



## **KEYNOTE SPEECH ON TACKLING RURAL DISTRESS IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY: A NEW TRANS-DISCIPLINARY MULTI-STAKEHOLDER PARADIGM OF DEVELOPMENT**

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Rural distress is one of the most important issues of today. We cannot continue with business-as-usual; we have been following a certain paradigm, which has been dictating policies and actions we have taken in the rural and farming sphere and I am here to urge that we need to make an urgent change. Since the 1950s, when economies of Asia, Africa, and Latin America emerged from colonial rule, the primary strategy of development that has been followed is to try and move people away from the farm; to try and move them into industry and urban areas because agriculture was essentially seen as a no-hoper.

That has been the strategy we have consistently followed. Even after following those policies for the last 70 years, the demographic realities are: the global rural population today, which is 3.4 billion will remain over 3 billion in 2050. An overwhelming proportion of people in developing countries will continue living in rural areas well beyond 2050. The very possibility of absorbing an increasing number of rural migrants in the urban centers of these countries is severely limited already even as we speak. The kind of crisis that urban areas face in these countries is, in my considered view, even more grave than the one that faces us in the rural areas.

While this is a crisis no doubt, it is also a crisis full of opportunity because we have the possibility of making these rural areas leap-frog into the 21<sup>st</sup> century on the back of certain major, exciting technological, social, and ecological innovations.

We need to change the way we look at economic development itself. The paradigm of economic development has not recognized that the economy is only a small subset of the larger ecosystem. Here we have many examples from across the world: we have China's commitment to become an ecological civilization in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It has already embarked on a model of ecosystem compensation, whereby upstream communities are compensated for maintaining downstream water quantity and quality. The Chinese have a concept termed ecological space, which needs to find its place along with rural space and urban space. The city of New York negotiated with farmers living in the catchment areas to pay for ecosystem services that farmers provided to the city assuring a safe and secure supply of drinking water. Over many years the water catchment areas were protected,



farming was of a certain kind and the farmers were paid by the residents of New York to be able to do this. This is a kind of win-win scenario where you preserve the ecology, which sustains development.

As was said yesterday in the first session: we need to learn the right lessons from the Green Revolution. I want to quote from FAO's review in 2017:

“High-input, resource-intensive farming systems, which have caused massive deforestation, water scarcities, soil depletion and high levels of greenhouse gas emissions, cannot deliver sustainable food and agricultural production. Needed are innovative systems that protect and enhance the natural resource base, while increasing productivity. Needed is a transformative process towards ‘holistic’ approaches, such as agro-ecology and conservation agriculture, which also build upon indigenous and traditional knowledge.” What we require is a new agriculture. Chemical agriculture across the world is now reaching its limits. Farmers have to apply more and more fertilizers and pesticides to get the same level of output. The costs of these inputs are rising by the day. This has led to a dramatic rise in the cost of production, resulting in negative incomes in some cases. In countries like India, hundreds and thousands of farmers have committed suicide over the last 30 years. This is unprecedented in Indian history. You have had rural distress but you have never had a situation where farmers are compelled to commit suicide.

Clearly we need to think out of the box. If we continue with the old paradigm of giving higher minimum support prices, giving subsidies for chemical inputs, that gets us deeper and deeper into the same vicious cycle. So what are the alternatives? There are major efforts on the ground, for example in the Southern Indian State of Andhra Pradesh in India, where the State Government has committed that by 2027, eight million hectares, its entire cultivated area, will be shifted to natural farming. This is a political call taken also because the largest number of suicides has taken place in that State. Even with the change of government recently in Andhra Pradesh, the new Chief Minister has also committed to following this path of natural farming. If you follow this path, you get multiple win-wins; there are higher farmer incomes because costs of cultivation come down; there is better soil health, the foundation of agricultural productivity; there is water security, and we can move towards ensuring consumer health.

The Lancet Commission Report that came out in 2019 is called the Global Syndemic of Obesity, Undernutrition, and Climate Change. Diabetes in a country like India has become an epidemic. The number of diabetics has increased from 26 million in 1990 to 65 million in 2016 and the number is projected to double by 2030. A major contributor to this epidemic is the displacement of wholefoods from our diet by energy-dense, nutrient poor and ultra-processed food products. How do we, therefore, address this crisis of nutrition? I think the fundamental change we need to make is to diversify our cropping pattern.



The Green Revolution no doubt made a huge contribution to food security – don't get me wrong. But today after 50 years, the Green Revolution has run out of steam. We need to look for alternatives, particularly in the area of crop diversification. We should move away from the “traditional crops” of the Green Revolution. Millets, pulses and oil seeds have high nutrient value; along with that we need to have fruits and vegetables. We need to develop cold chain infrastructure, which will move the farmers up the value chain while addressing the nutrition crisis. Tomorrow you will hear from a farmer from Maharashtra, who is growing strawberries, which are an extraordinary option for that farmer and he will explain to you that moving to organic strawberry cultivation dramatically reduces the cost of cultivation with yields being stabilized within two years when production moves to organic.

I also want to focus your attention on the question of water. When the Honorable Prime Minister of India invited me to join the Planning Commission; my major task was actually to suggest a paradigm shift in water. And the new government has asked me to continue this work in recent years. We need to shift the emphasis from endless supply to sustaining supply by reducing the demand for water and moving away from water intensive crops.

We also need to have a new vision for infrastructure. The 21st century now offers us the possibility of what we call blue-green infrastructure. This is infrastructure, which builds with nature, allowing room for the river, is energy and resource sensitive, and, therefore, enables us to create jobs in the infrastructure sector, which leads to sustainable development.

We also need to carefully pay attention to innovations in waste management. Biological and nature friendly technologies are now available for us to leap-frog the capital and energy intensive technologies of the 20th century.

I think what we have seen so far, farmers have interacted with markets and the isolated farmer has been dealt out an unfair deal. Innovations in Farmer Producer Organizations and collectives have turned adversity faced by farmers in markets to empowerment and bargaining power. I think institutions of the poor, in our battle against poverty, and institutions led by women are key to overcoming farming and rural distress across the globe. We need major investments and facilitative action that enable farmers and others in rural areas to come together to benefit from the power of collective action.

Finally, I want to emphasize the importance of what has been called “invisible infrastructure” – participatory approaches to development. All development experience across the world in health, education, sanitation, nutrition or water shows that when people are centrally involved in making decisions about the kind of development that should happen and in overseeing the very process of implementation of development programs, that is when these programs are successful. The



leadership of women has proven to be a critical factor in ensuring success for these development programs. Invisible infrastructure are the social and human systems that enable capacity building among primary stakeholders and this must form an integral part of our battle against farm and rural distress. So to summarize, I am talking about: a) harnessing the power of ecology, and ecosystem services; b) Evergreen Revolution; c) harnessing the power of blue-green infrastructure; and d) building institutions of the poor led by women at the grassroots.