Indian Farming 75 (03): 05-09; March 2025

Building climate-resilient agricultural systems

for a sustainable future of food, land and water

Sunil Kumar* and Prakash Chand Ghasal

ICAR-Indian Institute of Farming Systems Research, Modipuram, Meerut, Uttar Pradesh 250 110

Climate change presents significant challenges to global food, land, and water systems, with agriculture both contributing to emissions and vulnerable to climate impacts. Integrated farming systems (IFS) and climate-smart agriculture (CSA) provide solutions by enhancing productivity, resilience, and sustainability. IFS optimizes resource use by integrating crops, livestock, aquaculture, and agroforestry, while CSA focuses on practices like precision agriculture, water-efficient techniques, and soil carbon sequestration to adapt to climate change. Organic and natural farming reduce reliance on synthetic inputs, promote soil health, and enhance biodiversity. Transforming agricultural systems requires supportive policies, research, capacity building, and global collaboration. By adopting these approaches, agriculture can adapt to climate change, mitigate its effects, and ensure food security, contributing to global sustainability goals and building a resilient future for food, land, and water systems.

Keywords: Climate smart agriculture, Integrated farming system, Natural farming, Organic farming

THE rapid acceleration of climate change has brought unprecedented challenges to food, land, and water systems worldwide. Agriculture, deeply interconnected with these systems, faces a dual burden: it significantly contributes to greenhouse gas emissions while being highly vulnerable to climate variability. Rising temperatures, erratic rainfall, and extreme weather events are disrupting agricultural productivity, threatening food security, and depleting natural resources. To tackle these challenges, transformative strategies are essential to build resilience, ensure sustainable resource use, and secure global food security. Among these, integrated and climate-smart farming systems offer promising solutions. Integrated farming systems optimize resource use by combining crops, livestock, aquaculture, and agroforestry, while climate-smart agriculture emphasizes productivity, adaptation, and mitigation. These approaches not only enhance ecosystem services but also reduce agriculture's environmental footprint, making them critical tools to address the multifaceted impacts of climate change and safeguard the future of global agriculture.

The nexus of food, land, and water systems

Food, land, and water systems are closely interconnected, forming the foundation of global sustainability. Any disruption within one system triggers cascading effects across the others, emphasizing the critical need for integrated management. For instance, water scarcity directly impacts agricultural productivity, reducing crop yields and leading to food insecurity. This, in turn, accelerates land degradation as farmers are forced to overexploit marginal lands to fulfil food demands. Similarly, unsustainable land management practices, such as deforestation or excessive tillage, exacerbate water resource depletion by reducing soil water retention and increasing runoff, further compromising food systems.

Climate change intensifies these challenges by altering precipitation patterns, increasing the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events, and intensifying competition for limited natural resources. Erratic rainfall can lead to droughts or floods, impacting water availability and crop production, while rising temperatures aggravate soil degradation and stress water systems. To address these complex and interconnected challenges, a holistic approach is essential. This involves recognizing and managing the interplay between food, land, and water systems rather than treating them in isolation. Strategies such as sustainable land management, efficient water use, and resilient agricultural practices must be implemented in tandem to strengthen these systems. By adopting integrated solutions, we can mitigate the impacts of climate change, enhance resource sustainability, and ensure global food security. This nexus-based approach is vital for building resilience in a rapidly changing world and achieving long-term sustainability goals.

Climate change and agriculture

Climate change is significantly impacting agriculture, altering farming and/cropping systems worldwide. Rising temperatures, shifting growing seasons, changes in pest and disease dynamics, and reduced water availability threaten the productivity, profitability, and resilience of these systems. Smallholder farmers, who depend heavily on natural resources and have limited capacity to adapt, are particularly at risk. The impacts are profound:

- ***Crop yield declines***: Heat stress and water scarcity are reducing the yields of staple crops like wheat, rice, and maize, threatening food security of the world.
- ***Soil degradation***: Increased soil erosion, salinization, and nutrient leaching caused by erratic weather patterns are degrading soil health, reducing its fertility and productivity. More and more inputs are being applied in each succeeding years to achieve the similar productivity.
- ***Water resource depletion***: Climate-induced changes in rainfall patterns and over-reliance on groundwater for irrigation are intensifying water scarcity, depleting groundwater table, posing a major challenge for agricultural sustainability.
- ***Biodiversity loss***: Disruptions in ecosystems due to changing climates are leading to declines in pollinator populations and other beneficial species critical for crop production.

These cascading effects demand transformative changes in farming systems to enhance resilience. Sustainable practices like integrated farming system, organic and natural farming, conservation agriculture, and water-use efficiency are essential to mitigate these impacts, protect livelihoods, and ensure food security in the face of a changing climate.

Integrated farming systems

Integrated farming systems (IFS) are innovative approaches that combine multiple agricultural components such as crop production, fruit plants, livestock, aquaculture, and agroforestry, to optimize resource use and enhance sustainability. IFS approach is defined as a "A judicious mix of two or more components while minimizing competition and maximizing complementarities with advanced agronomic management tools aimed at sustainable and environment friendly improvement of farm income and family nutrition". By integrating different farming activities, IFS creates synergies that improve productivity, profitability, and resilience, particularly in the face of climate change. Key features of IFS include:

Resource recycling: One of the core principles of IFS is the efficient recycling of resources. Residues from one component, such as crop residues, livestock manure, or fish waste, can be used as inputs for another, reducing waste and minimizing the need for external inputs like synthetic fertilizers and pesticides. This reduces production costs while enhancing sustainability.

Diversification: IFS encourages diversification by integrating various farming activities, which provide multiple income streams. This diversification reduces the risk of total failure, particularly during adverse climatic conditions like droughts or floods. If crop yields decline, income from livestock or aquaculture can help offset losses, improving overall farm stability.

Climate resilience: IFS builds climate resilience through practices such as agroforestry and crop-livestock integration. Agroforestry, for example, contributes to improved soil health, water use efficiency, and carbon sequestration. The inclusion of tree species like neem and khejri in cropping systems enhances soil fertility and provides shade, reducing heat stress on crops and improving yields under stressful climatic conditions.

Overall, IFS represents a holistic, sustainable approach to farming that addresses both environmental and economic challenges, ensuring long-term agricultural productivity and resilience.

Climate-smart agriculture (CSA)

Climate-smart agriculture (CSA) is an integrated approach that promotes practices and technologies aimed at increasing agricultural productivity, enhancing resilience to climate change, and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. CSA is aligned with the need to transform food, land, and water systems to adapt to the challenges posed by climate change while ensuring sustainable development. Major CSA practices are given below:

Precision agriculture: Utilizing advanced technologies such as GPS, sensors, and remote sensing, precision agriculture optimizes the use of inputs like water, fertilizers, and pesticides. This increases efficiency, reduces waste, and minimizes emissions, making farming more profitable and sustainable.

Agroecological approaches: Techniques such as crop rotation, intercropping, and cover cropping are used to restore and enhance ecosystem functions. These practices promote biodiversity, improve soil health, and increase resilience to climate impacts, thereby supporting sustainable food production.

Water-smart practices: CSA promotes water-efficient practices such as drip irrigation, rainwater harvesting, and water-efficient cropping systems. These approaches reduce water consumption, enhance water availability, and improve the overall efficiency of water use, which is particularly critical in areas facing water scarcity due to climate change.

Soil carbon sequestration: Practices like conservation tillage and the use of organic amendments (e.g., compost, crop residue incorporation/retention) help increase soil organic matter, store carbon, and improve soil fertility. These practices enhance soil health and contribute to climate change mitigation by sequestering carbon in the soil.

Together, these CSA practices provide a comprehensive framework for building resilient farming systems that are both productive and environmentally sustainable in the face of a changing climate.

Organic and natural farming

Organic and natural farming play a crucial role in transforming food, land, and water systems under the pressures of global climate change. These farming approaches prioritize ecological balance, biodiversity, and sustainable resource management, which are essential for building resilient agricultural systems. By reducing reliance on synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, organic farming promotes healthier soils, enhances water retention, and mitigates soil erosion—critical factors in maintaining long-term productivity amid climate variability. Natural farming, with its emphasis on minimal external inputs and working with nature, fosters a more resilient farming environment by enhancing soil organic matter, promoting nutrient cycling, and improving overall farm ecosystem health.

These practices also reduce greenhouse gas emissions associated with conventional farming, contributing to climate change mitigation. Furthermore, organic and natural farming systems enhance biodiversity, which supports pollination, pest control, and the resilience of ecosystems to climate extremes. By fostering climate-smart, regenerative practices, such as agroforestry and diversified cropping systems, both organic and natural farming help improve water-use efficiency, increase carbon sequestration, and restore degraded lands, making them powerful tools for adapting to and mitigating the impacts of climate change. In essence, they provide a sustainable alternative to conventional farming, ensuring food security, protecting natural resources, and promoting ecological resilience in the face of global climate challenges.

Policy interventions and global collaboration

Transforming farming systems requires enabling policies and international collaboration. Key policy recommendations include:

Incentivizing sustainable practices: Financial incentives for adopting climate-smart and integrated farming practices can accelerate their uptake.

Strengthening research and development: Investment in agricultural research is essential to develop region-specific solutions and scale innovations.

Capacity building: Training programmes and knowledge dissemination empower farmers to adopt sustainable practices.

Global cooperation: International initiatives like the Global Alliance for Climate-Smart Agriculture facilitate knowledge sharing and resource mobilization.

Way forward

The transforming food, land, and water systems under climate change involves a comprehensive strategy combining sustainable farming practices, supportive policies, and global collaboration. Governments should incentivize the adoption of climate-smart agriculture (CSA) and integrated farming systems (IFS) through financial support and subsidies. Strengthening research and development will help create region-specific, climate-resilient solutions. Capacity building through training programs and knowledge dissemination will equip farmers to implement these practices. Additionally, fostering global cooperation via initiatives like the Global Alliance for Climate-Smart Agriculture will facilitate knowledge sharing and resource mobilization. These coordinated efforts will ensure resilient farming systems, enhance food security, and promote sustainable resource management, ultimately helping agriculture adapt to and mitigate the impacts of climate change.

SUMMARY

The intersection of food, land, and water systems under global climate change represents both a challenge and an opportunity. By embracing integrated and climate-smart farming systems, we can transform these systems to be more resilient, productive, and sustainable. Collaboration among farmers, policymakers, scientists, and global stakeholders is essential to achieving this vision and ensuring a food-secure future for generations to come.

*Corresponding author email: director.iifsr@icar.gov.in