

Impact of the COVID-19 Lockdown on Agriculture and Allied Sectors of West Bengal, India

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SUMMARY

The impact of COVID-19 varies widely among different regions, districts and among the small and marginal farmers, agricultural wage labourers, migrant labourers, their livelihoods and across the large economy. A huge number of constraints faced by the farmers and agricultural labourers during the lockdown period are labour shortage, higher wages due to shortage of migrant labour, diversification of job, food insecurity, supply chain disruptions, market access problems, falling price of agricultural commodities, problems of repaying crop loans and so on. To mitigate these constraints necessary steps should be taken to strengthen the economy of agriculture and allied sectors of West Bengal. The withdrawn of the lockdown cannot solve of the problem immediately, it will take time to grow and stabilize the economy.

INTRODUCTION

The impact of COVID-19 on the economy of agriculture and allied sectors of West Bengal is no doubt devastating. A bumper yield of crops and vegetables of different regions of West Bengal is at the mercy of COVID-19 lockdown. A huge number of farmers in different villages face the problem of price dropped from higher price to lower price of crops and vegetables. Over 50-70% of the crops are damaged due to shortage of labour during the harvesting season. The harvested crops remain stacked in the fields and houses of the farmers, as they cannot transport the crops due to COVID-19 lockdown. There is a shortage of food in a particular region of West Bengal because there are no means of transporting the food grains, vegetables and other perishable products even if it is available in other regions of West Bengal. The period of lockdown due to COVID-19 is invariably the period of extensive agricultural unemployment. Therefore, the mass of poor people find it impossible to purchase food. As a result of it.

Major Constraints Faced by the Farmers and Agricultural Labourers of Agriculture and Allied Sectors:

Labour Shortage:

The non-availability of labour hampers the intercultural operations such as sowing, weeding, irrigation, fertilizer application, pest management, harvesting etc. Labours are unable to reach their work place or farm due to suspension of public transport. As a result they are not getting the daily wages to maintain their livelihoods. Only very few local labours are continuing their duty or job. For an example, a shortage of labour in cold storage facilities hamper timely sorting and timely storing of potatoes. According to Raya Das, Society of Social and Economic Research, W.B, in the month of March, the producer prices of the 'Jyoti' variety of potato in Kotulpur Block of Bankura District in West Bengal was Rs. 11/kg. Part of the potato crop is usually put into cold storage in preparation of second marketing season. Labour shortage in cold storage has resulted in operational issues. Many of the farmers have lost between 50-70% of their crops because of the acute shortage of labour and lack of access to the field during the harvesting period.

Higher Wages Due to Shortage of Migrant Labour:

Migrant labours are unable to reach their work place due to suspension of public transport. The shortage of migrant labour results a sharp increase in daily wages for harvesting crops and intercultural operations. On the other side, where they have returned to their native place has led to huge decline in agricultural wage. According to Raya Das, Society of Social and Economic Research, W.B, a large amount of labour is required for preparation of land and sowing of jute crop in the villages of Nadia district. Hired labour is unavailable at present and sowing is being undertaken using family labour.

Diversification of Job:

Most of the labourers are bound to change their occupation temporarily or may be permanently from farming to some other jobs like as door to door selling vegetables, fishes etc.

Food Security Challenges:

Food security means the availability of food should be adequate in quantity as well as quality to meet the nutritional requirements for a healthy livelihood. Due to prolonged lockdown many small and cottage industries are closed. As a consequence labourers or workers are not getting their wages which leads to insecurity of foods. Farmers and agricultural labourers have not enough purchasing power so that they can acquire food they need.

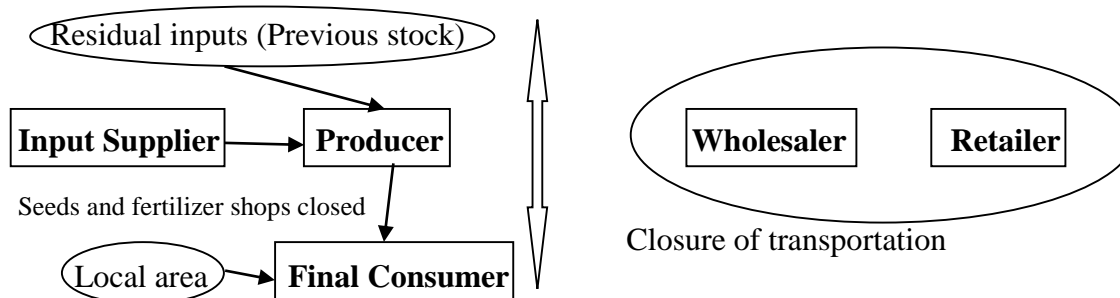
Disruptions in Supply Chain:

In case of West Bengal, supply chain has been badly disrupted due to tough lockdown and naka-checking in district border as well as in the toll plazas such as farmers of Bankura district producing large amount of vegetables & other perishable crops used to sale in local hats or mandis of districts like Purba Burdwan, Paschim Burdwan and some parts of Purulia, Paschim Bardhaman, Purba Bardhaman etc. But due to lockdown they are unable to sell their produce beyond their own district. As a consequence they are neither getting the actual profit by selling in other mandis nor getting the minimum production price due to higher supply in the same district.

Normal Supply Chain:



Disruptions in Supply Chain:



Market Access Problems Due to Lockdown:

Farmers are unable to access markets for agricultural produce due to the closure of transportation and sealing of borders. According to Raya Das, Society of Social and Economic Research, W.B, agricultural labourers from Purulia District, work in the villages of Bankura District during the peak agricultural season, but they have been unable to travel due to the

restrictions on movement. Even agricultural labourers residing in the village are not working due to fear of COVID-19 infection.

Problems of Repaying Crop Loans:

Farmers have borrowed crop loans from the formal banking sectors. Crop loans are repaid mostly between April and May and fresh loan is granted at the onset of new seasons. As a result of it farmers are facing huge losses and most of the farmers are highly indebted to repay their loans, though government is planning to support them by providing additional “COVID LOAN”.

Falling Price:

Farmers are incurring loss while going to sell their produce in mandi or local hat due to lower price because of lower demand of vegetables and perishable crops. Demand of vegetables as well as perishable crops is low as the commercial restaurants, shops, café are closed due to lockdown. Only domestic demand is there.

Poultry Farmers Suffered Badly Due to Misinformation:

Social media spreading misinformation and news that chicken are the carriers of COVID-19.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 lockdown has an adverse effect on the economy of agriculture and allied sectors in West Bengal. As the restriction on movement of goods and commodities continue during lockdown, the farmers and agricultural labourers are likely to feel insecure for their lower income level. COVID-19 lockdown forcing migrant workers slip away to their home town. This lockdown has influenced the supply chain of agricultural commodities. In this tough situation few policies needs to be implicated. The remarkable steps has been taken by the government, registered institutions, banks and NGO's that has positive impact on this situations. Public Distribution System (PDS) provide free rice and wheat at early stages of lockdown for poor households and free rice up to 5 kgs at later stages of lockdown for all the households. Banks provide more cheap credit for the poor households and farming sector COVID-19 loan during the lockdown period. Many registered institutions and NGO's are extending their hands towards supply of basic essentials and foods. Farmers and agricultural labourers are allowed to continue their jobs during lockdown. Mid day meal Programme are allowed to continue even schools are closed. Government plays an important role to mitigate the Covid-19 effect on the economy. Hope government shall overcome all the issues & constraints faced in agricultural economy particularly during lock down & see the new ray of development.

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