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CONTENTS

Sr. No.	TITLE & NAME OF THE AUTHOR (S)	Page No.
1.	BANKING FOR THE POOR IN THE CONTEXT OF ISLAMIC FINANCE DAVOOD MANZUR, HOSSEIN MEISAMI & MEHDI ROAYAEI	1
2.	THE RELATIONSHIP OF INSURANCE SECTOR DEVELOPMENT AND ECONOMIC GROWTH IN ETHIOPIA: EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE ADERAW GASHAYIE	5
3.	ETHNIC CONSIDERATION IN POLITICAL COVERAGE BY NIGERIAN MEDIA DR. IFEDAYO DARAMOLA	10
4.	ECONOMICS OF PROMOTING HIGHER EDUCATION: A CASE OF ROLE OF PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES AND COLLEGES IN THE SULTANATE OF OMAN HASINUL HUSSAN SIDDIQUE	14
5.	ANALYSIS OF CHRONIC AND TRANSIENT POVERTY IN RURAL OROMIYA - ETHIOPIA DEREJE FEKADU DERESSA	19
6.	TOWARDS A NEW MODEL FOR POVERTY REDUCTION IN NIGERIA DR. AHMAD SANUSI, DR. AHMAD MARTADHA MOHAMED & ABUBAKAR SAMBO JUNAIDU	25
7.	PERCEIVED EASE OF ACCESS/USE, PERCEIVED USEFULNESS, PERCEIVED RISK OF USAGE AND PERCEIVED COST OF USAGE OF MOBILE BANKING SERVICES AND THEIR EFFECT ON CUSTOMER COMMITMENT FROM SELECTED COMMERCIAL BANKS IN RWANDA MACHOGU MORONGE ABIUD, LYNET OKIKO & VICTORIA KADONDI	29
8.	LOST IN TRANSLATION: A CLOSER LOOK AT THE SWEDISH ORGANIC CERTIFICATION AGENCY – KRAV KHAN RIFAT SALAM & MAHZABIN CHOWDHURY	35
9.	STOCK MARKET, INFLATION, AND ECONOMIC GROWTH IN NIGERIA (1990-2010) ADEGBITE, TAJUDEEN ADEJARE	38
10.	DETERMINANTS OF CUSTOMER SATISFACTION OF TRADITIONAL AND MODERN FORMATS IN FOOD AND GROCERY: THE CASE OF INDIAN RETAIL DR. SNV SIVA KUMAR & DR. ANJALI CHOPRA	44
11.	THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL NETWORKING TO FACILITATE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF GREEN MARKETING: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY DR. D. S. CHAUBEY & K. R. SUBRAMANIAN	52
12.	PROBLEMS FACED BY THE WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS IN THENI DISTRICT-AN OVER VIEW DR. A. SUJATHA	61
13.	AN ANALYTICAL STUDY ON PROFITABILITY AND CONSISTENCY OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY SECTOR IN INDIA MOHAMMED NIZAMUDDIN & DR. PERWAYS ALAM	64
14.	WHAT HAS BEEN SOWN HAS NOT BEEN HARVESTED: THE CURIOUS CASE OF FARM SUBSIDIES IN INDIA B. SWAMINATHAN, M. CHINNADURAI & K. C. SHIVA BALAN	69
15.	ANALYSIS OF VARIOUS POULTRY SOCIETIES IN VARIOUS DISTRICTS OF JAMMU & KASHMIR STATE AASIM MIR & SHIV KUMAR GUPTA	72
16.	SHG – BANK LINKAGE PROGRAMME IN ANDHRA PRADESH: A SWOT ANALYSIS DR. M.SREE RAMA DEVI & DR. A. SUDHAKAR	74
17.	A STUDY OF ISSUES AND CHALLENGES WITH REFERENCE TO THE WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA DR. MARUTHI RAM.R., MANJUNATHA.N., ASRA AHMED & PARVATHY.L	78
18.	INFLUENTIAL FACTORS OF CEMENT CONSUMPTION IN INDIA FOR 2011-12 ANJAN REDDY VISHWAMPATLA & DR. P. SRINIVAS REDDY	82
19.	WOMEN IN HANDLOOM INDUSTRY: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS S.VIDHYANATHAN & DR. K. DEVAN	87
20.	NON-FARM SECTOR LOANS BY DINDIGUL CENTRAL COOPERATIVE BANK IN TAMIL NADU DR. T. SRINIVASAN	91
21.	DEVELOPMENT OF WEAKER SECTION OF SOCIETY: A ROLE OF STATE FINANCIAL CORPORATIONS DR. SUSHIL KUMAR & MAHAVIR SINGH	94
22.	AN EMPIRICAL STUDY ON CONSUMER BUYING BEHAVIOR WITH RESPECT TO CONSUMER DURABLES ANU GUPTA & PRIYANKA SHAH	97
23.	A STUDY ON THE GROWTH OF SCHEDULED COMMERCIAL BANKS IN INDIA C.A VISALAKSHI & K. BABY	100
24.	ROLE OF GRAM SACHIV IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT - A CASE STUDY OF KURUKSHETRA DISTRICT PARDEEP CHAUHAN	105
25.	AGMARK CERTIFICATION AND CONSUMERS' PERCEPTION- A STUDY WITH REFERENCE TO MADURAI DISTRICT OF TAMILNADU DR. M. SANTHI	108
26.	PERFORMANCE AND PROSPECTS OF HOPCOMS IN KARNATAKA – A DIRECT LINK BETWEEN FARMERS AND CONSUMERS KRISHNA.K M. & DR. S. MOKSHAPATHY	114
27.	HEALTH IMPACT OF IRON ORE MINES: A COMPARATIVE STUDY ON MINING AND NON-MINING INHABITANTS OF KEONJHAR DISTRICT OF ODISHA MINATI SAHOO	118
28.	IMPACT OF GLOBALIZATION AND LIBERALIZATION ON SCs AND STs IN INDIA- A BIRD VIEW DEEPA HANMANTHRAO & PADMAVATI R. SOMANI	122
29.	TO STUDY THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STRESS-WORK LIFE BALANCE AND WORK ALIENATION AMONG WOMEN EMPLOYEES OF KERALA STATE GOVERNMENT IN TRIVANDRUM DISTRICT CHITHRA MOHAN.K	126
30.	DALITS AND DISTRIBUTION OF LAND IN ANDHRA PRADESH SATRI VEERA KESALU	130
	REQUEST FOR FEEDBACK	137

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WHAT HAS BEEN SOWN HAS NOT BEEN HARVESTED: THE CURIOUS CASE OF FARM SUBSIDIES IN INDIA**B. SWAMINATHAN****RESEARCH SCHOLAR****DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS****TAMIL NADU AGRICULTURAL UNIVERSITY****COIMBATORE****M. CHINNADURAI****PROFESSOR & HEAD****DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS****TAMIL NADU AGRICULTURAL UNIVERSITY****COIMBATORE****K. C. SIVA BALAN****RESEARCH SCHOLAR****DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION****TAMIL NADU AGRICULTURAL UNIVERSITY****COIMBATORE****ABSTRACT**

Subsidies play a vital role in the economy of a country as they ensure equitable utilization of the resources for the people. Subsidies are a part of a comprehensive plan towards the essential goal: feeding more people. At the same time subsidies are not without consequences as they have reported to have led to the deterioration of resources which otherwise would not have been so had the farmers made to use the resources without subsidies. This paper tries to bring out the importance to agricultural subsidies by the world nations and India in particular over the years. Apart from showing whether subsidies have resulted in the deterioration or over exploitation of resources, the paper also lists out the cross border effects of subsidies. It also shows that the subsidies have led the governments to compromise on the need of public investments. The paper recommends that there is an urgent need to put into effect an expenditure switch from subsidies to investment to lift Indian agriculture from its current stagnation. The most alarming aspect of the surging subsidies is not the size, but the manner and purpose of spending on them. Subsidies provided in India suffer from both inclusion error (wrong kind of people benefiting) and exclusion error (deserving people left out of subsidies). It recommends that three Ts are important to make subsidies efficient: transparent, targeted and temporary. It also recommends that subsidies need to be differential for rain-fed and perennially-irrigated farms. The amount of subsidy must also be inversely propositional to increase in the size of land holding.

KEYWORDS

Farm subsidies, farmers.

INTRODUCTION

 subsidies play a vital role in the economy of a country. A country has various resources which are to be gainfully deployed for the benefit of the population of the whole country¹. Subsidies are provided to ensure equitable utilization of the resources for the people. The benefits given by government to the members of the farming community directly or indirectly usually in the form of a cash payment or tax reduction or price support are commonly construed as agricultural subsidy or farm subsidy.

There are two kinds of farm subsidies: investment subsidies and input subsidies. Investment subsidies are necessary for increasing the nation's capacity to improve production and a farm's capacity of increasing productivity. It can be possible through measures like installing drip irrigation, making water storage tanks and buying farm implements. Nearly 60 per cent of Indian farms are rain-fed and more than 75 per cent farmers are small and marginal³. Under these conditions input subsidies for fertilizers and power would certainly be of help.

At the same time subsidies are not without consequences. It has been felt many times before and has been studied in the recent times that subsidies are not only serving the purpose for which they have been intended but also leading to the deterioration of resources which otherwise would not have been so had the farmers made to use the resources without subsidies.

QUANTUM OF AGRICULTURAL SUBSIDIES IN INDIA AND THE WORLD

After the Great depression in the 1930s subsidies were introduced in the developed countries only as a 'temporary palliative'². But the trend of subsidies continues to run still today (table 1). A comparison of India with other developed countries as in table.1 shows that it is not far behind in awarding farm subsidies. The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) cost almost \$ 102 billion last year for EU, around 50 per cent of the whole EU budget. The total spending for 2014-20 is to increase further, to over \$550 billion⁵. The world nations irrespective of development status continue to give importance to agricultural subsidies over the years.

TABLE 1: AGRICULTURAL SUBSIDIES IN INDIA AND ABROAD OVER THE YEARS

Sl. No.	Country/ Group	2010- Subsidy bill (\$ billions)
1	India	30.0
2	USA	35.0
3	China	147.0
4	Japan	45.0
5	OECD countries	227.0
6	European Union	101.4
7	Russia	16.0
8	Brazil	7.0

Source: <http://www.economist.com/node/21530130>

STATUS OF SUBSIDY IN INDIA**TABLE 2: AGRICULTURAL SUBSIDIES IN INDIA OVER THE QUINQUENNIALS (RS. CRORES)**

Year	Fertilizer	Electricity	Irrigation	Others	Total
1990-91	4562	2400	5872	1235	14069
1995-96	6735	1977	7931	1034	17677
2000-01	13800	6449	13681	854	34784
2005-06	18299	14674	10987	1337	45297
2010-11	54976	7500	13826	1894	78916

Source: Central Statistical Organization, New Delhi

As table 1 show, agricultural subsidies have been on a rising trend over the years, but it is not the agricultural sector alone that is getting subsidized (table 3). In fact agriculture is getting largely subsidized only for the farm inputs (table 2) which is required for the improvement of agricultural prospects of yield and income which in turn transgressing all sectors, cascade their impacts in the overall development of the nation.

TABLE 3: TYPE OF SUBSIDIES IN INDIA AND THEIR ALLOCATED PERCENTAGES IN 2010⁷

Sl.No.	Type of subsidies	In percentage share
	Economic Subsidies	
1	Agriculture and Co-operation	16.4
2	Irrigation and flood control	10.8
3	Power and energy	7.6
4	Industry	11.5
5	Transport	7.3
6	Communication and others	2.4
	Social Subsidies	
7	Education	22.0
8	Health	9.0
9	Water supply and sanitation	5.0
10	Rural housing and others	8.0

Table 2 shows that input subsidies have the lion's share from 88 percent in the beginning of 1990s to 98 per cent in the recent years. This comes at the cost of investment subsidies for the development of drip irrigation or any water harvesting methods or encouraging better marketing aspects or developing storage units or for farmers' education. This stands at a stark contrast to the developed countries where direct payments have averaged around \$5 billion every year since 2005; crop insurance subsidies have crossed \$35 billion since 1995⁸. Subsidies, from straight subsidies to grants, "market support mechanisms", "export enhancement programs" or specific tax regime for farmers show that in the US and Europe, farmers survive because they get direct income support and not because what they earn from the farm gate prices.⁹

IMPACT OF SUBSIDIES ON RESOURCES

The Economic Outlook for 2012-13 points out that, subsidies are progressively losing their relevance and are becoming an unbearable fiscal burden. Farm subsidy itself forms 1 % of the total GDP but the role of subsidies in contribution to productivity enhancement is fast disappearing. This could be seen especially in the case of fertilizer subsidy.

It has become a pan India phenomenon of fertilizers being indiscriminately used than the recommended dosage levels¹⁰ leading to escalations not only in the cultivation costs but also in the subsidy bill. Degradation of land¹¹ and deterioration of water resources have been reported as a result of non-judicious fertilizer applications along with decreasing productivity levels of land.¹² Subsidies on canal water have led to disproportionate usage leading to water scarcity in general and water deficit stress for crops.¹¹ As agriculture accounts for over 25 per cent of electricity consumption, power subsidies to the farmers have reported¹¹ to be resulting in inefficiencies in power utilization and huge transmission losses. It can be ascertained¹¹ that this overutilization has in turn led to soil degradation, soil nutrient imbalance, environmental degradation, and groundwater depletion. The effectiveness of inputs has decreased over the years with the depletion set in water and land.

CROSS-BORDER EFFECTS OF SUBSIDIES

Impacts of subsidies have become an international phenomenon in the era of globalization as steep input subsidies make the final produce cheap, regardless of efficiency in farming and productivity. For example, Thailand has now emerged as the biggest exporter of rice, but it produces only 2.8 tonnes per hectare (as compared to India's 3 tonnes per ha), thereby productivity is not the only criterion for profitable exports. At the same time USA which produces 7 tonnes of rice per hectare continues to indulge in subsidies as while the output of American rice is worth \$ 1.2 billion, there is a \$ 1.4 billion subsidy. Consider cotton. The United States spends some \$2.5 billion a year and the European Union about \$700 million in subsidies to cotton farmers. The historically low cotton prices are wreaking havoc for domestic producers in poor countries to such an extent that cotton subsidies in Mississippi drive cotton farmers in West Africa out of business¹. In cotton alone, the 20,000 cotton farmers in America receive an annual subsidy packet of Rs 45.40 lakh crore. Both the EU and the United States maintain programs to *directly subsidize* exports of farm products. The EU spends about \$3.3 billion per year doing this. That gives EU goods an artificial advantage in international markets and works against the interests of producers in poor countries. As a result 70 percent of both world exports and imports are exchanged among developed countries. Developing countries do only have a smaller share of world agricultural trade.

SUBSIDIES AND PUBLIC GOOD INVESTMENTS: AT CROSS-ROADS

The subsidies for agriculture add up to almost 2% of GDP¹¹ in India and the value added in agriculture is now a shade less than 14% of GDP, subsidy accounts for some 14% of the value of agricultural output. This huge subsidy bill comes at the expense of investment. Public investment in agriculture has been low and dwindling for a long time (World Development Report, 2008). Rural people are forced to taste the back-burner when it comes to development which further leads to yawning gaps in terms of income and standard of living between the rural people and their urban counterparts. Thus it could be seen that agricultural subsidies compromise the need of government spending on improving rural infrastructure which further results in flawed economy. According to Dr Ashok Gulati, the returns were only 53 paise for every rupee spent on subsidizing fertilizers⁴ He claimed, that returns in the farm-related sector were highest on roads - Rs 3.17 for every rupee spent. This was presumably because produce could be more speedily dispatched to markets and did not perish.

FARMERS AT THE RECEIVING END

The biggest problem in agricultural subsidy is that it has failed to distinguish between the needy and non-needy. Even in the US, Though subsidies have tripled between 1995 and 2009, the richest 10 per cent of the farm families pocketed 74 per cent of the entire subsidy.¹² In India only 30 per cent goes to small, medium and marginal farmers. On an average, the wealthiest 10 per cent farmers of the world received a total payment of \$4,45,127 in the past 15 years. Small farmers received an average of \$8,862 per recipient in the same period.¹²

Moreover, subsidies distort trade by increasing net exports of input intensive commodities while decreasing net exports of commodities which require relatively fewer inputs. This is the main reason for increased fertilizer prices over the years.¹² If this is the soft part of keeping the farmer unconnected from the market for his produce, the hard, infrastructure part comprises missing rural roads and rural power. Without a good, motorable road network, no organized procurement of farm produce can take place. Yet farm subsidies in rich countries depress market prices for farm products and induce poor countries in Africa and elsewhere to import food that local farmers could otherwise produce more efficiently. Farmers in poor countries are rightly concerned about the effects of the subsidies. Moreover, Indian governments still continue subsidies by a production-driven system but not by a market-driven approach. The subsidies are available for current production and not addition for productive capacity. As a result farmers face the brunt when it comes to selling. Plus, it has to be taken into account that food subsidy was 31,328 in 2007-08 and 60,573 in 2011-12. Supplying food grains at low prices mainly to urban residents meant low prices to farmers.

CONCLUSION

Subsidies must be a part of a comprehensive plan towards the essential goal: feeding more people. But there is widespread evidence that the more affluent farmers are able to garner a disproportionately large part of the subsidies. Hence the subsidy incidence is inequitable. At the same time, the stagnation of agriculture has led to a spillover in the area of unemployment. Indian agricultural subsidies, though at historic high levels, are low when compared to European or US levels. However, there is an urgent need to put into effect an expenditure switch from subsidies to investment to lift Indian agriculture from its current stagnation. The most alarming aspect of the surging subsidies is not the size, but the manner and purpose of spending on them. Subsidies provided in India suffer from both inclusion error (wrong kind of people benefiting) and exclusion error (deserving people left out of subsidies). Efficient subsidies must be transparent, targeted and in many cases temporary. These three Ts are missing from most subsidies in India.

Subsidies could be delivered through "debit input cards" that the farmer can use to buy whatever input he chooses. The cost of the input, whether it is power, seeds or fertilizers, should be refunded by the government to the seller. Farmers will become proficient managers as they exercise their choices judiciously to optimize inputs. Power subsidy cannot be reviewed in isolation. Controls, barriers and commodity export restrictions are a form of taxes on farmers. Thus subsidies could function as a vehicle for increasing income of the producers but instead they have proved to be an inefficient and inequitable instrument.

The true problem with subsidies is to have a cost-effective system. Subsidies must help produce what is needed. Therefore there is a need for "smart subsidies". Subsidies need to be differential for rain-fed and perennially-irrigated farms. The amount of subsidy must also be inversely proportional to increase in the size of land holding. This will ensure that the least common denominator, that is, marginal and small farmers, is satisfied. Thus subsidies when inappropriate retard the farmers, when misappropriate kill the farmers and when disproportionate kill farmers, farming and farming system as a whole.

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