



Exploiting New Opportunities of Natural Farming through Community Based Organizations

Sanjeet Kumar Sameer

Associate Professor, School of
Agribusiness and Rural
Management, Dr. Rajendra
Prasad Central Agricultural
University, Pusa, Bihar



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INTRODUCTION

Off late, natural farming is getting renewed attention among key stakeholders. Being hooked into indigenous agricultural systems and practices, this form of farming is likely to be very helpful in not only reducing the hazardous effects of chemical fertilizers but also may have potential of cost saving for farmers as well as the nation (in terms of import bill). The central government has therefore launched 'National Mission on Natural Farming Management and Knowledge Portal'. The natural farming initiative is not only likely to rejuvenate the soil health and make ecosystem more sustainable. As per various reports, natural farming has been found to reduce cost and risk of production and help in improving farmers' income. As it focuses on local resources, it has power to boost local economy as well. In the long run, it has the potential to improve our Atma Nirbharta (self-reliance).

Quality of Naturally Farmed Products

As per reported data (<https://naturalfarming.niti.gov.in/benefits/>), natural farming products have been found to be rich in nutritional content. Protein, amino acid, crude fat and other essential nutrients were in fact about 300% higher than ordinary products. Chemical residue such as nitrate is almost undetectable in natural farmed produce. A research study on 'Assessment of Post Natural Farming (NF) effects on the Health and Nutrition Profile of Households' through interviewing 570 households spread across 8 pilot districts and 19 clusters of Andhra Pradesh revealed that almost 80% of the NF families have experienced improvement in gastric problems, Hypertension and Diabetes post NF consumption. All the NF households revealed improvement in stamina and improvement of health in their infants post NF consumption. Based on the above findings of the studies, one may like to find a merit in naturally farmed produce particularly from health perspectives.

Implications of Improved Quality of Naturally Farmed Products

There is a growing demand of customers for safe and healthy products. In fact, customers are looking forward to high nutrition products with minimum side effects. As mentioned above, the naturally farmed products have superior quality and therefore if such products are made available to the customers as per their requirement, this is likely to enhance the sales of these products. Since these products are primarily going to be produced in rural areas, it offers a great opportunity to many Community Based Organizations (CBOs) to tap the business potential.

Role of Community Based Organizations in Natural Farming

Majority of population belonging to small and marginal farmers' category (almost 85%) are dependent on agriculture. Therefore, it is important to examine the possibility of promoting such system through Community Based Organizations (CBOs). CBOs such as cooperatives or Farmer Producer Companies (FPCs) have been set up in large numbers during past few years. The central government has also launched a scheme for setting up 10,000 FPOs. This scheme has been rolled out very aggressively pan India and can play an instrumental role in this process. These CBOs are largely working on agriculture and allied activities, primarily in production and collection activities. Their products generally cater to the traditional requirement of the markets. Some of them have already attained a reasonable economic base. However, to generate more value out of agriculture activities, there is a need to set up another business vertical in the existing organizational set up in the form of naturally farmed produce and products so that the benefit of the ground work already done by these CBOs (on creating a large base and membership) are utilized to the fullest. This arrangement will have multiple benefits. First, it will help in adding a produce/product portfolio that is already been

demanding by the customers and hence has more chances of generating better returns. Second, it will help in business diversification thereby reducing business risks. The common infrastructure and resources can be used for this new business.

Business Development by CBOs

There are multiple government schemes for CBOs. For example, the CBOs can use Agriculture Infrastructure Fund Scheme and apply for funding support up to the tune of Rs. 2 Cr per project. These projects could also be in natural farming themes. There could be equity grant support under central sector scheme of 10,000 FPOs in addition to handholding support to the FPOs. If FPOs have registered under Startup Scheme there are additional benefits and relaxations in terms of taxation and gives additional preferences to them in production and supply. Since, natural farming requires Cow based inputs; there is a requirement to create collectives of these cattle owners so that urine and dung are easily collected and processed to develop the ingredients of natural farming which can be used by farmers for naturally farmed produce. Linkages with marketing agencies or selling it through online platform can be explored for generating better returns.

Way Forward and Conclusion

Recent reports and trials indicate encouraging results of Natural Farming from long term sustainability perspective. There is a growing demand of such products due to health and nutrition concerns. Since this business can be undertaken by rural based enterprises only, it makes sense to mobilize the existing FPOs and other CBOs to exploit this opportunity. There are many related schemes that can support natural farming initiative, some of which have been highlighted earlier. There is a need to work in this direction to make our farming community and the country 'Atmanirbhar' and 'Samridh' (prosperous) in the long run.