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## Failed agricultural initiatives

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- Nepal embarked on a very challenging task of agricultural development by forming the Land Reform Commission in 1953 and launching the first Five-Year Plan in 1956. The promulgation of Land Reform Program in 1956 represents a comprehensive undertaking by the Nepali government to address agricultural development. To provide easy access to credit, the Agriculture Development Bank was established in 1968. The construction of the East-West Highway made cash crop production such as sugarcane, tobacco, jute, oilseeds, and vegetables, especially in the eastern part of the country, viable. Several irrigation projects were funded by international organizations such as ADB, World Bank, and donor countries. Integrated Rural Development Projects were launched across the country. Trade schools, vocational education, and the establishment of Institute of Agriculture and Animal Science (IAAS) were major educational initiatives for agricultural development in Nepal. For research and development, institutions like NARC and APROSC were established, and a number of research farms were set up across the nation. Since the 1980s, several NGOs and INGOs are engaged in agricultural research and development. Agriculture Input Corporation and Sajha Sanstha were developed to deliver agricultural inputs. Institutions like the Ministry of Agriculture, Department of Irrigation, and Department of Soil and Water Conservation are fully dedicated to the country's resource conservation, utilization, and agricultural development. Despite these relentless governmental efforts for agricultural development, agriculture in Nepal is

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currently experiencing a decline in productivity, degradation of resource base, lack of research and development, low income and investment, and half of Nepal's 25 million people do not have adequate food. With fixed ceilings on landholdings (25 bighas in Terai, 80 ropanis in the hills and mountains, and 50 ropanis in the Kathmandu valley), the 1964 Land Act promised Nepali peasants some hope. But the lack of land surveys prior to the promulgation of the Land Act, improper implementation of the program, and sufficient time for landowners to redistribute land among their relatives (among other problems), caused the Land Reform program to remain merely a political slogan rather than an effective tool for agricultural development. At present, about 40% of the farmers manage only 9% of the agricultural land while the top 6% occupy more than 33% of the land. Land shortages and population growth have forced more and more of the population into landlessness. Financial programs that were designed to help farmers in agricultural development have mostly been ineffective due to lack of coordination among relevant agencies or corruption. Research and development activities are very limited or basically non-existent. Expenditure on the import of chemical fertilizers and pesticides are increasing while sufficient efforts are not made for enhancing agricultural productivity based on local resources and knowledge. Certainly, academic institutions such as IAAS or other colleges have been able to develop a sizable number of hard working, high quality agricultural graduates. But, due to the lack of appropriate agricultural strategies and programs, this manpower has not been fully utilized. A large number of agricultural graduates have gone to Western countries (especially USA, Canada, or Australia) for further education and many never return to Nepal.

Almost 94% of Nepali people live in rural areas, and 90% of Nepali population is engaged in agricultural activities. As a result of the failure of Nepali agricultural policies and programs over the past fifty years, Nepal's rural population is facing massive poverty and chronic hunger. About half of the population is underfed. Production of per capita cereal grain has been continuously declining over the past decade and has

reached levels below 185 kg per year. This has caused massive malnutrition, very high infant and child mortality, as well as social disruption. Nepal's rice and rice products export was 28 thousand metric tons in 1979-1981 which decreased to less than a thousand metric tons in 2002. Meanwhile rice import increased from 7.9 thousand metric tons to 19.9 thousand metric tons during the same period. Net trade deficit of 1.7 thousand metric tons for maize and 2.3 thousand metric tons for wheat, and 6.7 thousand metric tons for vegetables in 2002 reveal that the country has fallen behind on its goal of national food self-sufficiency. Nepal's positive agricultural trade balance of 14.3 million US dollars in 1979-81 has turned into a negative balance of 151.6 million US dollars in 2002. A temporary increase in agricultural production over the past 50 years was mainly due to the expansion of agricultural lands and a one-time increase in crop yields due to the use of improved seeds, chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and irrigation facilities. In 1997, the Nepali government launched the Agriculture Perspective Plan (APP), a 20-year plan, with a hope of increasing agricultural production to meet the growing demand for food. This plan follows "Pocket Package Strategy" in which production pockets are identified and local infrastructures are established. Soon after the implementation, this plan received widespread criticism and there are clear signs of failure. Scholars have envisioned the extension of program and policies from select production pockets to the whole nation as a big challenge. This plan fails to identify a lead agency that has a clear mandate and resources to implement agricultural programs and policies. As the APP relies on imported agricultural technologies, including seeds, chemical fertilizers, and pesticides, long-proven sustainable local production practices will simply be neglected or forgotten. As such APP appears to be more on commercial agricultural development targeted for cities rather than a broad-based holistic agricultural development program that is also capable of feeding hungry people living in the rural areas.

Agricultural development policies that are fragmented and depend on external

reliant. Likewise, policies oblivious to grassroots realities that lack community participation are doomed to fail, and the society will have to pay a larger price for survival in the future. No communities across the country should be left behind in resource management and sustainable food production endeavors. Only agricultural programs and policies that foster sustainable resources (soil, plants, animals, water, etc) conservation and utilization, sustainable technological development, holistic outlook, and grass-root participation are capable of sustainable food production.



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