
Report on the AERC Platinum Jubilee Conference on “Sustainability of Agricultural Sector: Issues, Challenges and Policy Matrix” held on 23-24 December, 2024

The Agro-Economic Research Centre (AERC), Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics (GIPE), Pune, organized the AERC Platinum Jubilee Conference on “Sustainability of Agricultural Sector: Issues, Challenges and Policy Matrix” on 23–24 December 2024, marking the completion of 70 years of the AERC. The conference was held at the Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics, Pune, and brought together researchers, policymakers, academicians, practitioners, and students to deliberate on critical issues concerning agricultural sustainability in India.

The conference witnessed the participation of around 160 delegates, including invited dignitaries, scholars from across the country, faculty members, research staff, and students. The event served as a significant platform for reflecting on the legacy of the AERC and discussing emerging challenges and policy directions for sustainable agricultural development.

Inaugural Session

The inaugural session commenced with Saraswati Vandana and lighting of the lamp, followed by the felicitation of dignitaries. The programme was formally inaugurated with a welcome address by Prof. Shankar Das, Interim Vice-Chancellor, GIPE.

The conference was graced by the Chief Guest, Hon’ble Shri Shivraj Singh Chouhan, Union Minister, Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers’ Welfare, Government of India. The Guest of Honour was Prof. Vijay Paul Sharma, Chairman, Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices (CACP). The conference was organized under the leadership of Prof. Jayanti Kajale, Director, AERC, Pune, who served as the Organizing Secretary.

In his welcome address, Prof. Shankar Das highlighted the legacy of the Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics as one of India’s premier institutions in the areas of research, training, education, policy advisory, and evidence-based knowledge creation since its establishment in 1930. He noted that in recognition of its research excellence, the Ministry of Food and Agriculture established the Agro-Economic Research Centre at GIPE in 1954. He emphasized that over the past seven decades, the AERC has built a strong tradition of rigorous empirical research contributing meaningfully to agricultural and rural policy formulation in India.

Conference Overview and AERC Legacy

Introducing the conference, Prof. Jayanti Kajale underscored the historical and contemporary relevance of AERC’s work. She emphasized that the Centre has consistently engaged in grassroots-level research to examine diverse socio-economic challenges faced by Indian agriculture and rural society. She highlighted the extensive portfolio of studies undertaken by AERC under the aegis of the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers’ Welfare (MoAFW), with a strong emphasis on village-level surveys and primary data collection.

She further noted that AERC's research spans a wide range of areas including poverty and employment, crop studies, agricultural credit, cooperation, marketing and trade, livestock, irrigation, rural non-farm employment, and extension services. In addition, the Centre has been actively involved in the evaluation of major central sector schemes and flagship programmes, regular compilation of agricultural indicators, and concurrent feedback surveys for the Ministry. She concluded by emphasizing the importance of the Platinum Jubilee Conference in reaffirming AERC's commitment to evidence-based research and policy engagement.

Addresses by Dignitaries

Prof. Vijay Paul Sharma, Chairman, CACP, in his address as Guest of Honour, shared insights drawn from his extensive experience in agricultural research and policy formulation. He discussed key issues related to rural livelihoods, food and vegetable production, animal husbandry, fisheries, trade dynamics, and ethanol production. He highlighted emerging challenges such as over-extraction of groundwater and declining soil health, and emphasized the need for appropriate policy responses. Prof. Sharma underscored the transformative potential of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, machine learning, and robotics in enhancing agricultural productivity and efficiency. He advocated for greater investment in infrastructure, research and development for high-quality seeds, farm mechanization, and expansion of irrigation facilities to ensure sustainable agricultural growth.

The Chief Guest, Hon'ble Shri Shivraj Singh Chouhan, emphasized the rational and sustainable use of natural resources in agriculture. He highlighted the existing knowledge gap between researchers and farmers and stressed the importance of disseminating research findings in regional languages to enhance outreach and adoption. He emphasized that agricultural policies must be firmly grounded in farmers' needs and realities. Expressing concern over the excessive use of chemical fertilizers and its adverse impact on soil health, he advocated the adoption of natural farming practices in a scientifically sound manner. He also outlined various government initiatives and future plans aimed at strengthening the agricultural sector and achieving sustainability goals. He concluded his address by invoking the spirit of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* and "*Jiyo aur Jeene Do*"—emphasizing inclusive and harmonious development. The inaugural session concluded with a formal vote of thanks by Dr. Peddi Dayakar, followed by the National Anthem.

Special and Keynote Addresses

The conference featured a special address by Prof. R. S. Deshpande, renowned economist and Visiting Faculty at ISEC, Bengaluru. Drawing upon his long association with the AERC system, Prof. Deshpande reflected on critical economic challenges confronting agriculture and rural areas at the village level. He presented selected case studies based on his extensive research on rural transformation, irrigation efficiency, marketing inefficiencies, dryland agriculture, WTO-related impacts on agriculture, and watershed development programmes. He also offered critical perspectives on agricultural price policy and marketing reforms, and suggested measures to address persistent structural challenges.

The conference was further enriched by keynote addresses from three eminent scholars:

1. **Dr. Amarendra Reddy** shared insights from a case study on Bt cotton in Gujarat, based on his experience as a scientist at the Indian Institute of Pulses Research. He emphasized the importance of integrating socio-economic and biological sciences through a multidisciplinary approach to achieve sustainable and inclusive agricultural growth.
2. **Dr. Smita Sirohi** focused on the sustainability of smallholder farming systems, drawing evidence from Jaipur district in Rajasthan. Her address highlighted livelihood challenges, risk management strategies, and the critical issues of indicator selection and data availability in sustainability assessment.
3. **Prof. Kavi Kumar** delivered a keynote address on climate change adaptation and finance in Indian agriculture. He discussed the economic impacts of climate change and emphasized the importance of understanding adaptation strategies and their associated costs at both national and global levels.

Technical Sessions

Recognizing the growing importance of agriculture in ensuring farm income stability, food and nutritional security, employment generation, poverty reduction, and sustainable economic development, the conference invited research contributions across four broad themes:

Theme 1: Agricultural Growth, Investment, Crop Diversification and Farm Sector Sustainability

Theme 2: Rural Credit, Marketing, Trade and Agricultural Sustainability

Theme 3: Technological Innovations, Climate Change and Agricultural Sustainability

Theme 4: Agricultural Value Chains: Inclusion and Competitiveness

The first three themes were organized into four technical sessions each, while the fourth theme comprised two technical sessions. Each session included three to five research papers selected by the organizing committee based on relevance and thematic alignment. Each session was chaired by an expert academician, followed by interactive discussions and question-and-answer sessions. The technical sessions facilitated meaningful exchange of ideas, presentation of empirical findings, and constructive scholarly debate.

Valedictory Session

The valedictory session featured the presentation of the Rapporteur's Report, summarizing the key deliberations, insights, and outcomes of the conference. The session was graced by the Chief Guest, Dr. Sudhir Kumar Goyal, IAS (Retd.), Former Additional Chief Secretary, Government of Maharashtra, and was chaired by Prof. R. S. Deshpande.

In the concluding remarks, Prof. Jayanti Kajale, Organizing Secretary, delivered the formal vote of thanks, acknowledging the contributions of dignitaries, speakers, participants, and the organizing team. The conference concluded with the distribution of certificates to participants and paper presenters.

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