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Chapter 13

Farm Revival in the Aftermath of COVID-19: The Case of Kerala

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic caused large scale disruptions to the farm sector across India. However, due to the differing context and varied challenges, its effect on the farm sector varied considerably across states. In this paper we discuss the impact of the health crisis on the farm sector of Kerala and policy measures taken by the State to tackle the challenge. With the heavy dependence on its neighbours for food commodities and declining area under food commodities, Kerala was already trying to solve the puzzle of food self-sufficiency. Back to back floods in the past two years further ensured complete devastation of the farm sector. Thus, Kerala faces a serious challenge in food security as it has a low base in food production. Now, the COVID-19 pandemic made it sure that the vagaries of farmers would continue for a longer period. Paradoxically, farming sector is emerging as the beckon of hope for the revival of the rural economy by provision of employment as well as means of livelihood in the same context. An analysis of the policy measures like promotion of integrated farming units and fallow land cultivation coupled with multi-level interventions taken by the State government indicates that efforts are directed towards the long cherished objective of food self-sufficiency. However, the crisis underscores need for more structural changes like redesign the post-production infrastructure, strengthening of producer collectives, streamlining youth power to farm related enterprises and promotion of agri-entrepreneurship in the state.

Keywords: Livelihood, Food Self-sufficiency, Youth, Rural employment, Agri-entrepreneurship, Kerala.

Introduction

The COVID-19 crisis is unfolding at an unimaginable pace by spelling doom in the lives and livelihoods of millions across the world. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has already warned of an impending “food crisis” due to shifts in demand and supply for food unless the countries take countermeasures to curb hunger and malnutrition. It has also been reported by United Nations World Food Programme, that by the end of 2020, around 265 million people could face severe food insecurity if appropriate steps are not taken. With lockdown, lack of activity and workforce along with travel restrictions has caused the Agriculture and allied sector to come at a standstill. FAO has also stated that restrictions of movement and shortage of labour force may impede farming and food processing. Generally, Indian farmers face risks such as drastic changes in the rainfall pattern, price volatility and rising debts. But risks from the COVID-19 pandemic are putting new challenges in front of a sector that is already under threat. Long supply chains have been severely affected, especially at the beginning of the lockdown when transport was restricted. Various farm activities were restricted especially the harvest of crops that were standing on the field. With migrant labourers returning to their respective states, the harvesting and post-harvest operations were affected negatively across the country. Moreover, reduced availability of agricultural inputs caused a lag in the sowing of Kharif crops as well. Apart from these issues, closing of restaurants and hotels has drastically affected the demand and supply of livestock and fisheries produce as well. However, Kerala, the southern state of India faced unique set of challenges in the farm sector in the face of pandemic. Unlike other states the challenges faced by the farm sector of Kerala were different such as huge dependency of the state on food imports, managing the labour shortage in the farm sector and attracting youth towards farm related enterprises and stabilizing the sector from the effects of pandemic. In this backdrop, response of the state to the COVID-19 crisis and its response measures to guard the agriculture sector is worth exploring. This paper is an attempt towards this direction.

Farm Sector of the State-the General Scenario

The state of Kerala, which had been highly acclaimed for its high social and economic indicators, was witnessing a declining trend in agricultural production in the last few decades. As per the land use data of 2018–19, out of a total geographical area of 38.86 lakhha, total cultivated area is 25.68 lakhha (66%) and the net area sown is 20.44 lakhha (53%). The diverse topographic,

agro climatic conditions in Kerala enable the cultivation both cash crops and food crops. Agriculture and allied sectors contribute 9.5% of the GSDP of the state and 16.7% of employment in 2017–18. Rice is the major food crop, covering 7.7% of the total cultivated area, comprising 1.98 lakh ha in 2018–19, which is 4.7% increase over the previous year (Economic Survey, 2019). Though the production of rice was pegged at 6.94 lakh tonnes in 2018–19, which falls well behind the annual demand of 40 lakh tonnes. The declining profitability of paddy crop, shortage of farm labourers and the rapid increase in their wages, conversion of paddy lands for other purposes etc. are the major reasons for the decline in paddy cultivation in Kerala (Abraham, 2019). Similarly, annual production of vegetables in Kerala is estimated at about 12.12 lakh MT which is about 60% of actual requirement. The natural disasters that hit the State in the form of floods and massive landslide wreaked havoc, affecting agricultural sector the most in the years 2018 and 2019. As indicated by the study reports of State Planning Board, crop loss to the tune of nearly 88% is reported in the sector. Given these challenges, it can be safely concluded that the State is reeling under the looming threat of food shortage.

Further, the State produces around 48% of the total plantation crops in India. Kerala accounts for 76.5% of rubber, 88.6% of cardamom, 22.05% of coffee and 4.54% of tea produced in the country. Around 3.3 lakh labourers are directly dependant on plantations. The sector was already passing through a difficult phase following unrestricted import of farm produce, diminishing the demand for domestic crops, decline in the domestic production and its quality together with erratic weather patterns. The 40 day long statewide lockdown induced by COVID-19 outbreak has exacerbated this crisis by destabilizing the agricultural supply chains of most of the commodities. Disruptions in the supply of grains, vegetables, fruits and meat during this period compelled the state to have a relook on its domestic agricultural production and marketing. Being hugely dependent on the migrant labourers for workforce, Kerala has been immensely affected in the corona pandemic with labourers returning to their respective states, creating severe shortage of labour force especially in farming. Therefore taking stock of farm sector assumes prime importance at this juncture (Kerala State Planning Board, 2019).

Farm Sector of the State in the Wake of COVID-19

The agriculture sector has legacy of being the long held victim of natural calamities and policy shift, affecting the lives and livelihood of millions of farmers in multiple

ways. Farmers in the state were greatly hit by two consecutive years of flood. The spread of COVID-19 has further spoiled the chances of an agrarian revival by halting most of the economic activities. It caused large scale disruptions in the agricultural supply chain – disturbing the harvesting, procurement and movement of various commodities. The sector was affected in multiple ways like dampened prospects of cash crops resulted from shut down of world economy and global trade, sharp fall of domestic prices of agricultural produces, livestock products and fish and shortage of workers including migrant labourers. An initial appraisal by the Kerala State Planning Board (KSPB) pegged losses amounting to Rs.1570.7 crore in the farm sector alone. However, the domestic prices of most agricultural crops, livestock products, and fish fell sharply with the start of lockdown. Drop in demand coupled with supply chain disruptions have led to major income losses for the farmers. In the dominant plantation sector, the set back of COVID-19 was huge in the lockdown period. Large scale disruptions in the harvesting operations due to acute labour shortage and closure of processing factories, halt in the supply chains and export operations and accumulation of unsold produce in the warehouses. An estimated loss of ₹ 50 crore may be expected in sub-sectors of agriculture like nurseries, transportation and input dealers, according to KSPB. Dairy sector witnessed huge losses due to fall in demand for milk during the period of lock down.

The state agricultural machinery tried to respond by beefing up the local procurement through various agencies, relaxing the lockdown norms for transport of commodities and agricultural operations in line with the directives of the Central Government. The Department of Agriculture along with other agencies such as Vegetables and Fruit Promotion Council of Kerala (VFPC) and Kerala State Horticultural Products Development Corporation (Hortico) have made logistic arrangements to procure fruits and vegetables from village level farmers through Ecoshops and existing cluster markets. The procured items were sold through their outlets across Kerala, mainly Farmer Retail Outlets (FRO) that were launched during the lockdown. Besides, by joining with an array of online delivery platforms, consumables were supplied directly to customers to lessen the need for market visit. Further, VFPC distributed over 25,000 vegetable 'challenge' kits across the State since lockdown. The novel initiative was conceptualized to boost household level vegetable cultivation in an effort towards food self-sufficiency. The kit comprised of grow bags vegetable seeds, select organic manures and bio-control formulations fit for small landholder cultivators (VFPC, 2020). Thus these efforts were mainly to facilitate market linkages to farming communities

in view of lockdown measures enforced in the state. Further, the State Agriculture Department responded promptly by forming crisis management groups in each district. The block level assistant directors and agricultural officers were roped into social media groups, to facilitate market linkages (AESA, 2020b). One of the first initiative was the “The pineapple challenge” launched by the Association of Agricultural Officers Kerala (AOAOK) and the Kerala Pineapple Farmers’ Association in Ernakulam district to handle the unsold harvest that reached the market received good response and was extended to other parts of the state. Further, AOAOK joining with HortiCorp facilitated procurement of mangoes at Multhalamada, the mango city of Kerala in the Palakkad district. The intervention benefitted more than 500 farmers by procuring 48.191 tonnes of mango at Government fixed support price even at the time of statewide lockdown (AESA, 2020c). Similar interventions were reported in other crops such as banana, vegetables etc. was reported from different parts of the state, though at micro level. In order to address the labour shortage, government plans to channelize the required manpower from the registered labourers of MGNREGA scheme.

Beyond these short term measures, the agricultural department formulated a specific strategy to tide over the crisis and reinvigorate the farm sector. A dedicated campaign called Subhsiksha Keralam was conceived and launched to aggressive promotion of domestic farming and allied activities to enhance food production and attain food self-reliance (Government of Kerala, 2020). This special drive envisaged active involvement of different various departments, such as the Agriculture, Animal Husbandry, Industries, Fisheries, Water Resources, and Cooperative department, Local Self-Government Institutions (LSGI) as well as agriculture, veterinary and fishery universities in the State. Besides, the drive intends to engage large number of Non-resident Keralites (NRKs), who returned to the state in the wake of COVID-19, on the farm sector. Many of the ongoing schemes such as Jeevani, a dedicated intervention to promote domestic vegetable cultivation was integrated with this special drive. The programme has several components such as bringing the entire cultivable fallow land in the state under cultivation, enhancing production and productivity by employing scientific practices, establishment of efficient and innovative supply chain mechanism to market indigenously grown products, enhanced value addition and integration among development agencies (Kerala Agricultural University, 2020). Crops like paddy, vegetables, plantains, tubers, lentils and small grains will be cultivated in additional areas across the state. The programme also envisages aggressive promotion of fallow land farming

in an area of 25,000 hectares under the leadership of the local self-governments, with the guidance of the Department of Agriculture and public cooperation. Besides, Kitchen gardens will be encouraged in all households, for which seeds and saplings will be provided by the government. Intensive promotion of Integrated Farming System (IFS) units are another components in the scheme to tap the full potential of the farm sector. Since the per capita land availability is very low (0.18Ha) in the state, adoption of IFS stands crucial in meeting the diverse dietary needs of its people. To resolve man power shortage in farming, promotion of Agricultural Labour Force Units (ALFU) are proposed by the agriculture department which is already present in 290 panchayaths¹ along with agro service centers. Of late, block level Agricultural Knowledge Centers (AKC) are established in the state to have a better linkage between the farm university and agriculture department. These centers are intended to assist local self-government institutions in preparing the best agricultural practices and projects for various crops on the basis of five agro-ecological zones (AEZ) and the 23 agro-economic units (AEU) identified across the State. Formation of 'seed villages' and seed production clusters of various crops, establishing model demonstration plots and technical advice and training to farmers on various aspects of farming, production, processing, value-addition and marketing are the other proposed objectives of the AKCs.

If the COVID-19 crisis has a lesson for Kerala agriculture, it is the need to reform its agricultural marketing system. The state is readying to build its marketing infrastructure by strengthening of chain of cold storage facilities for post-harvest storage. Importantly this special drive also has components to promote livestock and fisheries. Subsidy rates for sanitation, cattle farming, modernization of mini dairy farms, fodder cultivation, kitchen poultry, poultry and fish farming have also increased under this programme. The programme is aiming to create 23,000 jobs in fisheries sector alone. The government has earmarked ₹3,680 crore to be expended for various activities that will be undertaken across the State as part of the project next year (Government of Kerala, 2020). Further, the Government is contemplating a long pending reform in the plantation sector. Partial relaxation of critical provisions in the historical Kerala Land Reforms Act, 1963 and Kerala Land Reforms (Amendment) Act, 1969, to aid the plantation sector is on anvil. This move will be a game changer as it allow growing of exotic fruits in the land that was hitherto subject to rigid controls, limiting cultivation to five approved

¹Panchayath is the local self government organization working at the grassroot level in India governed by democratically elected members.

cash crops— rubber, tea, coffee, cardamom and cocoa. The decision is prompted by an already ailing plantation sector which became more vulnerable with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusion

In India's battle against COVID-19, Kerala has emerged as a forerunner. The lockdown imposed to fight the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has created major disruptions in economic activity in the state as much as in the rest of the country and elsewhere in the world. By launching a host of policy measures and dedicated programmes the state responded quickly to insulate and rejuvenate its farm sector. Launch of Subhiksha Keralam and reforms in the plantation sector are such measures in this direction. The special drive envisages to enhance production of food crops, bringing more fallow land under cultivation, establishment of efficient and innovative supply chain mechanism to market indigenously grown products, enhanced value addition and integration among development agencies. The pandemic has also posed the serious challenge of creating employment opportunities in the farm sector for the rural youth and the non- resident Keralites who are likely to return in large numbers to the state. An opportunity to attract youth towards farming is a blessing in disguise at the time of this health crisis. By promoting farm mechanization and modern farming techniques, more unemployed youth can be attracted to agriculture and allied sectors. Formation of farmer's collectives and Producer Organizations would go a long way in reimagining farming as an intellectually rewarding enterprise. Prospects for youth engagement are not only in the production alone but also in the areas of marketing and value addition. Above all, agriculture in the post pandemic period will have to face serious shortage of labourers for various agricultural operations as migrant labourers have returned to their native places in large numbers and are not likely to return soon. This would lead to an increase in the demand for mechanization through custom hire services by agro service centres. Chances are good for the youth to take up such demanded services as an employment. Building up the IT infrastructure in the marketing and supply chains of various commodities is another area where youth can meaningfully engage. There is a fairly good possibility of enhanced capital investment in agriculture and allied sectors by qualified youth and NRIs for which wider consultancy and handholding services will have to be provided by the scientific community.

Food processing units, agro-based industries and export oriented units will have to play a key role in the changing dynamics. An ecosystem to support

agribusiness entrepreneurs is already functioning in the state. For instance, the Kerala Agricultural University offers Agripreneurship Orientation Programme (KAURACE) for prospective agripreneurs and Agribusiness Incubation programme (KAU PACE) for the startups in farm sector. The business incubation centers of Central Plantation Crop Research Institute (CPCRI) at Kasargode, Central Tuber Crop Research Institute (CTCRI) at Trivandrum, Indian Institute of Spices Research (IISR), Kozhikode and Central Institute of Fisheries Technology (ICAR-CIFT) are also running similar programmes. Apart from the basic infrastructure support, these incubators provide other services like technology support, seed funding, market study, patent trademark and support, facility to start trial production and business promotion and online platform linkages for marketing. In order to build local level infrastructure, youth should be supported to formulate bankable project proposals suited to each locality. Building the local labour force for crucial farming operations in the form of labour banks and ALFUs are crucial in addressing the labour shortage. Time is ripe to extend such novel ideas across the state with the engagement of agriculture department and local self-government organizations.

Besides a number of policy level actions need to be taken by the government. For instance, crop loans and loans for plantation crops require a longer period of moratorium. Further, an expansion of the crop loan ceilings and waiving off the GST component in agricultural payments are recommended by the Kerala State Planning Board to revive the sector. Similarly to encounter more zoonotic diseases in the future, modern bio-security architecture may be introduced in the livestock and fisheries sector. The report of Kerala State Planning Board also recommends tapping the full potential of fisheries sector by promoting mariculture, seed production and farming of fishery species and diversifying production systems such as coastal ponds, rafts and pen farming and inshore and offshore cage farming. Besides, there are large procedural and infrastructural gaps in the existing system of collection, compilation and reporting of data on area, production, and marketing of vegetables and fruits by various agencies in the state. This would hamper assessing the demand supply dynamics of these commodities as well as estimating the losses due to COVID-19. The Kerala State Planning Board recommends establishment of a centralized automated system of reporting and recording data urgently to tackle this issue. Thus, the important lesson from the experience of Kerala is the need to capacitate public sector institutions with more resources and professional capabilities to serve the farmers better.

There is no denial that COVID-19 has led to massive and lasting disruptions in the farm sector. Nevertheless, the unprecedented health crisis has presented a rare opportunity to rejuvenate the farm sector for the state. Response of the State to such a challenge was quick with some novel policy measures to combat multiple challenges through dedicated interventions. These interventions are driven mainly by the objective of food self-sufficiency by the state. In fact, COVID-19 lockdown has resulted in an exceptional enthusiasm among the people to turn to farming as a vital activity. Specifically, the lockdown has paved the way towards creating awareness on the importance of small-scale farming, urban agriculture and nutri-farming in homesteads among a large population who had not considered these options so far. However, realizing the partnerships and implementing planned activities at the ground level is going to be a real challenge in addressing the crisis.

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