

Assessing the Effects of Agricultural Policy Reforms on the Welfare and Resilience of Smallholder Farmers

Arifa Sultana 

Centre for Economic and Social Studies, Greenlands, Begumpet, Hyderabad, Telangana 500016, India

Corresponding author: Arifa Sultana | E-mail: arifa@cess.ac.in

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Abstract

Smallholder farmers play a vital role in global food production, yet they continue to face constraints such as limited inputs, unstable markets, and increasing climate pressures. Agricultural policy reforms directly influence the economic, social, and environmental conditions shaping their livelihoods. This review synthesizes recent evidence on how major policy shifts impact smallholder welfare, access to essential resources, and resilience to external shocks. The analysis highlights that reforms involving input subsidies, market restructuring, land tenure security, climate-adaptive interventions, and extension service modernization can produce highly variable outcomes depending on the policy design and local implementation capacity. When formulated inclusively and supported by strong institutions, these reforms can enhance productivity, stability, and long-term resilience. Conversely, poorly targeted or inequitable reforms risk deepening existing vulnerabilities. Strengthening institutional frameworks, expanding financial inclusion, and promoting participatory policy development emerge as key priorities for improving smallholder welfare and resilience under evolving agricultural governance systems.

Keywords: Smallholder farmers, agricultural reforms, welfare, resilience, policy analysis, food security, rural development, climate-smart agriculture, livelihoods.

1. Introduction

Smallholder farmers form the backbone of agricultural production in many regions of the world, contributing substantially to global food security and rural livelihoods. In developing countries, smallholders produce a significant share of staple foods and sustain local economies through labor-intensive farming systems. Despite their critical role, they frequently operate under conditions that limit their productivity and economic stability. Landholdings are often fragmented and insufficient to support economies of scale, while access to modern inputs, credit, and extension services remains constrained. Limited rural infrastructure, such as inadequate irrigation networks, poor transportation facilities, and insufficient storage systems, further restrict their ability to increase yields, minimize losses, or reach competitive markets [1-2]. Additionally, the persistence of traditional farming technologies and limited institutional support often leaves smallholders vulnerable to fluctuating commodity prices, exploitative value chains, and high production risks.

Climate variability adds another layer of complexity, intensifying the challenges faced by smallholder farmers. Rising temperatures, erratic rainfall, frequent droughts, and extreme weather events threaten crop productivity, soil fertility, and water availability. Smallholders typically lack the financial and technical capacity to adopt climate-resilient

technologies, making them disproportionately affected by climate-related shocks. As a result, the livelihood security of millions of rural households is increasingly at risk, highlighting the urgent need for robust and inclusive agricultural policy reforms.

Agricultural policy reforms play a central role in shaping the structural environment in which smallholder farmers operate. Such reforms encompass a wide range of strategies, including input subsidies, land tenure adjustments, market liberalization, insurance schemes, credit reforms, and the modernization of extension systems [3]. Historically, agricultural policies in many countries have oscillated between interventionist approaches—such as subsidized inputs and minimum support prices—and market-driven strategies emphasizing competition, export growth, and private sector participation. These shifts have produced mixed outcomes for smallholders, depending on how reforms are designed, targeted, and implemented. Input subsidy reforms, for example, can significantly reduce production costs and promote technology adoption when well-targeted. However, untargeted or abruptly withdrawn subsidies may negatively affect poorer farmers who rely heavily on low-cost fertilizer or seed support. Similarly, market liberalization has improved export opportunities and price incentives for some farmers but has simultaneously exposed others to volatile global markets and competition from large agribusinesses.

Land tenure reforms, while essential for security and long-term investment, may inadvertently disadvantage marginalized groups if land allocation and ownership structures are influenced by elite capture or unequal social power dynamics [4].

Understanding the effects of such reforms is therefore essential for designing policies that genuinely support smallholder welfare and resilience. Welfare in this context extends beyond income to encompass food security, household stability, gender inclusion, and social equity. Resilience refers to a farmer's capacity to absorb, adapt to, and recover from shocks—whether economic, climatic, or institutional [5]. These dimensions are deeply interconnected; the success of any reform depends not only on the policy itself but also on the broader institutional capacity and socio-economic conditions in which it is implemented.

This review aims to provide a comprehensive examination of how agricultural policy reforms influence the welfare and resilience of smallholder farmers. By integrating evidence from economic, social, institutional, and environmental perspectives, it seeks to offer a holistic understanding of the pathways through which policy changes—both positive and negative—affect smallholder livelihoods. The review highlights key opportunities for enhancing policy effectiveness, identifies persistent gaps in reform implementation, and underscores the importance of inclusive, context-specific, and sustainable governance frameworks [6]. Ultimately, this analysis contributes to ongoing discussions on strengthening agricultural systems that support equitable development, climate resilience, and long-term food security for smallholder farming communities.

Table 1. Key Pathways Through Which Agricultural Policy Reforms Influence Smallholder Welfare

Policy Area	Mechanism of Influence	Short-Term Effects on Smallholders
Input Subsidy Adjustments	Changes in fertilizer, seed, or irrigation prices affect production decisions	Lower cost of cultivation
Increased use of improved inputs	Sustained productivity gains	
Enhanced competitiveness		
Market and Trade Reforms	Opening markets, reducing tariffs, changing price policies	Greater market participation
Exposure to price fluctuations	Improved integration into value chains	
Potential vulnerability to global shocks		
Land Tenure Policies	Formalizing or securing land rights	Increased confidence in land use
Improved access to credit	Higher long-term investments	
Better land management practices		
Extension and Advisory Reforms	Strengthening training, digital advisory tools, and knowledge transfer	Better decision-making
Improved adoption of modern techniques	Capacity building	
Greater resilience to climate and market risks		
Climate and Environmental Policies	Promoting climate-smart agriculture, sustainability incentives	Immediate protection from climate extremes
Better soil/water use	Stronger climate resilience	
Enhanced ecosystem stability		

Table 2. Major Challenges and Opportunities in Implementing Agricultural Policy Reforms for Smallholders

Dimension	Key Challenges
Institutional Capacity	Weak delivery systems
Slow implementation	
Fragmented policymaking	Stronger institutions improve service delivery
Better monitoring and accountability	
Financial Access	Limited credit/insurance outreach
High interest rates	
Exclusion of women and youth	Financial inclusion programs expand credit access
Risk-mitigation tools strengthen resilience	
Market Systems	Poor infrastructure
Middlemen dominance	
Price volatility	Improved roads/storage enhance profitability
Cooperative models increase bargaining power	
Social Inclusion	Gender biases
Unequal resource distribution	
Youth disinterest in farming	Inclusive policies empower women and youth
Stronger community-based organizations	
Climate Adaptation	Limited awareness of climate-smart practices
High cost of resilient technologies	Diversification and sustainable practices reduce vulnerability
Climate-smart technologies increase long-term stability	
Technology & Extension	Inadequate extension services
Digital divide	Digital platforms provide real-time advice
Improved adoption of modern innovations	

2. Conceptual Framework

Understanding the effects of agricultural policy reforms on smallholder farmers requires a multidimensional analytical perspective. Smallholders operate within complex social, economic, and environmental systems, and policy reforms can influence these systems in interrelated ways. To capture this complexity, the conceptual framework for this review is organized around four central dimensions: economic welfare, social welfare, institutional support, and resilience. These dimensions collectively provide a holistic lens for evaluating how reforms shape smallholder livelihoods and long-term sustainability.

2.1 Economic Welfare

Economic welfare represents the most immediate and measurable impact of agricultural reforms. It encompasses changes in farm income, productivity levels, input affordability, and access to reliable markets. Policies such as input subsidies, price incentives, improved infrastructure, and market liberalization can significantly alter the economic landscape in which smallholders operate. Increased access to affordable seeds, fertilizers, and irrigation technologies can raise productivity, while improved market connectivity can enhance bargaining power and farmgate prices. Conversely, poorly designed reforms may lead to increased production costs, reduced competitiveness, or heightened exposure to

price volatility [7]. Understanding economic welfare therefore requires examining both short-term gains and long-term economic stability.

2.2 Social Welfare

Social welfare extends beyond economic indicators to include the broader well-being of smallholder households and communities. This dimension incorporates food security, nutrition, gender equity, youth participation, and community empowerment. Agricultural reforms that promote inclusive participation—particularly for women, indigenous groups, and marginalized farmers—can enhance household decision-making, improve nutritional outcomes, and strengthen social cohesion [8]. However, reforms lacking equitable design may unintentionally widen social disparities. For example, policies that favor commercially oriented farmers may exclude those with limited resources, thereby increasing inequality. Evaluating social welfare thus provides insight into the inclusiveness and distributional fairness of policy interventions.

2.3 Institutional Support

Institutional support is a critical mediating factor that shapes how smallholders experience policy reforms. This dimension includes access to credit and financial services, the quality and reach of extension systems, land tenure security, and the effectiveness of local agricultural institutions. Strong institutions can enhance farmers' ability to benefit from reforms by providing knowledge, financial resources, legal protections, and market information. For instance, secure land rights enable long-term investment in soil conservation or tree crops, while effective extension services enable adoption of new technologies [9]. Weak or poorly coordinated institutions, however, can undermine reform outcomes, reinforce barriers, and reduce policy impact. Thus, institutional support acts as a foundational pillar upon which successful agricultural reforms depend.

2.4 Resilience

Resilience refers to the capacity of smallholder farmers to absorb, adapt to, and recover from shocks such as climate variability, market instability, pest outbreaks, and supply chain disruptions. Policy reforms increasingly focus on climate-smart agriculture, risk management tools, crop insurance, and diversification strategies to strengthen resilience. A resilient smallholder system is better able to maintain productivity and livelihoods in the face of uncertainty. Reforms that neglect resilience may expose farmers to heightened risks, particularly in regions prone to extreme weather events or volatile commodity markets [10]. As climate change intensifies, resilience is emerging as a central criterion for evaluating policy success.

Integrated Perspective

For agricultural reforms to generate meaningful and sustainable benefits, they must integrate all four dimensions. Economic gains alone are insufficient if they worsen social inequality, weaken institutions, or increase vulnerability to shocks.

A holistic approach ensures that reforms contribute not only to short-term improvements but also to long-term welfare, equity, and stability for smallholder farming communities.

3. Major Types of Agricultural Policy Reforms

Agricultural policy reforms encompass a wide range of interventions designed to improve productivity, enhance welfare, and strengthen the resilience of smallholder farmers. These reforms vary across countries and regions, but they generally target core structural challenges such as limited access to inputs, unstable market conditions, insecure land tenure, and increasing climate risks. Understanding the different types of reforms and their implications is essential for evaluating how policy shifts translate into real outcomes for smallholder communities [11]. This section discusses four major categories of reforms—input subsidy reform, trade and market liberalization, land tenure reform, and climate-environmental policies—highlighting both the opportunities they create and the challenges that may arise during implementation.

3.1 Input Subsidy Reforms

Input subsidy programs—covering fertilizers, seeds, agrochemicals, and irrigation technologies—have been a central component of agricultural development strategies in many low- and middle-income countries. Historically, these subsidies were introduced to stimulate agricultural intensification and ensure smallholders could access essential inputs at affordable prices. In recent years, however, governments have introduced reforms to improve efficiency, reduce leakages, and transition toward more targeted or digitalized subsidy systems. When effectively designed, subsidy reforms can substantially raise farm productivity, increase yields, and generate higher household incomes by enabling farmers to adopt improved seed varieties, soil fertility practices, and modern technologies that would otherwise be cost-prohibitive. Yet, reforms that reduce or withdraw subsidies without adequate safety nets often disproportionately harm smallholders, who rely heavily on subsidized inputs to sustain production [12]. Moreover, targeting mechanisms sometimes suffer from administrative weaknesses, leading to exclusion of the poorest farmers, women, or remote communities. This highlights the delicate balance policymakers must strike between fiscal efficiency and equitable access to essential agricultural inputs.

3.2 Trade and Market Liberalization

Trade and market liberalization are among the most transformative reforms affecting smallholder agriculture. These reforms often involve reducing tariffs, removing export or import controls, deregulating prices, and strengthening market competition. Liberalization can create new market opportunities by allowing farmers to access regional and international value chains, often resulting in higher prices for quality crops and greater incentives for diversification. Market reforms may also stimulate private-sector investment in storage, processing, and

transport infrastructure, further integrating smallholders into dynamic markets. However, increased exposure to global competition brings substantial risks, especially for farmers lacking the scale, capital, or technology to compete with large commercial producers or imported commodities. Price volatility in global markets can translate into unpredictable farm incomes, undermining household economic stability [13]. Thus, while market liberalization can expand economic possibilities for smallholders, its benefits are unevenly distributed and dependent on complementary policies such as price stabilization mechanisms, access to market information, and farmer organization support.

3.3 Land Tenure Reforms

Land tenure reform remains a foundational policy category because secure land rights shape virtually all aspects of smallholder decision-making. Reforms typically aim to formalize land ownership, enhance tenure security, and streamline land administration systems. Secure tenure encourages farmers to invest in long-term improvements such as soil conservation, terracing, tree planting, and irrigation infrastructure, all of which enhance sustainability and productivity. Where farmers feel confident that they will retain control over their land, they are more willing to adopt improved technologies or pursue climate-resilient practices. Nevertheless, tenure formalization can sometimes reinforce existing inequalities. Wealthier or politically connected households may capture formal rights, while women, tenants, indigenous groups, or land-poor farmers may be sidelined due to limited documentation or awareness. In some contexts, formal land markets may lead to increased land sales and consolidation, potentially displacing vulnerable smallholders. Effective land reforms therefore require strong institutional safeguards, participatory processes, and mechanisms that protect the rights of marginalized groups [14].

3.4 Climate and Environmental Policies

In the face of increasing climate variability, environmental degradation, and rising disaster risks, climate-related policy reforms have become central to agricultural planning. These policies promote climate-smart agriculture, renewable energy technologies, water-efficient irrigation systems, conservation agriculture, and sustainable land management practices. Well-designed climate policies can significantly enhance the resilience of smallholder farmers by improving their ability to manage droughts, floods, pests, and other climate-related shocks. They also contribute to ecosystem preservation by encouraging practices that reduce soil erosion, improve biodiversity, and mitigate greenhouse gas emissions [15]. However, effective adoption of climate-smart technologies often requires substantial knowledge, financial resources, and institutional support. Many smallholders face barriers such as limited credit, inadequate extension services, and insufficient technical training, which hinder the uptake of environmentally sustainable innovations. Thus, while climate and environmental reforms offer transformative potential, their success

depends heavily on accessible financing, inclusive extension systems, and policies that explicitly address the constraints faced by resource-poor farmers.

4. Effects on Smallholder Welfare

4.1 Economic Impacts

Agricultural policy reforms have wide-ranging implications for the economic welfare of smallholder farmers. Subsidy programs and input-support schemes can significantly reduce production costs, enabling farmers to invest in improved seeds, fertilizers, and irrigation technologies that enhance yields and profitability. Similarly, reforms that strengthen market infrastructure—such as rural roads, storage facilities, and price information systems—can lead to better market prices and reduced post-harvest losses. Increased access to modern technologies further boosts productivity, helping farmers transition from subsistence to more commercially oriented production [16]. However, when market liberalization measures are introduced abruptly or without adequate safety nets, smallholders may experience increased vulnerability to price fluctuations and competition from larger producers. Such instability can offset the potential income gains of reforms, underscoring the need for carefully sequenced policies that balance efficiency with protection for vulnerable households.

4.2 Food Security

Improving food security is a central objective of many agricultural reforms, particularly in regions where smallholder households rely heavily on their own production for staple foods. Policies that promote access to improved seed varieties, efficient irrigation systems, sustainable soil management practices, and post-harvest technologies directly enhance food availability at the household level. Increased productivity often translates into more stable and diverse food supplies, contributing to better nutrition and reduced seasonal hunger [17]. Beyond production, reforms that facilitate market integration allow households to access a wider variety of foods throughout the year, strengthening dietary diversity. When combined with social protection or nutrition-sensitive agriculture initiatives, these reforms can play an essential role in reducing malnutrition and improving overall household well-being.

4.3 Social Equity and Gender Inclusion

The social impacts of agricultural reforms depend largely on how equitably policies are designed and implemented. Gender-sensitive reforms—such as those ensuring equal access to credit, land rights, extension services, and training programs—can significantly improve the participation and empowerment of women farmers, who make up a substantial proportion of the agricultural labor force. When women gain better access to resources and decision-making, household productivity and nutrition outcomes often improve. Conversely, reforms that fail to address structural inequalities risk exacerbating existing disparities. For instance, market-oriented programs may disproportionately benefit farmers with more land, assets, or education,

marginalizing poorer or less resourced households [12]. Thus, ensuring social inclusion is essential for maximizing the broader developmental impacts of agricultural reforms.

5. Effects on Smallholder Resilience

5.1 Climate Resilience

Agricultural reforms increasingly emphasize climate resilience due to the growing frequency of droughts, floods, pests, and other climate-related shocks. Policies that facilitate the adoption of climate-smart technologies—such as drought-tolerant seed varieties, agroforestry systems, conservation agriculture, and water-harvesting structures—significantly enhance farmers' ability to cope with environmental stresses [6]. These interventions not only stabilize yields under variable conditions but also contribute to long-term ecosystem sustainability. By promoting diversified cropping systems and sustainable land management practices, climate-focused reforms help reduce vulnerability and support adaptive capacity across farming communities.

5.2 Market Resilience

Market-related reforms also contribute to smallholder resilience by improving the stability and reliability of agricultural value chains. Policies that strengthen farmer cooperatives, producer organizations, and contract farming arrangements can improve collective bargaining power, reduce transaction costs, and enhance access to markets [7]. These structures help farmers better withstand price drops, demand fluctuations, and supply chain disruptions. When farmers are integrated into well-organized value chains, they gain greater predictability in pricing, inputs, and market access, thereby reducing risks associated with market volatility.

5.3 Financial Resilience

Financial resilience is another critical component of smallholder stability. Reforms that expand access to microcredit, agricultural insurance schemes, and risk-management tools provide farmers with essential buffers against unexpected shocks such as crop failure, livestock disease, or sudden income losses. Microfinance initiatives enable smallholders to invest in productivity-enhancing technologies, while insurance products protect them from catastrophic events that could otherwise undermine their livelihoods. Digital financial services further enhance efficiency, promote transparency, and extend financial access to remote or marginalized communities [8], these financial mechanisms strengthen farmers' capacity to manage risk and recover quickly from adverse events.

6. Challenges in Implementing Agricultural Reforms

Despite their potential benefits, agricultural reforms often face significant implementation challenges. Weak institutional capacity remains one of the most persistent obstacles, limiting effective delivery, monitoring, and evaluation of reform programs.

In many cases, smallholder farmers are not adequately included in policy design processes, resulting in interventions that fail to address their realities or priorities. Extension systems, which play a crucial role in disseminating new knowledge and technologies, are frequently understaffed or underfunded, reducing farmers' awareness and adoption of new policies. Additionally, power imbalances within agricultural sectors may allow large-scale producers or political elites to capture a disproportionate share of benefits, sidelining smallholders. Climate change adds further complexity by undermining the effectiveness of traditional policies and requiring continuous adaptation of policy frameworks. These challenges highlight the need for comprehensive and inclusive strategies to ensure equitable and effective policy outcomes.

7. Strategies to Improve Policy Outcomes

Strengthening the effectiveness of agricultural reforms requires integrated strategies that address both structural barriers and farmer-level constraints. Participatory policymaking—where smallholders and local organizations actively contribute to policy formulation—ensures that reforms reflect community needs and local conditions. Enhancing extension services through digital platforms, mobile advisory tools, and well-trained field agents can improve awareness and adoption of policy initiatives. Gender-inclusive and youth-supportive policies are essential for achieving social equity and tapping the potential of often underrepresented groups. Developing integrated risk-management frameworks that combine insurance schemes, safety nets, and early-warning systems can protect smallholders from shocks. Investments in rural infrastructure—including irrigation systems, storage facilities, rural roads, and energy access—improve both productivity and market integration [5-6]. Finally, promoting cooperative models and farmer organizations can strengthen collective bargaining power, improve input procurement, and enable better participation in value chains. Together, these strategies can enhance the welfare and resilience of smallholder farmers while supporting more equitable and sustainable agricultural development.

Conclusion

Agricultural policy reforms profoundly affect the welfare and resilience of smallholder farmers. While well-designed reforms can enhance income, productivity, food security, and climate resilience, poorly implemented policies may deepen inequities and undermine long-term sustainability. Effective reform requires a holistic, inclusive approach that aligns economic, social, and environmental objectives. Strengthening institutional capacity, ensuring equitable access to resources, and adopting climate-smart strategies will be essential for enhancing smallholder resilience in an increasingly unpredictable global agricultural landscape.

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