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LAHORE: Public spending on agricultural research and development in Pakistan has been irregular and has not kept up with agricultural growth.

Data from 2009 indicates that for every \$100 of agricultural output, Pakistan invested just \$0.21 in agricultural R&D, which is one of the lowest levels in the developing world, and shows a considerable decline from levels recorded in the 1990s, said a speaker at an event on Tuesday.

Policymakers, donors, researchers and other stakeholders gathered in the federal capital to deliberate recent developments in agricultural research in Pakistan. The event was organised by the International Food Policy Research Institute's (IFPRI) Agricultural Science and Technology Indicators (ASTI) initiative and the Pakistan Agricultural Research Council (PARC), to share findings on agricultural R&D in Pakistan.

Jock Anderson presented an independent evaluation of PARC and Anwar Naseem, assistant professor of agricultural economics from McGill University, provided an insight into the role of private-sector agricultural R&D in Pakistan on the occasion.

According to the speakers, the agricultural sector in Pakistan plays a vital role in the nation's food security and employs half the country's labour force. Pakistan's population is expected to nearly double by 2050. To feed the growing population and address challenges such as climate change and rising food prices, it is crucial that agricultural productivity is increased.

Agricultural R&D has contributed significantly to agricultural productivity and poverty reduction around the globe over the past five decades. However, despite the well-documented evidence that the payoffs to agricultural R&D are considerable, Pakistan continues to under invest in agricultural research.

Since there is a significant time lag between investing in research and reaping its rewards, agricultural R&D requires long-term commitments in sufficient and sustained funding and well-staffed research agencies, said Gert-Jan Stads, ASTI programme coordinator.

India's agricultural R&D investments as a share of agricultural output were found to be almost twice those of Pakistan. Pakistan faces financial challenges as well as a dearth of skilled human capital. The country's share of agricultural researchers with PhD degrees remains very low, at 18 percent.

PARC is Pakistan's main agricultural R&D agency and its broad mandate is the coordination of research among federal, provincial, and higher education agencies. There are 19 other federal government agencies that conduct agriculture-related R&D under various government ministries. With the recent devolution of the agricultural sector's responsibilities to the provinces, provincial research systems have gained a clearer mandate in science, technology and innovation.

A key challenge facing Pakistan will be to ensure that resources and capacities are more evenly distributed, both from the central government to the provinces and among the provinces themselves, said Muhammad Sharif, director of PARC.

Courtesy: The News