AgriSustain
Agriculture

Review

TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCEMENTS DRIVING AGRICULTURAL TRANSFORMATION

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Abstract

The article discusses the pivotal role of technology in modern agriculture, highlighting its transformative impact on farming practices. It explores various technological innovations such as precision agriculture, smart farming, genetic engineering, and automation, which have enabled farmers to boost productivity, optimize resource use, promote sustainability, and address global food security challenges. Additionally, the article emphasizes the significance of agriculture in poverty reduction, particularly during early stages of economic development, where it proves more effective than other industries. It also underscores agriculture's contribution to GDP per capita growth, citing examples of its positive economic impact. Furthermore, the article acknowledges agriculture's role in stabilizing food production, enhancing food security, and preventing food crises, crucial for maintaining societal well-being and economic stability.

Keywords: Precision agriculture, and transformation, smart farming, genetic engineering

OPEN ACCESS

CITATION

Yadav, R.; Kumar, R.; Kumar, U. technological advancements driving agricultural transformation. *AgriSustain-an International Journal,* 2023, 01(2), 05-11.

ARTICLE INFORMATION

Received: May 2023
Revised: June 2023
Accepted: June 2023

Introduction

Agriculture has always been a fundamental aspect of human civilization, providing sustenance and nourishment throughout history. However, as the global population continues to grow, agricultural practices face increasing pressure to meet the rising demand for food while minimizing environmental impact. In response to these challenges, technological advancements have emerged as key drivers of agricultural transformation. This article explores the transformative role of technology in modern agriculture. It delves into various technological innovations that have revolutionized farming practices, from precision agriculture and smart farming to genetic engineering and automation. By harnessing the power of technology, farmers can enhance productivity, optimize resource utilization, promote sustainability, and address critical global food security concerns. Numerous studies indicate that during the early phases of economic development, the agricultural sector is remarkably effective at reducing poverty, often two to three times more effective than comparable growth in other industries [1]. Additionally, at these initial developmental stages, agricultural growth tends to have a disproportionately positive impact on the poorest segments of the population [2]. Furthermore, it plays a crucial role in addressing malnutrition concerns [3]. Research has consistently shown that agriculture's contribution to the value added per worker directly contributes to an increase in GDP per capita, effectively acting as an engine for overall economic growth [4]. For instance, a study by the FAO in 2002 found that a 500 kcal per day increase in dietary energy supply, which can be achieved through investments in agriculture, resulted in a 2 percent growth in GDP per capita in East and Southeast Asia [5], demonstrating that agriculture can be viewed as an investment in human capital [6]. Moreover, the agricultural sector has a proven track record in stabilizing domestic food production, enhancing food security, and mitigating the occurrence of food crises, which can otherwise lead to political and social instability, negatively impacting investment and efficiency [7&8]. This multifaceted role of agriculture is essential for maintaining economic stability and overall societal well-being.

Precision Agriculture: The Power of Data-Driven Farming

Precision agriculture involves the use of advanced technologies to gather and analyze data, enabling farmers to make informed decisions and optimize their farming practices. Geographic Information Systems (GIS), Global Positioning Systems (GPS), and remote sensing technologies play a pivotal role in precision agriculture. These tools provide valuable insights into soil conditions, moisture levels, crop health, and nutrient deficiencies, among other parameters.

By precisely mapping these variables, farmers can implement targeted interventions, such as variable-rate fertilization and irrigation, thereby optimizing resource allocation and reducing waste. Real-time monitoring and predictive analytics further enhance decision-making by identifying potential issues and enabling prompt action. Furthermore, the integration of drones and satellites allows for efficient and cost-effective data collection over large agricultural areas.

Smart Farming: Connectivity and Automation Revolutionizing Agriculture

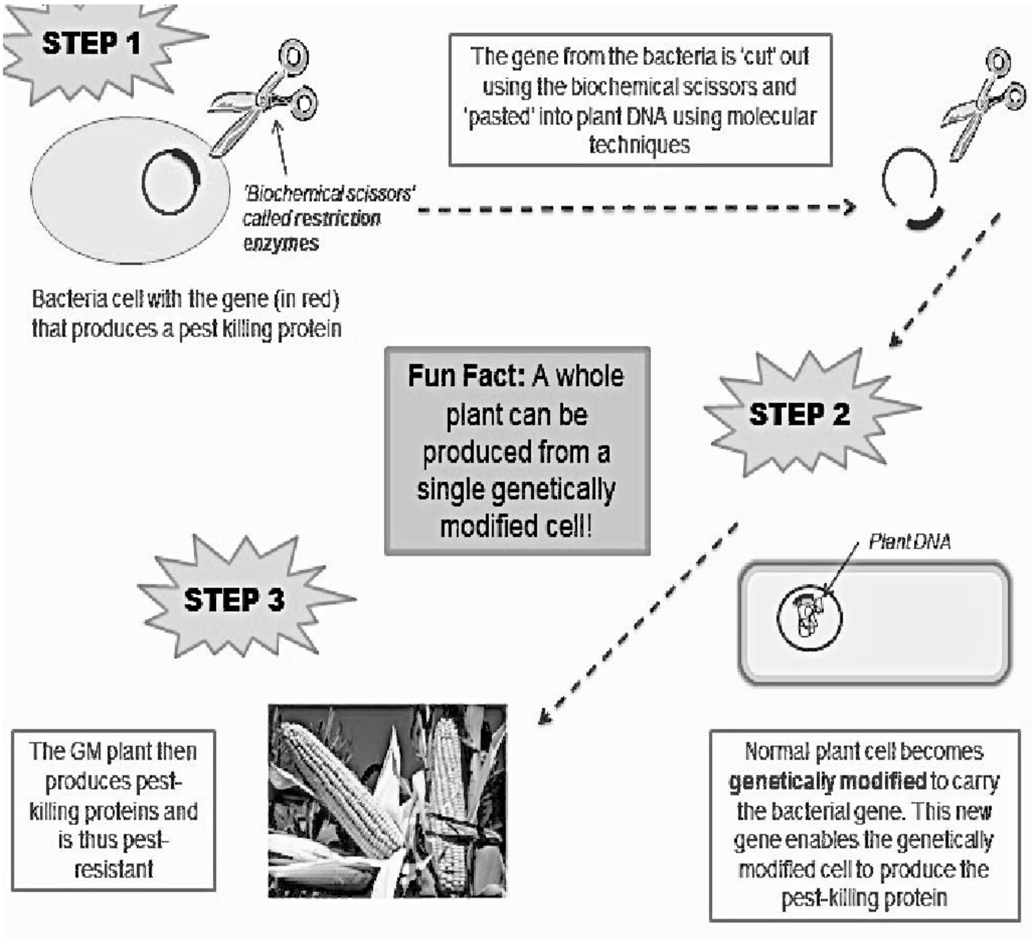
The advent of the Internet of Things (IoT) has revolutionized farming through the concept of smart farming. Smart farming involves the interconnectivity of various devices and sensors that gather real-time data and enable automation in agricultural operations. This technology enables farmers to remotely monitor and control farming systems, resulting in enhanced efficiency and productivity. Sensors embedded in the fields and on farm equipment provide valuable information about soil moisture, temperature, humidity, and plant health. This data can be wirelessly transmitted to farmers' devices, allowing them to make informed decisions in real-time. Automated systems, such as robotic harvesters and milking machines, streamline labor-intensive tasks, reducing the dependency on manual labor and improving overall productivity.

Moreover, smart farming facilitates the implementation of autonomous vehicles for tasks like planting, spraying, and harvesting. These vehicles leverage advanced navigation and artificial intelligence algorithms to operate independently, reducing human error and optimizing time and resource utilization. Additionally, smart farming practices enable the integration of vertical farming and hydroponics, where crops are grown indoors under controlled environments, maximizing yields and minimizing water and land requirements.

Genetic Engineering: Enhancing Crop Traits for Improved Agriculture

Genetic engineering has emerged as a powerful tool for enhancing crop traits and addressing agricultural challenges. Through the manipulation of an organism's DNA, scientists can introduce specific genes that confer desirable traits such as resistance to pests, diseases, and environmental stressors, improved nutritional content, and enhanced yield potential.

Genetically modified (GM) crops, such as insect-resistant Bt cotton and herbicide-tolerant soybeans, have gained widespread adoption due to their ability to increase crop yields and reduce the use of chemical inputs. Furthermore, gene-editing technologies like CRISPR-Cas9 have revolutionized genetic engineering by enabling precise modifications with greater ease and efficiency. Genetic engineering also offers the potential for developing crops with increased nutritional value, such as bio-fortified crops enriched with essential vitamins and minerals. Additionally, research is underway to create climate-resilient crops that can withstand adverse weather conditions, including drought, extreme temperatures, and salinity.



Public Expenditure in Agriculture

In Asia, key strategies and government actions have revolved around utilizing price incentives, investing in agricultural research and development (R&D), enhancing rural infrastructure, boosting education and healthcare services, and overhauling rural institutions related to land tenure security, credit accessibility, and savings mechanisms. Agricultural institutions hold a pivotal position in the process of agricultural transformation, and when they are reformed efficiently and promptly, they contribute to establishing a dynamic environment that is vital for achieving successful transformation. Significant levels of public spending in the agricultural sector have historically been linked to the initial phases of agricultural transformation in Asia. This funding is typically directed towards critical areas such as infrastructure development (including irrigation, rural roads, and electrification), the promotion of agricultural mechanization, and the provision of subsidies for modern inputs like seeds and fertilizers. Across Asia, achieving self-sufficiency in rice production has consistently been a central goal of public policy and investment, and this objective remains a priority in several countries today. It is worth noting that the prolonged or occasionally heightened allocation of agricultural subsidies in Asia may not always be justified by economic reasoning. For instance, in China, the annual average public spending on agriculture saw a substantial rise of 240 percent between 1996 and 2010. When combined with other governmental policies, this increase has led to a significant reduction in poverty levels, measured at USD 1.90 per day, plummeting from 88.1 percent in 1981 to a mere 0.3 percent in 2018, as reported by the World Bank and the Development Research Center in 2022. In Indonesia, during the 1970s, there was an annual increase of approximately 10 percent in public investment in agriculture. This boost in funding served as a catalyst for agricultural transformation, which began gaining momentum in the 1980s. Additionally, investments made in primary education and vocational training have played a pivotal role in promoting inclusive agricultural transformation in countries like Vietnam, Thailand, the Philippines, China, and South Korea.

FAO Making Trade Work for Improved Food Security and Nutrition.

Trade impacts directly on food volumes and prices in national markets and hence affects each dimension of food security (availability, access, utilization and stability). FAO supports members in multiple ways, providing: information and in-depth analysis on the possible consequences of trade policies; capacity development to improve understanding of international trade rules and their implications; neutral forums for dialogue between trade and agriculture stakeholders; support to regional trade integration; and assistance in preparing for trade negotiations and in implementing agreements.

Key policy messages

1. Trade policy has a critical role to play in eradicating global hunger by 2030, but trade alone cannot address all of the socio-economic and political challenges that influence food security and nutrition.
2. Multilateral trade rules, which take into account the specific needs of developing countries, are needed to ensure that the expansion of agricultural trade is conducive to the eradication of hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition. This is particularly pertinent in times of crisis. COVID-19 is a reminder of the importance of international trade in mitigating the impacts of shocks and protecting livelihoods while ensuring food security.
3. Trade policies must consider the different needs and roles of both large-scale agricultural producers and those of smallholder and family farms.
4. Sound policies for food security and nutrition balance a reliance on trade with domestic production to ensure stable food availability and accessibility. At the same time, policies should raise income levels for the rural poor and improve nutritional value in food chains.
5. FAO assists Members in strengthening their capacities related to international trade agreements and the promotion of export opportunities. The focus is on the development of evidence-based analyses, knowledge sharing, technical assistance and dialogue on key issues related to food and agricultural trade, including regional and multilateral trade negotiations.
6. Trade and governance are tightly interrelated and both carry cross-sectoral relevance within FAO. It's crucial to develop an ever-improving framework for trade-related policy-making processes in accordance with standards and regulations set in place by the WTO. FAO aims to make trading systems as free, fair, predictable and inclusive as possible on local, national, regional and global levels.

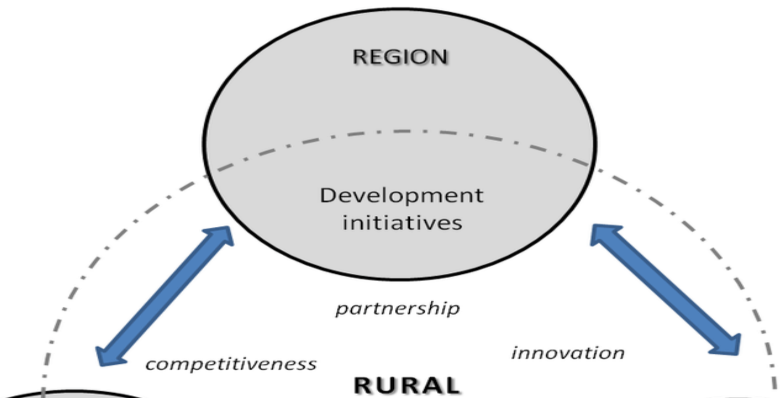
Rural Finance

In the Asian context, rural financial services are typically provided by two main categories of suppliers: formal and informal. Informal financial service providers encompass private individuals, including professional moneylenders, traders, commission agents, landlords, as well as friends and relatives. Over the past few decades, civil society organizations like the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh have also started to play a more prominent role in this domain. On the other hand, the formal sector consists of entities like commercial banks and other financial intermediaries that operate under national banking regulations and are subject to supervision, as outlined in the FAO 2005 report.

According to Mellor [9], extending loans to small-scale commercial farmers leads to increased investments, which, in turn, make a significant contribution to the growth of the agricultural sector. Both formal and informal rural financial intermediaries have crucial roles to play, but formal institutions have been a primary source of credit for small commercial farmers, as highlighted in FAO's report from 2021. FAO and Mellor [9&10] argue that the establishment of a specialized lending agency tailored to the unique needs of small commercial farmers is a vital step in ensuring access to rural financing for agricultural-based livelihoods. Initially, this specialized agency may need to be a public-sector organization during the early stages of agricultural transformation. However, it's important to carefully consider this option to avoid displacing private sector and civil society organizations. Nonetheless, since the late 1990s, there has been a growing emphasis on implementing a more decentralized rural finance system to enhance the effectiveness of rural financial services. A recent study on food system transformation by the Philippine government [11] with support from the Asian Development Bank and FAO, suggests the adoption of a "centrally supported decentralized service delivery" approach.

Rural and Agrarian transformation in India

The rural economy has undergone a transformation, shifting from subsistence farming to a cash-based system. Farmers have transitioned to cultivating cash crops such as sugarcane and cotton, which they sell in external markets. They have increased their productivity by adopting new agricultural techniques. The government plays a more active role in the village agricultural economy through various development programs and personnel. Village cooperatives strive to support farmers by providing essential agricultural inputs. Despite the enactment of land legislations, there has been little change in the land ownership pattern. Tenant farmers have not seen significant improvements in their conditions, and agricultural laborers continue to live in poverty, even though agricultural production has increased. Given that agricultural production operates within a capitalist and market-oriented framework, the farming community does not reap the benefits of increased production. Instead, industrialists and traders, who wield influence in national politics, tend to capture the profits from agricultural yields. Consequently, farmers often find themselves compelled to sell their produce due to immediate financial needs.



Agricultural Automation: Optimizing Efficiency and Labor

Automation technologies are transforming traditional agricultural practices by reducing the reliance on manual labor, optimizing efficiency, and improving overall productivity. Automated systems are being employed in various stages of agricultural operations, from planting and irrigation to harvesting and post-harvest processing. Automated planting systems accurately place seeds at optimized depths and spacing, ensuring uniform plant growth and maximizing yield potential. Intelligent irrigation systems utilize real-time data to deliver precise amounts of water to crops, minimizing water wastage and reducing the risk of over-irrigation.

In the realm of harvesting, automated machinery and robotics have significantly reduced the labor required for tasks such as fruit picking, sorting, and packing. These technologies improve the speed and accuracy of harvesting operations, reducing post-harvest losses and ensuring product quality.

- Furthermore, automated post-harvest processing systems streamline activities such as sorting, grading, and packaging, reducing human error and enhancing efficiency. Advanced storage and preservation techniques, including controlled atmospheres and smart warehouses, help maintain the quality and extend the shelf life of agricultural produce.

Conclusion

Technological advancements have the potential to revolutionize agriculture and address critical challenges faced by the global food system. Precision agriculture, smart farming, genetic engineering, and agricultural automation are among the key drivers of this agricultural transformation. By harnessing data-driven insights and leveraging automation, farmers can optimize resource utilization, increase productivity, and reduce environmental impact. Genetic engineering offers the potential to enhance crop traits and develop varieties that are resilient to pests, diseases, and changing climate conditions. However, the adoption of these technologies must be accompanied by considerations of ethical, environmental, and socio-economic factors. Proper regulations, training programs, and infrastructure development are crucial to ensure that technological advancements in agriculture are accessible and beneficial to all farmers, including those in resource-constrained regions. As we move forward, continued research and development in agricultural technology, along with collaborative efforts between farmers, scientists, policymakers, and technology providers, will be essential for a sustainable and resilient agricultural sector capable of feeding a growing global population while minimizing its environmental footprint.

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