

COVID-19 impact on Indian farmers

– An evidence from Tamil Nadu

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COVID-19 without a doubt damaged all the known sectors of the country including transport, tourism, education, manufacturing and other sectors. Agricultural sector performed outstandingly despite COVID-19 lockdown. Here, the grassroot issues faced in lockdown and few workable solutions in the rural regions which could be made in the future during similar times have been dealt from farmers' perspective. All the farmers (100%) reported that marketing and transportation restriction of their agricultural produce was a major problem during the lockdown. Medium and large farmers felt more lockdown distress than small and marginal farmers. In addition, employment of small businesses was worst affected. Notably, people of the village appreciated the work of state government's public distribution system during the lockdown period.

Keywords: Agriculture, COVID-19, Economy, Farmers, Lockdown

The NAFIS survey (2016–17) conducted by NABARD states that because of low income from farming, the incidence indebtedness of farm households are higher in Tamil Nadu i.e. about 61% higher than the national average of 47%.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 2020 reported strong insights regarding the issues faced by Food and Agriculture Sector i.e. the virus posed a serious threat to food security and livelihoods in the poorest countries, where agricultural production systems were more labour-intensive and there was less capacity to withstand a severe macro-economic shock. In all but the poorest countries, the biggest challenges for the sector came from the measures needed to contain COVID-19; the necessary adjustments within the sector to comply with those measures (which may increase costs); and the need for finding alternative markets for affected products as people changed their consumption habits in response to COVID-19.

FAO (2020) substantiated the

statements in the developing countries context. In developing countries, particularly those already affected by conflict or humanitarian crisis, COVID-19 likely had much more serious impact on livelihoods and food security. Similar to the experience of Ebola, livelihoods were devastated, as fear of contagion and movement restriction kept some farmers from producing, affecting both cash and food crop production, disrupting agricultural supply chains, and causing acute agricultural labour shortages in the region.

Agriculture and COVID-19

There exists a connection between agriculture and COVID-19 precautionary measures announced by the union and state governments of India and some of these are explained in Table 1.

Evidence from Sivagangai and Karaikudi

As farmers of Sivagangai and Karaikudi Taluks (comprising about 80 villages) were much affected and worried about the lockdown, they had expressed their feelings on the

flow of tank irrigation survey. Some of the important findings of the survey have been presented here.

- **Information aspect:** Farmers obtained information about COVID-19 through sources like Newspaper (40%), Social Media (28%, Whatsapp in particular), local representatives like panchayat president and ward members (24%) and fellow farmers and peer groups (8%).
- **Marketing aspect:** All the farmers (100%) reported that marketing the vegetables was a problem at the time of pandemic as big vegetable markets like Sivagangai, Karaikudi, Kalaiyarkoil, Kallal and Keelapoongudi were shut. Because of permission issues, farmers could not perform local sandhies also. Farm Policy News (2020) reported that in developed countries, the macro-economic shock to consumer demand and employment reduced overall food demand only slightly, but had a stronger impact on demand for higher value premium products and those with more service addition. Demand also appeared

Table 1. Connection between Agriculture and COVID-19

Government intervention	Agricultural sector	Other sectors
Maintain social distancing	Field work – natural spacing between agricultural labourers gathering at leisure time is unavoidable	Managers can possibly facilitate shiftwise work allotment
Sanitize frequently	Work full of dirt and mud hence, not possible to sanitize	Computer and machine operating works
Wear mask	Hard work full of sweat. Wearing mask is impossible in the field	Completely possible to make all workers obey if the strict orders passed by officials
Remain in home	Everyday care is needed for crops	Employee can manage with deduced salary from company
Avoid transport	Everyday the harvested vegetables have to be sent to markets to redeem the investment	If company is not functioning, no need to worry about the transport
Avoid gathering	The local sandhies/bazaar have to be set up by farmers to sell their produce as the big markets shutdown	Possible in case of company shutdown or by alternative shift arrangements
Exposure to sunlight and ventilation	Naturally available	Special arrangements made, involves more cost
Monetary relief by Government	₹2000 per farm household	₹1000 per household

to have shifted away from higher value items and towards staple and ready-to-eat foods that could be stored.

- **Transport aspect:** All the farmers (100%) experienced the transport restriction in nearby check posts as the restrictions even applied for their self-owned two wheelers and shared autos as well. The local milk vendors and vegetable growers were major victims. As most farm produce is perishable in nature it demands regular outflow which was affected

during lockdown and at the initial phase of lockdown the vegetable growers and milk vendors even failed to receive concrete directions from the executives as they were very much occupied with the virus controlling process. OECD (2020) in its report of evaluation of impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) on fruit and vegetables trade pinpointed that the labour shortages in the agriculture sector rose heavily due to the movement restriction. It stated that limits on the mobility

of people across borders and lockdowns contributed to labour shortages for agricultural sectors in many countries, particularly those characterised by periods of peak seasonal labour demand or labour-intensive production. Closing borders or slowed trans-boundary movement of seeds potentially hampered seed supply chains and on-time delivery of seed with negative impacts on agriculture, feed and food production over the next seasons.

- **Economy aspect:** Money rotation in hands of people became lesser. In the study area, more than 70% of households were agricultural labourers and daily wage earners, who because of transport restrictions could not go to nearby towns and cities. At the announcement of lockdown, the demand for vegetables was more hence, the farmers got handsome profit but after the commencement of lockdown, vegetable demand became lesser and its sales price fell (30–50%) due to public fear. As the products could not be sent to market, farmers provided the vegetables as cattle feed for no price in several villages. Medium and large farmers felt more lockdown distress than small and marginal farmers, as they did not need big sandhais and they sold their limited produce in local village itself with minimal risks.
- **Administrative aspect:** Panchayat level elected members were given responsibility for control of corona virus in rural area but urban area couldn't get this chance as the local elections were not held. As the Panchayat president, vice-president and ward members held a good face value and understanding with the local villagers; they played a crucial role in pandemic control.
- **Employment aspect:** Because of curb in social gathering during the auspicious Aadi month, many small business persons from the villages lost their earning opportunities e.g. retail candy vendors, rattinam operators, seasonal shops, retail garland



Interaction with the farmers on effect of COVID-19 on their day to day life



Farmers performing their farm operations with COVID-19 precautions



Unharvested produce left out in fields due to market constraints during lockdown

vendors, musicians, drama artists, handcrafts makers etc.

- **Execution aspect:** Irrespective of the village, almost all the respondents unveiled their dependency towards the state government's public distribution system (ration shops) during the lockdown period and appreciated the same for their frequent provision of supplements like, food grains, pulses, cooking oil, kerosene and sugar.

The obtained farmers' perspective field data on this pandemic situation observed that, the overall effect of COVID was less in rural areas than urban areas. It might be due to the open environment, more exposure to sun, natural ventilation and decentralization. Additionally, we have given few workable solutions

in rural regions which could be made in the future at times of alike medical emergencies and these are as follows:

- Ensuring market transparencies via the provision of timely market information. This can help mitigate panic buying and generate trust in markets. It can also improve trust among countries, thereby encouraging co-operative solutions. Countries can also benefit from peer learning in terms of what kind of policy approaches are proving effective.
- Provide clear and transparent communication at the domestic level.
- Avoid trade restrictions. Export restrictions increase instability in global markets and undermine

supply, particularly for countries that are more exposed to price fluctuations.

- Keep domestic, regional and international markets open. Well-functioning domestic markets, regional co-operation and an open international trading system are all important to connect producers to market opportunities, and help food get to where it is needed. Open borders and well-connected internal markets can help contain supply disruptions. This is especially important in the case of net food importing countries.

The study area farmers have provided several suggestions to administrators towards tackling the alike emergency situations; they are as follows:

- Initiating mobile procurement centers for every 10 km radius aimed at agricultural commodities in each block especially for daily moving products like vegetables and milk.
- Timely release of the pending agricultural insurance amount, as it may ease farmers' burden in emergency situations.
- Farmers expect short-term personal loans without interest at the time of natural distress.

SUMMARY

Because of changing food pattern and less concern towards nature, UNO predicted that humankind may face at least three pandemics within next 15 years. OECD (2020) stresses its report to learn from the crisis to increase preparedness for future shocks i.e. work with stakeholders and international organisations to identify weaknesses, choke points and vulnerabilities in agriculture and food systems, and critical services that need to be strengthened in order to increase preparedness for systemic risks and identify opportunities to strengthen networks between public and private stakeholders to make these investments.



Farmer providing agricultural produce as animal feed due to market constraints during lockdown

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