

Food security

The land paradox



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Division of land

» About 209,323 acres of wetland indentified for sustainable food production

Tara Limbu | Thimphu

The availability of land or the non-availability of it both for agriculture and development activities is now an issue which is seemingly resolved.

Now, land for agriculture activities will be indentified, segregated and coordinated, states a report, Protected Agriculture Areas for Food Security (PAA) piloted by the agriculture ministry.

The PAA which is still at its preliminary stage has indentified about 209,323 acres of wetland in 20 dzongkhags for sustainable food production out of the country's total agriculture land area of 393,440 acres.

Since other cereals, such as maize, wheat, and millet contribute significantly to the food basket, *Kamzhing* (dry land) has been considered for future food production.

"These indentified lands will be off-limits for any construction and development activities," said the agriculture and forests minister, Lyonpo Pema Gyamtsho (PhD).

Agriculture is still the main source of livelihood for many Bhutanese and is a major contributor to

the country's economy. However, the agriculture land base is very small with about only 7%, seriously undermining the food self-sufficiency policy.

The country would require 55,500 acres of wetland to fulfill its 40% food self-sufficiency target by 2015 and 50% rice self-sufficiency target would require a total of 69,373 areas of wetland.

Currently, about 50% of rice and other food crops requirement are met from 67,000 acres of wetland and 2, 95, 000 acres of dry land.

The Finnish funded project (PAA) has also looked into the estimated food requirement and land use.

By 2015, the total rice demand for the country's population of 757,042 is estimated at 109,014 Metric Tons (MT).

Likewise for the total population of 808,397 in 2020 and 887,000 in 2030, would require 101,174 MT and 110, 875 MT of rice respectively.

However there is no land base for pursuing policy target beyond 50%, states the report.

The difficult mountainous terrain makes it impossible to add new areas to the existing arable land.

Expansions and establishment of new urban areas and haphazard acquisition of prime agriculture land for developing infrastructure also contribute to the loss of arable lands.

With the intensification of development activities, more land will continue to be sacrificed to accommodate the increasing population.

Inadequate irrigation to sustain paddy cultivation, inadequate mechanism to use the land effectively and lack of incentives to encourage farmers also contribute to the constraints.

Small scattered land holdings with most of them located at steep slopes are prone to soil erosion and landslides making it difficult for the farmers to take up agriculture seriously.

Uncoordinated efforts

A disconnect in common goal

There is an inherent flaw in the planning process which actually should have been taken into account proper linkages of gewog plans with the central plan

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There is currently a 'disconnect' among the gewog and sector plans which have had implications especially on the objectives of the development goals at the local levels.

Officials of the agriculture and forests ministry say in the ministry's 10th Plan program, the RNR central departments were delinked from the gewog and dzongkhag as a result of the parallel planning process.

The RNR sector plans are mostly targeted and focused at the gewog level. In order to bridge the gap and integrate the 10th Plan programs of RNR sectors, the agriculture ministry came up with the idea of 'one gewog three products.'

A former civil servant, who had served in an RNR center under the agriculture ministry said, there would not have been any need for follow-up programs to correct things if there was a proper linkage of policy at different levels.

According to him there is an inherent flaw in the planning process which actually should have been taken into account proper linkages of gewog plans with the central plan.

"There should be a series of harmonization of planning process at various levels from gewog, dzongkhag and central level to ultimately integrate the local and central plans for better integration of plans at the dzongkhag level because they are responsible for consolidation of the

gewog plans," said the former RNR member.

The need to strengthen the capacity of the dzongkhag planning officers/sector focal points was identified as one area to work on.

He said all plans should pass through respective departments for feasibility and technical validation. Otherwise, the departments are aware only of the central programs.

According to the former RNR member, at present plans are coming from all the gewogs and then the dzongkhag brings another plan with a different target.

If during the planning process the centre doesn't have an idea about the size or a clear picture of the local plans it will have an impact on the central plans' capacity to support the local plans.

In view of the number of farm roads being prioritized by the local government in the 10th Plan, the issue of harmonization of bottom-up and top-down planning to prioritize farm road construction was highlighted.

The former RNR member pointed out that the identification of gaps or linkages should happen at the design stage wherein there is a level of control as opposed to implementation or post implementation.

"There should be a forum where the linkages should be identified probably during the mid-term review of the plan where it will be coordinated by the planning agency, the Gross National Happiness Commission," he said.

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