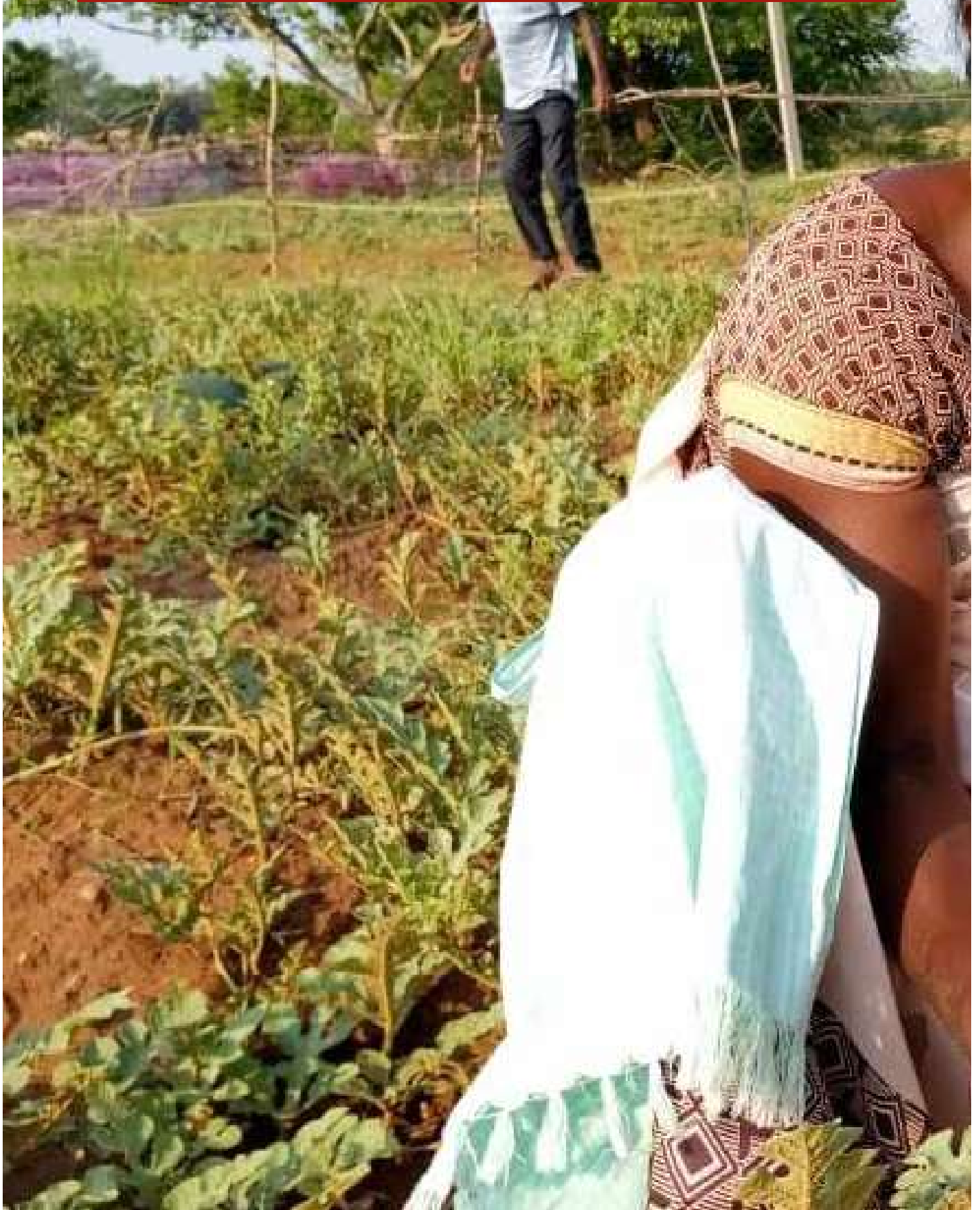


Reimagining Agriculture through COVID-19

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As the world grapples with the devastating consequences of the spread of the novel coronavirus, nations are faced with multiple questions that go well beyond the direct impact of contracting the disease. We are dealing with massive loss of livelihoods, unemployment, hunger, and a decline in overall health status of citizens including a sharp rise in mental health ailments. In India, agricultural distress is stark and ever increasing. The lockdown, announced to check the spread of the virus, has had detrimental impact on the agricultural economy even though the government had announced certain measures to protect farmers with most agricultural activities included in the essential list. However, disruptions in the food supply chain have significantly impacted farmers across the nation, with small and marginal farmers forced to bear the maximum shock. Farmers have been struggling to harvest and trade perishables for many reasons including shortage of workforce, transportation, and limited market operations (Pandav, 2020).

PRADAN, a 38-year-old organization, works with, 800,000 families in 7 of the poorest states, in more than 8,000 villages. It has been proactively engaged in responding to the pandemic in its geographical areas of work. Recognising the urgent need to address the large scale rural economic distress PRADAN is grappling with strategizing towards absorbing the current shocks and working towards a regeneration of the rural economy and livelihoods. This article highlights some of the pressing concerns related to addressing the livelihoods question in India through a review of existing media reports as well as PRADAN's own experience during the lockdown in the state of Jharkhand with 3.3 lakh families across 37 blocks spread over 10 districts. The measures taken at the end is a collation of steps mapped out by PRADAN.

Lockdown Impact on Agriculture

Around 70% of the workforce in Jharkhand's predominant tribal population is agricultural with more than 80% small and marginal farmers. While agriculture is mainly rainfed, the area under irrigation is less (around 11.3%) (Government of Jharkhand, 2011). Thus, farming outcomes in Jharkhand is already unpredictable and prone to seasonal shocks. This has been a key reason for the large-scale migration that the state has witnessed over the last many years. The pandemic and its impact on agriculture has been catastrophic to say the least as it came as

the third shock to farmers in Jharkhand in the same agricultural cycle. The first shock was during the kharif season when a drought affected the harvest. Due to the low rainfall, 35% less than normal, (Indo Asian News Agency, 2019) paddy transplantation was delayed by around 6 weeks resulting in low yields. The second shock was during Rabi due to heavy, untimely rainfall affecting chickpea and wheat yields. The impact of the lockdown has therefore exacerbated the situation.

In the initial days of the lockdown, access to market for both buying inputs and selling produce suffered greatly. With village mandis shut, no direct access to large retailers, supply chain bottlenecks due to transport issues, decline in demand, and small-scale production, farmers have been in distress selling to middle-men at throw away prices, delaying harvesting of standing Rabi crops as well as wasting and destroying harvested produce. With this, the shortage of agricultural labour compounded the distress (Ramakumar, 2020).



In Jharkhand, small farmers are generally able to sell at least 30/40 kg of produce in the weekly market on their bicycle. But with the unpredictable status of the markets, farmers have stopped making the journey as there is no assurance of the products being sold. With a general supply block, the farmers who manage to sell their produce do it at throwaway prices to middle-men. Watermelon which sold at INR 7/8 per kg was sold at INR 2/3 per kg.

Produce sold across states like jackfruit and chili have been affected by transport blocks. The most abundant variety of the latter is a kind that cannot be dried and stored for future sale either, leading to massive losses for the farmers. Sumitra Devi, from Sondari, Torpa block, had invested INR 40,000 in 2 acres of watermelon farming. More than half the money was taken as a loan from her SHG. “My only source of income is agriculture. I have invested all my resources in it. If I can’t sell the watermelons now, I will be ruined”, she says. Like her around 435 farm-

ers from her village have invested in watermelon farming through cluster farming approach. Their fate hangs unknown unless there is a targeted intervention to protect their interests.

Key Factors in Planning Ahead

To plan ahead for measures of shock absorption, there are several factors that beg cognizance. Transport, household savings, unemployed family members, standing rabi crop and planning for kharif, all seen especially through the lens of a small farmer requires a number of protective measures that go beyond declaring agriculture activities as essential. To add to this is the overall concern of the safety and security of the farmers and labourers.

Estimates show that small scale farms can be 2 to 10 times as productive as large farms while being environmentally successful (Khabar Lahariya, 2017). As India is largely a nation of small and marginal farmers, their products account for around 70% of the supply in the country (Dev,



2012). It is these farmers who currently bear the brunt of the adverse impact of the lockdown due to their existing vulnerabilities that have multiplied and added to the lack of safety nets for absorbing the pandemic shock to their livelihoods.

Fall in produce prices

Fall in the price of agricultural produce has been the main concern especially for small farmers. Already the agricultural sector was battling a dip in demand and a subsequent dip in prices, before the pandemic. According to Ramakumar (2020), with the continued extension of the lockdown, while prices may rise due to panic buying at each stage, the benefit of this rise will not reach the small farmers. Middle-men, wholesale and retail traders are the ones most likely to benefit from the price rise.

Impact on approaching kharif season

With farmers unable to harvest standing crops due to shortage of labour, lack of market access and fall in demand, there is already a delay in the preparation for the next set of crops. Additionally, the financial burden of the agricultural distress has forced most families to dip into their meagre savings for sustenance. Most small farmers in Jharkhand invest around Rs. 7000-





10,000 for kharif cropping. A significant share of this investment is from the income generated through rabi produce as well as some all year round saving. Many farmers are also forced to take loans from money-lenders and SHGs. With farmers having little or no earnings from the rabi produce, planning and investing in kharif farming will be severely impacted.

Incoming migrants adding to rural stress

Many migrant workers have been returning home, on foot. With the current provisions for train travel there will now be a massive influx of returning migrants into villages. This will lead to further strain on the rural economy creating additional pressure on existing resources coupled with unemployment.

Absorbing Shocks and Renewing Livelihoods

Needless to say, it is imperative to start providing immediate relief measures, as well as plan long-term to boost the economy and address the massive loss of livelihoods. The following measures draws from PRADAN’s experiences of working with small-scale farmers especially women for over three decades in the deep poverty pockets of rural India. While some of them include a significant role of the government,



others focus on collective efforts at the village level towards sustainable utilisation of existing resources. With an increased demand for food grains, in Jharkhand, crops like paddy, millet, maize and wheat should be promoted. Pulses and oilseeds can be grown as useful sources of nutrition. These crops are also non-perishable and can survive long distance transport to markets. Mustard can be grown as a single crop instead of the more commonly used multi cropping pattern.

Government Measures

Addressing immediate concerns of food security, shelter and safety: States need to ensure adequate resource supply of food in villages. An increase in the number of family members due to the incoming migrants will cause strain on both existing food grains as well as finances. Ensuring ration supply for all is crucial. Safe shelter and quarantining measures too need to be in place to contain any possibility of spread of infection.

Setting up of food processing mechanisms: With a large quantity of produce going unsold and wasted, states can establish low-cost food processing plants which serves the dual purpose of buying of agricultural products and employment of rural labour.

Role of MGNREGA: In the past MGNREGA has been a useful scheme for rural employment and to increase rural assets. The government should ensure enrolment of incoming migrants into the scheme and subsequent provision of work. During the period of no work, unemployment allowance should also be provided. The scheme can be used to build water harvesting resources for villages to improve overall farming practices.

Redistributing brunt of economy from farming to allied activities: This period will lead to an increase in the rural population due to incoming migrants some of whom may choose to stay back permanently while others may stay for a significant length of time, albeit temporarily. This will cause strain on income through land especially for farmers with small landholdings. Promoting expansion into other activities such as livestock, and earnings through non-timber forest products (NTFP) should be considered.

Government subsidy for inputs: To promote productivity there will be an increased demand

for fertilizers and thereby a price rise. Government needs to step in to regulate prices and possibly subsidise costs of fertilisers and monitor availability across areas especially remote ones.

Promotion of collective farming methods/ Farmer Producer Organisations (FPO): Scale is imperative for farmers to both benefit in regular conditions from price fluctuations as well as in conditions like these where small produce is only either wasted or bought at throwaway prices by middle men. State governments should both promote and financially support formation and functioning of FPOs at the block level to protect the interests of small and marginal farmers. Expanding the role of FPOs to distribution of subsidies and buying of produce will ensure a fairer system of equitable distribution of benefits. Minimum Support Pricing (MSP): Safety nets can be provided by bringing in more crops



such as watermelon and mangoes and vegetables under MSP or regulating their prices.

Altering Farming Practices

Even without the pandemic shock, agricultural distress has been felt for many years with reports of huge losses incurred either due to droughts or floods laying bare the inadequate irrigation systems in rural India and the dependency of our farmers on natural rainfall; farmer suicides were regularly reported. There has also been an increasing consciousness on the continued depletion of natural resources and a worry that there may not be much left to exploit in the near future.

The pandemic now has only pushed us to immediately address the issue of restoration and conservation and regenerate agricultural practices towards sustainability. Farming practices should

aim towards rebuilding soil organic matter to enhance its water and nutrient holding capacity, maintain diversity of crops and reduce cost of production. Some of these practices could include, adopting practice of Direct Seeded Rice, crop rotation, mix cropping, cultivating climate resilient crops, mulching, a gradual reduction in use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides and subsequent move towards organic products.

The above are only a few measures for consideration. There will be many more as the country starts working towards a post-lockdown life. The effect of the pandemic and the subsequent lockdown measures is not an easy challenge to overcome. However, it is only through collective revisioning and efforts that this mammoth task can even be approached. At its optimistic best it can be seen as an opportunity to pick up pieces and build towards a more inclusive world.



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