

Rural-Poor, Agri & small mercies

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Dimapur | May 28

Nagaland state's chief commercial artery, Dimapur district, remains the main plank of the coalition government of Nagaland to parade its development ideas, with professed focus on the rural population. Of the roughly 3, 08,382 (2001) estimated population, the financial district is also home to one of the largest concentrations of the rural "working-class" estimated at a colossal 1, 84, 490 (2001, NEDFi). Developing Dimapur's rural stratum remains a huge challenge for the State - the mixed, if redoubtable, results from developmental schemes in the past two fiscal years in the district is an instance.

Currently the District Rural Development Agency of Dimapur has under its ambit several rural-development schemes and projects to bolster Dimapur's rural human development index. Principal rural-targeted schemes are centrally-sponsored.

Dimapur's poor still holding fort

They are the poverty-alleviation incentive Swarnjayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY), the rural housing scheme Indira Awas Yojana (IAY) and the guaranteed rural-employment program the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS). The state-sponsored incentives are chiefly concerned with finance-mobilization and rural resource management to act as supplements to the centrally-sponsored schemes. Yet, for the rural poor who contribute to the commercial town's agriculture production, the horizon remains bleak.

The silent breadworkers

Dimapur's rural poor comprise of largely daily wage-earners, unskilled laborers or contract small-time farmers. An informal estimate (no official data could be

obtained or was informed to be available) states "80 percent" as being engaged in rudimentary agriculture activities, or commonly "hajira" (one day-work wage). There is no denying Dimapur has one of the largest concentrations of Below Poverty Line (BPL) citizens - at least a claimed "57% to 70%" (no official estimate could be obtained or was informed to be available).

For the lot, schemes are only airy conversations about Utopia. In a tightly closeted and socially censorious society like Nagaland's, no one dare openly speak what they really need to. This reporter interacted with a villager from a Sumi village in the outskirts of Dimapur city, Thursday May 27. She requested not to be named as much as her village to be left unidentified. The village, with about 70 households, is home to some of the poorest sections in the district. Queried if she had heard about SGSY, IAY or NREGA, she said she has.

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Drought and exigencies

In 2008-2009, Nagaland's agriculture sector faced one its severest adversities in more than a decade - delayed monsoon and later, reduced rainfall. In August 2009, the government of Nagaland declared the state's commercial district, Dimapur district, as the worst-hit of the long spell of drought that swept across the country.

The drought across the country in 2009 set into motion escalation in prices of agricultural produce and consumptions - and left the villager high and dry. After the drought and later, the onset of reduced rainfall, the agriculture sector in Dimapur was left tottering at about Rs. 107 Crore production loss from one dry monsoon. Nagaland depends on Dimapur for food production - or at least, the supply base - and when the dry spell swept northern India, the farmers had no supply to talk of. Dimapur's farmers incurred an estimated 40, 000 Metric Tonnes to 48, 000 Metric Tonnes loss in production from April to December in 2009. During the phase of damage-assessment undertaken by the department of Agriculture in Dimapur, before the rains arrived, the total affected area was already estimated at around 20, 220 hectares.

Agriculture department officials told this reporter earlier that the "rice bowl" regions of Dimapur's administrative blocks, Jalukie and Medziphema were laid waste. Farmers of Sub-division Medziphema contribute to the region's claim to being one of the two largest rice and paddy production swathes in the contiguous Dimapur regions. A recent record made available accounts 37% of the Medziphema bowl to be under cultivation. The drought reduced farmers' harvest base to at least 67% of Dimapur's production. The delayed monsoon finally arrived but two-times lesser than the normal rainfall of 1504.7 mm. As rice and paddy farmer reeled from the dry monsoon, so did Dimapur's farmers tilling commercial crops (mustards etc).

The trend prompted the state government to the rescue of the mostly-Below Poverty Line (BPL) workers or unskilled contract farmers. Two schemes that the government sought to mitigate the impact of 'agriculture disaster' on the rural farmers in Dimapur was the centrally-sponsored Swarnjayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY) and the state-sponsored Grant-in-Aid to BPL families. SGSY is one of the state's main anti-poverty schemes for the rural poor. In the fiscal year 2008-2009, the government has been undertaking capacity-development programmes to assist rural farmers and rural poor receive financial backing from institutions. Sources point out that the SGSY is one of the successful schemes in the district. Success stories from Dimapur's administrative blocks such as the Dhansiripahar block and the Medziphema block have been highlighted.

However, banking institutions continue to shy away from the rural poor. The reason is, farmers are unable to repay loans and arrears continue to pile up till the farmer is 'blacklisted' for his inability to repay the loan. Basically, the most normal thing to do for the rural man is to 'just forget it'. The lament of a non-Naga farmer from Dhansiripahar sub-division, "Bikash": "I am paid Rs. 80 for one-day work. So if the day's wages are at least Rs. 75 I can make around Rs. 2100. But I cannot pay Rs. 800 or Rs. 1000 every month for a Rs. 70, 000 loan which I take to roof my house. What will my family and children eat if I pay the loan?" He adds: "I can only hope rains don't delay that I can finish tilling in one field and still have time to work for extra on another."

Agriculture production picking up

Thankfully, the affect of the 2009 drought seem to be wearing off and farmers in Dimapur are hopeful to making out of the "afterdrought" to make it through another month. Or at least make enough to pay a month's fee for their child. Overall crop production - discounting paddy - is gradually enjoying a small increase now. Additional information on the level of production in Dimapur for the past three production years shows a slight uptrend. Discounting paddy, which was estimated at "80%" loss by agriculture officials in August, cereals and lentils and commercial crops fared relatively well but not good enough by average standards of yearly monsoons.

Production of generic cereals in the district had a poor run however. During 2007-2008, cereal production over 461, 100 hectares harvested at least 1, 25, 947 Lakh Metric Tonnes. But for the current phase of 2009-2010 the total areas of production is recorded at a mere 81, 820 Metric Tonnes from 36, 463 hectares. Pulses increased slightly production from 1163 Metric Tonnes during 2007-2008 to 1796 Metric Tonnes in 2009-2010.

Notwithstanding the estimated slight increase in generic commercial crop production, policy-makers have acknowledged the need for long-term action plans to check negative repercussions from seasonal exigencies such as delayed/reduced rainfall. With Dimapur's rural population providing the chief production bulwark, their welfare is a concern that needs holistic action.

This News report was filed in aegis of the Inclusive Media Fellowship for Journalists 2010, awarded to this Reporter by the Center for the Study of Development Societies (CSDS), New Delhi under Inclusive Media Project.

The Morung Express
29, MAY 2010
DIMAPUR