water to every field, and its optimal utilisation is being moved from the ministry of agriculture and farmers welfare to the Ministry of water resources and ganga rejuvenation. This has happened even as the agriculture departments in the states are in the process of rolling out the first year of the plan after extensive consultations with all the stakeholder departments. West Bengal has already held the State level sanctioning committee meeting for the approval of the Plan on April 22 and adopted an Annual Plan of Rs. 1380.5 crore, of which Rs. 627.8 crore is the core Plan, and the balance Rs. 752.7 crore from convergence of resources of the rural development department, especially the RIDF (Rural Infrastructure Development Fund) and MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act). The Chief Secretary chairs this committee, and the Secretaries of all concerned departments – from Forest and Environment to Public Health Engineering and Rural Development – are members. Of course, the agriculture and irrigation departments, which have provided the critical inputs to the Plan, are members.

This state level meeting for approval is the culmination of a series of meetings at the district level with all the stakeholder departments under the chairmanship of the District Magistrate. In addition to this, the state level irrigation Plan was prepared which gave the broad perspective and general picture of the water availability and utilisation in the state, along with the issues for specific consideration: arsenic and fluoride in Malda, Murshidabad, and Birbhum, and water stress in Purulia, Bankura, and Midnapore. The State Watershed Development Agency, which implements the watershed development program, one of the key components of the PMKSY had been tasked with the preparation of these plans. States were free to designate any agency, including an agency from the Irrigation department to prepare the plans and implement the program, but the review and coordination work was vested with the Agriculture department.

Before one gets into the probable reasons, and the circumstances under which the program has been shifted from the agriculture to the irrigation departments, it's important to understand the functioning of the two departments. The agriculture department works with farmers, has a direct connect (howsoever imperfect) with them, and understands their "eco-system" (farming techniques, land holding, crop patterns, economic distress and social structure) far better than the Irrigation department which is essentially driven by technologies, engineers, and whether we like it or not, the contractors who actually implement the work on ground. Agriculture department also receives flak during times of crop failure, (and somewhat unfairly, when farmers do not get real value for their produce). The Department also has an extensive outreach through its own extension staff, and over the last decade through the technology managers appointed under the ATMA (Agriculture Technology management Agency) under the District magistrate and Collector.

As such, one only hopes that the rumour is wrong, for as things stand, states have not been asked for an opinion on this - and agriculture is certainly a subject under the state list. The time that was taken to roll out the program is not unexpected - given the issues of convergence and the vertical flow of funds across departments both at the Union and state levels. Moreover, the NITI Ayog recently held a meeting with the Agriculture and Irrigation Secretaries of select states to streamline the processes of plan preparation and implementation. The discussions were free and frank and one got the feel that the NITI Ayog was becoming a non-adversarial forum for discussion and deliberation. What emerged from the meeting was that while the agriculture departments in states are more or less in sync with the Government of India, there are major issues between the state governments and the Union water resources ministry.

However, placing the program under the water resources ministry will not resolve the issues. Rather these will get

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aggravated because the program is not about the design or completion of irrigation structures. It is more than making water available to farmers – it is also about using water efficiently, and about the use of precision irrigation and fertigation, cropping patterns, livelihoods, mobilisation of local resources, and setting priorities. It’s also about empowering farmers, and one must remember that farmers who do not have access to “organised irrigation” far outnumber those who have access to state-supported irrigation. PMKSY is also meant to address the needs of farmers whose agriculture is primarily rain-fed, in fact, they need more resources, better technologies and smarter institutional structures to address their needs.

The message must be conveyed that, for the reasons mentioned above, as well as the relative ease of access which all the farmers have with agriculture department, PMKSY should not shift its anchor elsewhere! Certainly not at a time when farmers distress is a cause of major concern in most states of the country.

(The views expressed are strictly personal.)

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