Foundation for Agrarian Studies

CONCEPT NOTE

The Foundation for Agrarian Studies will hold a conference from November 6 through 9, 2025, that will take stock of current thinking and scholarship on agrarian change.

The discussions at the Conference will focus on the following broad themes:

1. Productive Forces and Relations of Production in the Countryside
2. The Role of Modern Science and Technology in Advancing Agriculture
3. Poverty and Standards of living in Rural Areas
4. The Impact of Climate Change on Agriculture and Rural Development

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Productive Forces and Relations of Production in the Countryside

The agrarian question is central to the analysis of the dynamics of both national and global capitalism, particularly because production relations in agriculture and in rural areas are deeply intertwined with class, gender, and – in India and other parts of South Asia – caste and other hierarchies. In many parts of the world, class divisions in agriculture are stark, with a land-owning elite controlling the means of production while the majority -- wage workers, peasant farmers and smallholders -- struggle for subsistence. In south Asia, class relations are inextricably linked with caste oppression and exclusion. Women, despite being the backbone of farming and agricultural work, are often denied land ownership, equal wages, and equality in decision-making. This intersection of class, gender, caste, and other hierarchies is a feature of contemporary rural production systems in India and elsewhere.

Understanding agrarian change requires studying and analysing the interactions between global processes (i.e., the actions of multinational capitalism and corporations); national processes (i.e., changes determined by national governments, national ruling classes, and national political movements); and local processes (i.e., the specific dynamics of the infinite variety of local agrarian regimes, and of different scales of agricultural and rural development that exist in rural areas today).

Eleven years ago, the Foundation held a landmark international conference on agrarian change. Since then, the changes wrought by capitalism, nationally and globally, continue to be rapid, wide and deep. There have been radical advances in the forces and instruments of production available to agriculture, and consequent changes in the relations of production, the characteristics of individual social classes, and the conditions of the lives and livelihoods of the rural masses. A key feature of the present situation, particularly in India, is the emergence of new demands and new forms of struggle among farmers.

For this conference, the Foundation invites papers on rural socio-economic classes; women in the rural labour force; economic conditions of people of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and other victims of sectional social discrimination; incomes from agriculture and related activities; and contemporary agrarian movements.

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The Role of Modern Science and Technology in Advancing Agriculture

The development and application of science and technology have historically played a pivotal role in transforming agricultural productive forces, shaping the trajectory of food production and distribution. From the Green Revolution to the more recent advent of genetically modified crops, gene editing, and precision farming, technological advance has increased agricultural yields significantly.

In addition to enhancing productivity and thereby food security, modern biotechnology contributes to the achievement of multiple objectives in agriculture and related fields. These include climate resilience and sustainability, adaptation to different agro-ecological regimes, improved nutritional quality, disease and pest resistance, and accelerated crop processes.

Agriculture needs constant advance, both to meet new challenges of climate change and ecological pressures and to provide improved nutrition for the malnourished – at least one billion people – with a sustainable footprint. Continuous progress in agricultural science and technology is necessary if agriculture is to meet these needs by, say, 2050, when the population of the world is projected to be 9.7 billion from the present 8 billion.

Science and technology are the products of the collective labour and knowledge of humanity. In the present world, however, the overwhelming bulk of the products of this collective effort are owned by capital, while society and the people at large must deal with the consequences and risks arising from the commoditisation and appropriation of scientific knowledge. A particularly stark example of the increasing concentration of scientific research in the private sector is in the field of agriculture and genetic engineering technologies. In addition, the relations of production at different levels – the global level, the level of national economies, and in different agricultural production systems – prevent income-poor cultivators in different parts of the world from realising the full potential and benefits of modern biotechnology. To achieve genuine food security, public investment in science and technology must be encouraged, ensuring that innovations are accessible to all.

The scientific research agenda of sustainable agriculture is also sought to be diverted towards a number of "alternatives" to science. These range from the glorification of subsistence production with low inputs and low productivity to welcoming obscurantist initiatives such as zero budget natural farming.

Immense changes are now happening in the science of food production and in the application of science and technology to agriculture and allied activities. It is a matter of great urgency that progressive social scientists recognise – and analyse – the potentially emancipatory impact of the scientific and technological revolution on the lives and livelihoods of the working people in rural areas across the world while ensuring that the benefits of this advance are made available to the peasant masses. The conference will discuss the socio-economic implications of technological adoption in agriculture.

The Foundation invites papers on scientific and technological transformations in agriculture, fisheries, animal resources, and related fields; biotechnology and agricultural advancement; digital technologies and agricultural advancement; problems of scale in agricultural and rural production and scientific assessments of approaches to sustainability (such as zero budget natural farming).

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Poverty and Standards of Living in Rural Areas

In the post-pandemic period, the long-term tendency towards a reduction in poverty and food insecurity has been reversed in large parts of the developing world. In India, there was a huge return of workers from urban to rural areas. Rural wages have stagnated in the last few years, and, by a recent estimate, over a quarter of the rural population – hundreds of millions -- live in extreme poverty. This context gives urgency to the questions being explored under this theme, namely, changes in poverty and deprivation among the agrarian population of India and other countries.

Poverty and deprivation are defined broadly to include access to income and other resources (land, in particular) but also deprivation in basic capabilities such as ability to be healthy, to be educated, to secure nutritious food, as reflected in the Human Development approach. In India, official statistics and policy have neglected poverty as measured by income or household expenditure. There are two recent rounds of expenditure surveys that can be used to estimate the level and intensity of poverty. Income levels can also be gauged from wages and earnings, and changes in employment.

Our focus is on the living standards of poor peasants and manual workers or the mass of the working poor. The FAS-PARI village surveys are unique in providing a nuanced picture of deprivation, where levels of income, ownership of assets, conditions of housing, educational attainment, and many other measures of living standards can be understood not only in combination but specifically across socio-economic classes.

We need to learn from the experience of regions and countries that have been able to bring about reduction in poverty and deprivation. The experience of China is unique in terms of ending extreme poverty in a record period of time and on a mass scale.

Poverty and inequality are distinct but related. We need to document extreme poverty and monitor disparities within countries and across countries, especially rural-urban inequalities.

The Foundation invites papers on concepts and measurement of poverty, deprivation, and human development; trends in poverty and rural wages and earnings; poverty and living standards among rural workers, including poverty with respect to access to land and productive assets, to food and nutrition insecurity, and to housing and basic amenities; strategies of poverty reduction; growing inequalities in wages, incomes and wealth, including rural-urban inequality.

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The Impact of Climate Change on Agriculture and Rural Development

The impact of global warming of anthropogenic origin is an increasingly potent threat to agriculture globally and to the livelihoods and well-being of those engaged in agricultural and related activities. It will also endanger the food and nutrition security of all countries and regions. Adaptation to the impact of global warming, taking note of the potential range of future global temperature increase, is a critical issue for agriculture today.

An understanding of adaptation in agriculture requires not only analysis of the technological issues involved, but also of social, economic and political contexts, especially in the less-developed countries. Given the extensive contribution of small producers to agricultural production, the vulnerability of their lives and livelihoods, and their urgent developmental needs, adaptation measures must also be equitable, protecting and enhancing their livelihood choices and providing increase in incomes, consumption levels, asset and wealth creation and overall well-being.

Another challenge to agriculture in the global South, including in India, is the push for a policy shift in agriculture that prioritises climate change mitigation over the need to increase agricultural production and productivity. The bioresources of the global South are sought to be positioned a the key global carbon sink for the world, and the source of energy through biofuel crops, without considering the importance of adaptation for food and nutrition security. Mitigation is also sought to be pushed through by means of market-based policies, increasingly favouring carbon trading in agriculture. The conference will explore the future of food and nutrition security and the measures to safeguard it, particularly in the global South in the context of climate change.

The Foundation invites papers on adaptation and its impact on production and inequality (including on food and nutrition security, the adaptation challenge for small producers, and impact on rural workers); and on the scale and scope of mitigation in agriculture (including tradeoffs and distributional consequences of mitigation).