

1.1.1 Agriculture

About 88 percent of Nepalese people live in the rural areas. Agriculture constitutes the base for Nepal's economic growth and over 80 per cent of the active population depend upon agriculture. The percentage of people dependent on agriculture has declined gradually from 91 per cent in 1981 to 81 per cent in 1991. The land use statistics shows about 2,968,017 ha of land used for agricultural cultivation where as only 9,98,898 ha of the total land is categorised non-cultivated.

On an average about 65 per cent of the total cultivated land is rain fed. The Terai plains constitute 43 per cent of the total cultivated land. Up to 1999/2000, the total irrigated area was 0.922 million ha. The land distribution is also very uneven. About 62.8 per cent of the land is owned by 16.1 per cent of the farmers. The per capita agricultural land declined from 0.16 ha in 1980 to 0.13 ha in 1999. The person-land ratio on cultivated land has increased considerably from 47 in 1971 to 7.5 persons/ha in 1991 (CBS 1999). In the Terai, the person-land ratio has increased from 3.1 in 1971 to 8 person/ha in 1999. Out of the total agricultural land of 3.95 million ha, about 24 per cent land had access to irrigation in 2000 (MOAC, 2000).

The agriculture sector accounts for 42 per cent of GDP. Though about 25 per cent of Nepal's development budget is expended in this sector, the production rate only averages 3 per cent per annum. In comparison to the population growth rate, agricultural growth still lags behind resulting in a shortage of food produced. Nepal was self-sufficient in food-grains until the 1980s but now the country has to import food. Average yields of rice, wheat and maize are 10-30 per cent, which are lower than those of other South Asian countries. The current trend of still high population growth and low agricultural growth could result in a serious food-deficit unless agricultural productivity is improved substantially.

Although majority of the people depend on agriculture, this sector is adversely affected by the loss of top fertile soil due to soil erosion, landslides, and flood. It is estimated that about 1.8 million tonnes of plant nutrients [nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P_2O_5), potassium (K_2O) and calcium (Ca)] are removed away from the soils by crop harvests, and soil erosion (Joshy *et.al*, 1997). Out of this, only 0.3 million tonnes (16 per cent) are replenished by organic and mineral fertilisers. Another estimates revealed that about 75, 3.8, 10, and 5 kg/ha of organic matter, nitrogen, potassium, and phosphorus are lost in 5 tonnes/ha of soil each time (UNEP, 2001). Along with these major nutrients, micronutrients such as copper, iron, zinc etc, which are essential for plant growth and improvement of soil health are also lost. The agricultural land is also affected by river-bank cutting, sedimentation, and inappropriate use of agro-chemicals such as chemical fertilisers and pesticides. These have accelerated decline in unit area agricultural production.