Impact of COVID-19 on rural lives and livelihoods in India

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One can foresee many challenges as farmers and farm labourers set out to rebuild their lives and livelihoods.

The national lockdown from 25 March 2020 has severely affected lives and livelihoods across rural India. Agriculture and allied sectors employ more than half of the workforce in the country. A majority of India’s farmers (85%) are small and marginal farmers with less than two hectares of land. More than nine million active fishers directly depend on fisheries for their livelihood, 80% of which are small scale fishers; the sector as a whole employs over 14 million people.
The *rabi* crop stood ready for harvest in many fields when the COVID-19 crisis brought everything to a halt; this is also the time for harvest of plantation crops like pepper, coffee, banana. In the aftermath of the lockdown, harvest of the *rabi* crops has been delayed due to non-availability of labour, machinery (harvesters, threshers, tractors), transport facilities and restrictions on movement; farmers of perishable commodities like fruits, vegetables, and flowers in particular have been incurring losses. This is the peak flowering season when the demand is also high. Many small farmers in Tamil Nadu who cultivate flowers as a cash crop in their farming system, have incurred loss in what would otherwise have been the period of peak earning from sale of flowers. Harvest of plantation crops in Kerala and Tamil Nadu has been similarly delayed, affecting the cash flow of farmers and farm labour. Agriculture labourers are not able to go to work due to lack of transport. Labour work under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MNREGS) has stopped.

Egg prices crashed to an all time low of INR 1.95/egg and poultry farmers in Namakkal — the poultry hub of India, were left with huge stock of unsold eggs. Small dairy and poultry farmers engaged in contract farming in Tamil Nadu have faced a major loss with many private contract firms refusing to lift the produce. Fishers haven’t been able to go out to sea since end of March and are subsequently worried about the 45-day annual fishing ban in line with the fish breeding season, coming into force along the east coast from mid-April. Both brackish and fresh water aquaculture farmers have also been affected with harvest delayed due to labour non-availability, market closure and movement restrictions; exports of shrimps to Europe and the US has stopped and local fish prices have fallen leading to loss of income.

Tribal communities are amongst the most vulnerable in terms of food and nutrition security as seen in national statistics. In addition to farm based activities, the collection and sale of non-timber forest produce like *kendu* leaves and *mohua* flowers by tribal communities in Odisha has been badly affected by the lockdown, with no collection agents coming and markets closed. The informal sector is a major source of credit in rural India, and borrowing at high rates of interest is expected to increase to tide over the crisis. There are reports that market agents are charging 24 per cent interest for advance credit to be paid after harvest of flowers/vegetables, which farmers are unable to repay due to disruption of the supply chain.

While the government announced several measures, including exemption of agriculture and fisheries from lockdown restrictions in late March, there has been lacuna in delivery and implementation at the ground level. There have also been gaps in reaching relief in
cash and kind to the poor, needy and vulnerable as seen in media reports. Several civil society organisations and NGOs with field presence have been engaged in providing needed support that is possible under the circumstances. The M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation, for instance, has been engaged in providing relief to the communities in these difficult times, through use of technology to provide crop advisories, conduct phone-in programmes and facilitate aggregation and sale of produce through farmer producer organisations (FPOs) promoted by us. Awareness programmes on COVID-19 and precautionary measures to be taken have been conducted in many villages.

Guidelines issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India on 15 April 2020 following extension of lockdown till 3 May 2020, exempt agriculture, horticulture, animal husbandry, poultry and fishery, and allied activities from lockdown restrictions; labourers can go to work, markets are to open, procurement is to happen and agri-input shops and agro-processing centres are to function. MNREGS work will also commence.

Effective dissemination of the guidelines and implementation on the ground will be very crucial, as farmers harvest the rabi crop and start preparations for the kharif season.

Going forward, one can foresee many challenges as farmers and farm labourers set out to rebuild their lives and livelihoods. Migrant labourers who have managed to return will not be able to go back immediately. Some may not wish to go back also, given the travails many may have endured following the lockdown. There is a need for both relief and rehabilitation measures, to help the affected and pick the threads again, overcome the loss sustained and rebuild their lives. Precautionary measures like maintaining social distancing and hand washing will have to continue as COVID-19 continues. Proactive measures by the state with humanitarian perspective are called for as we begin operating in a 'new normal': more relief in kind (e.g. making the PDS universal, ensuring whoever is needy gets the necessary support and is not left starving due to bureaucratic hurdles like lack of ration card); and cash (e.g. increasing the amount under the PM Samman Kisan Nidhi from the present INR 6,000/- to INR 15,000/- and releasing the first instalment before kharif); measures to curb charging of exorbitant interest by informal sector lenders, waiver of interest for the quarter on term loans and overdraft agriculture and MSME accounts; compensating loss incurred due to damage to perishable crops like flowers, fruits, vegetables and fish; and enlarging the scope of MNREGS to include harvest of crops on farmers' fields by labour and value addition to produce by women.

The piece draws on assessment of the ground situation by the M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation.