

NOTE

## Managing Drought

**Siba Sankar Mohanty writes :**

In a knee-jerk reaction to demands for creating interventions to face an evolving drought situation in the country, the Union Minister of Agriculture, Mr Sharad Power on 4th January, released a Drought Management Manual that is expected to prove an effective practical guideline for administrators, experts and civil society in implementing drought mitigation and relief measures and for alleviating distress of the drought affected people.

Common people precisely know what to do in distress. When villages flood, they move up to higher locations and when skies fail to rain, they migrate searching two square meals. When they don't find a way out, they commit suicide. Over last 13 years more than 2 lakh farmers have committed suicide in the country. Common people do not require a manual to refer in distress situations. On the otherhand, what they really need is a support system through some concrete government action.

The manual released by the Union Minister suggests an extensive list of procedures and measures for alleviating the impact of drought. The manual also claims that India has accumulated substantial experience of handling droughts in the country and in providing not just immediate relief but also undertaking long-term mitigation measures such as emphasis on food production, distribution of foodgrains through the PDS and public works programmes.

These claims need to go through a litmus test.

As per the 'Economic Outlook 2009-10' by Economic Advisory Council, "the economy continues to be supply constrained, primarily in physical and social infrastructure such as electricity, irrigation and drinking water, road and other transportation and rural-urban economic infrastructure, where the government plays a major role." The Union Government spending on rural economy (comprising all expenses on agriculture and allied activities, rural development, special area programmes, irrigation and flood control, and village and small scale industries) as proportion of total union government expenditure on all heads declined substantially from around 22.24 percent in 2008-09 to less than 17 percent in budget 2009-10. The allocation for agriculture and allied activities alone declined from around 16 percent of total budget to 10.5 percent between 2008-09 and 2009-10.

The UPA government have no doubt considered some critical aspects of improving rural economy, through policies like National Rural Employment Guarantee Act and Unorganised Workers Social Security Act. But given the lack of a clear perspective to take the benefits of development to the masses these legislations have not achieved their desired success. There also lacks a political will on the part of the government to aggressively fight mass poverty and corruption. As per the reports of NSS surveys, the level of landlessness has increased from around 22 percent in 1992 to 35 percent in 2006-07. The gross capital formation in agriculture sector as a proportion of total investment in all sectors in the country declined from around 10.3 percent in 2002-03 to just 7 percent in 2006-07. As on 09 January 2010, less than 3 percent of all households

issued job cards and less than 7 percent of all households demanding job could avail 100 days of employment under NREGS even after spending 68 percent of the money available for the purpose.

All these loopholes in fixing the problems with the rural economy needs critical attention of the policymakers in the form of concrete redressal mechanisms. When 14 states in the country are affected by severe drought situation, they need investment on irrigation and water harvesting projects more than a manual for management of droughts. But contrary to the tall claims of the Ministry, public action to face the challenge has been limited only to announcements of drought prone areas and some stylised propaganda of some hyped 'intentions' that may not provide any releaf unless substantiated by concrete actions on the part of the government. □□□