



KEYNOTE SPEECH ON THE FARMING CRISIS

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In 2009, ten years ago, during the soya bean harvest in Madhya Pradesh I was sitting in the field with a young farmer called Vijay Tale and that day Vijay's primary concern was getting the harvest in because it had been raining a few days before and he was focused on bringing in the harvest that morning. He had spent a week organizing, travelled all the way from rural Punjab to come to Madhya Pradesh and get to his fields in time as clouds were gathering and there is a small window of time within which farmers must harvest the crop. In the middle of all of this I noticed his T-shirt and I asked him if he knew what his T-shirt actually said. He laughed and said it is his favorite T-shirt and I shouldn't say anything to ruin it for him. But he said he did not know what the T-shirt displayed. I told him, it read "Make your own Destiny". Vijay laughed loudly and said what a ridiculous T-shirt for a farmer to be wearing! He asked: what kind of farmer thinks they can make their own destiny? On cue the harvester started bellowing smoke and Vijay ran to find out what he could do. Afterwards Vijay said that is just one example of the type of everyday risk that farmers face.

Vijay's humor is actually typical of many farmers across the world; there is a philosophical approach to every day risks faced by farmers and the ability to laugh even under extraordinary stress and to share a joke in the middle of what clearly is a daily crisis for Vijay and for millions of others. It also reveals something about the helplessness that many farmers across the region face. When they think about what it means to bring in the harvest, that particular moment, a vulnerable moment in which weather, market risks, post-harvest storage conditions – all are playing on his mind, not least the small matter of how Vijay would have cash to pay the harvester driver, who had come from a long distance and was to leave shortly after.

This small example tells you a great deal about the kinds of risks that farmers face everyday. **Farming has always historically been a very risky business.** But what farmers like Vijay Thalia are facing today are both the intensification of old risks and the extensification and expansion of risks that encompass new aspects that are affecting farming. It begins of course with questions of land – access to land, land insecurity, ownership; lack of recognition of title; timely access to high quality inputs – seeds, water, fertilizer; access to labor, which is complicated in all of these economies; access to credit at the right time and at serviceable cost; weather and climate, and volatility and risks brought about by the market.



We have to keep in mind when we think about agriculture today that the scale, frequency, complexity and context-specificity of risks are all coming together. This means we have risks at a larger scale than ever before but that they are also highly context-specific. The challenges that Vijay Tale (a 10 hectare farmer) was facing in his field were quite unique as well as general; right next to his plot was a small farmer owning only 2 acres (0.80 ha) of land and who took on an additional 10 acres (4 ha) on lease. His risks were quite different than the ones that Vijay was facing; and they both shared common risks as well; this is where scale and context-specificity come together. Moreover the frequency of risks has escalated and equally their complexity; this makes it extraordinarily challenging for farmers, who have to manage scale, frequency, complexity and context. It also makes it exceedingly challenging for those who are seeking solutions to these kind of risks. Let's take an example from land – insecurity of ownership of and access to land across many countries of the Asia Pacific region.

Farmers still often do not have clean title or access to their land. Those who have ownership rights, often struggle to ensure that the title remains updated; struggle with mutation; passing on that land to other members of their families. Tenants and sharecroppers, a very large proportion of our farmers, are also landless farmers. Tenants and sharecroppers struggle to get basic recognition; this affects their ability to access inputs, to access guaranteed minimum support prices, to access to credit, which is often in the agricultural context tied to land and the ability to furnish clean title to land and property. Farmers are coping with land fragmentation. Land fragmentation is happening both as a result of family sizes and generational and inter-generational transfers but there is also the dynamics of land acquisition at work.

Across the region farmers are dealing with the challenge of quality and declining productivity of their land. This a problem related to access to water but also soil quality. Land is vulnerable to humans and non-human actors; Vijay Tale and many other farmers across our region spend their nights close to the harvest, sleeping on their land to protect themselves from both human and nonhuman intervention. This is just one example of risks related to land. Similarly, we could see similar kind complexity related to inputs, labor, credit, weather and climate, and markets. Each aspect of agriculture is dealing with challenges at multiple levels.

The importance of understanding these risks and their inter-linkages must to be highlighted. If we look at land, we could find solutions to each one of problems; for example, how do we improve ownership and titling; how can we give recognition to tenants and sharecroppers; how to combat the question of fragmentation and think about land pooling; how does one address the enormous challenges of land quality and productivity? However, what makes agriculture so complicated is how these risks are inter-linked and inter-connected with the whole range of other risks, beginning with the fact that we are centrally concerned with farmers who work both on and off the farm.



A great amount of our attention is focused on the farm as a unit; but these risks happen on-and-off the farm. We also spend a large amount of time thinking of farmers as producers. But we pay very little attention to the fact that all farmers are also consumers. They are not only consumers of the very produce they grow – as they both buy and sell agricultural produce and food; they are also consumers of inputs. As the journalist Harish Damodaran puts it often: farmers buy in retail but sell in wholesale. The terms of their engagement in both input and output markets tend to be poor. But many farmers, especially small and marginal farmers, are also laborers. They work as paid laborers on other people’s farms, off-farm labor, and of course also work as unpaid laborers contributing to household labor in a range of activities as part of the production system. A number of farmers are also aggregators or petty commodity traders. These are multiple roles that the same farmer plays. Income is both augmented and depleted in multiple ways for a single farming household. This makes the analysis of farm income extremely complicated because we are not dealing with a single, linear kind of analysis; e.g. how much did you get from this particular crop? Farmers usually grow multiple crops on the same farm, and they are providing labor for multiple kinds of livelihood options at the same time.

Agriculture needs to be seen as an agro-ecological, agro-commercial, and socio-economic system. If we do not understand the ways in which these linkages are combined, we are unable to address the challenges. This multiplication of risks also presentations the multiplication of opportunities for engagement but we need to understand the whole complex if a vicious cycle, where farmers are inundated with accelerating and extensifying risks is to be turned into a different, more virtuous cycle. This kind of coordination can only be done with public, government-led transformation.

In many ways we are at a crossroad where benefits of the Green Revolution and its costs have reached a critical point. In terms of the many achievements of food security over the last several decades, we are finding a plateauing; the focus on cereals and cereal-centricity of that intervention is now being widely questioned. It has had, and we have seen this across the region, very large and serious agro-ecological consequences. In some ways, we are now better able and equipped to think about solutions or mitigation strategies for these consequences: to think about scale-neutral technologies, socio-economic interventions, leveraging a whole range of scientific and technical developments. However, what we haven’t learned from the Green Revolution is the fact that it was a massive, coordinated public sector intervention. In 2019, we need to go back to those lessons; to take the right lessons from that effort, not to replicate the ‘package’ but the public investment. We need new frameworks of public investment; we need to rebuild and strengthen agricultural systems and institutions, whether they are institutions of science, agricultural extension, agro-commercial context or farmer organizations. We have to rebuild state capacity for agriculture and think of new frameworks by which technology can adapted and adopted. This calls for extraordinary coordination



and this is where the ADB and organizations of this kind are so vital as you can coordinate at different scales and across different kinds of entities and region. Just to take the few examples that I mentioned - land rights and consolidation, agricultural extension and knowledge ecosystems, farmer producer organizations where they massive questions of capital, working capital constraints, and institutional capacities, market design and regulation - all of these require coordination and are areas where women and youth are critical.

I will end with two brief points: firstly, farm income support, which is one of the key elements that governments are turning to as a way to address the crisis in agriculture, is not a substitute for public investment in agriculture and rural development or for other, vital forms of social protection. We must think of farm income support as an important complement, not as a band-aid to public investment. Secondly, our region and subregions have benefitted from an understanding of agriculture as a multiplier and driver for wider economic growth and development. We need to move from the current scenario of distress-driven diversification to a cycle of surplus-sustained diversification. To come back to Vijay Tale, in many ways making an agrarian destiny must be a collective public effort. Thank you very much.