

A Review on the Impact of COVID-19 Blockade on Indian Agriculture

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Abstract: *The imposition of nationwide lockdown due to COVID-19, no doubt has devastating impact on economy in general. But its impact on agricultural (farm economy) in particular is complex and varied across diverse segments that form agricultural value chains faced a severe hit, because of halted transportation and stagnating the harvest as the produce could not reach mandis. This result in disruption of supply chain. Moreover the unavailability of migrant labourers, intercepting the harvest and post harvest operation. Thus the pandemic has given rise to several challenges in procurement operation as well. This effect will reverberate across the large economy and will have longer impact.*

Keywords: Impact, COVID-19, Agriculture, Transportation, Harvest and Pandemic

1. Introduction

Due to Lockdown from 24th of March in India because of COVID-19 which has halted all the activities and affected all walks of life. Therefore protecting the lives of the people from the disease as well as frontline health responders have been the priority of nation. The farm economy (i.e. Agriculture sector) faced a severe hit, because of halted transportation, movement of people, which stagnate the harvest, and further during the peak harvest, the produce could not reach mandis, thus disrupting the supply chain. Beside the unavailability of migrant laborers, intercepting the harvest and post harvest operation. Thus the pandemic has given rise to several challenges in procurement operations as well. The impact of this pandemic on agriculture is complex and varied across the diverse segments that form the agricultural value chain. Even among the defended segments, its impact varies widely among different region. This impact will reverberate across large economy and will linger longer than a few months.

2. Immediate challenges

In spite of many measures taken on various activities including the movement of vehicular traffic, concerns have been raised regarding negative implications of COVID-19 pandemic on farm economy. This is the peak of rabi season in India and crops like Wheat, grains, Lentil, mustard etc. (including paddy in irrigated tracts) are at harvestable stage or almost reaching maturity. This was also the time when the farm harvest reach mandis (market yards) for assured procurement operation by designated government agencies. Moreover any severe disruptions to the supply of perishable fruits and vegetables, dairy products, fishes etc. have mobilized to meet the increasing demand from a bulging middle class as well as urban and rural consumers, may create irreparable damage to all sectors in the supply chain. The migration of workers to their native places has also triggered panic buttons; as they are crucial for both harvesting operation and post harvest handlings of produce in storage and marketing centres. Therefore the Union Home Minister in a very significant move has notified to exclude movement of farmers, farm labours, and harvesting and sowing related machines from the preview of lockdown.

During this period of lockdown essential items such as vegetables, fruits etc. available to the comers both in urban and rural areas are the most critical challenge for the government machinery. Maintenance and smooth functioning of supply chain with adequate safety measures for the people involved is of paramount importance. To keep the public distribution system (PDS) alive to the last delivery agents both by rail and road has to be ensured by respective government agencies, and distribution of commodities to vulnerable population, while maintaining prescribed guidelines and protocol, especially of social distancing must be effectively implemented/ monitored.

As the rabi harvesting season coincides with the ongoing lockdown, farmers ask the government to ensure uninterrupted harvesting of the crops as well as smooth procurement operations and ensuring availability of laborers for critical farm operations, their safety and welfare must be prioritized by the government system. Besides this poultry, dairy, fish etc. has also been effected during the lockdown period due to the shortage of work force and halt of transport.

3. Mitigation Measures

It is a natural thing that poor section of the society and down troddens are always effected badly in any disaster or pandemic situation. As India is having approximately 85% household being small and marginal farmers and major part of them as landless farm laborers; therefore welfare measures to contain any damage from COVID-19 are definitely going to help them with sincere implementation. The focus of the government is to protect the lives of every citizen, and the government transfer the cash into accounts of those farmers also has lost their income from informal employment during this lockdown period. The government has announced relief measures to ease the economic impact of the nationwide lockdown on vulnerable section of society, including farmers and more over duration of interest subvention scheme has been extended; while over 80 crore poor ration card holders, will each get 5 kg of Wheat or rice and one Kg of preferred pulses free of cost every month, for the next three months. Besides 20.4 crore women having Jan Dhan Bank accounts would get one time cash help of Rs

1,500 for three months. In order to function smooth the agricultural activities on 27 March government exempted farming operations, farm workers custom hiring centres of farm harvesters and implements as well as mandis and procurement agencies from the lockdown rule. The government has allowed fertilizers shops to function and even manufacturing and packaging of fertilizers, pesticides and seeds have been permitted during the lockdown period, besides intra and inter movement of machinery related to agriculture i.e sowing and harvesting is also exempted from the lockdown rules (Nati Aayog 7 April 2020)[1].

On 25 th March Government announced the world's largest food security scheme for 800 million people across the country (Sharma, 25th March 2020) [2]. On 26th March, Financial Minister announced a number of economic relief measures for the poor, Rs 1,70,000 crore will fund the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana which will provide both cash transfer and food security with the aim that no one goes hungry amidst the lockdown (Economic Times 26th March 2020)[3]. On 15th April as part of new lockdown 2.0 guidelines, the Ministry of Home Affairs announced, among other things that all agriculture and horticulture activities will remain fully functional. (MHA 15th April 2020) [4].

In one of the instance, Bharat Patel a farmer in village Valvada in Valsad area in Gujarat grows chilli and brinjal on his 22 acre farm. His crop are ready for harvest, but ongoing lockdown has disrupted his plans. He has neither labour nor is there any buyer to buy them. Patel has invested over two million rupees and was expecting to earn 6 to 7 million profit of these crops. But now it seems difficult to get back the actual investment (Mayank Aggarwal 3 April 2020)[5].

4. Conclusion

The precedented challenges due to COVID-19 on Indian large population and economy's dependence on the informal labour make lockdown and other social distancing measures hugely disruptive. The state and central governments responded to the challenges aggressively, but this response is not sufficient to combat the loss as it is just the beginning. India must be prepared to scale it up as events unfold, easing the economic impacts through even greater public programmes support and policies that help the market functioning.

References

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