

COMPLETE DISRUPTION

COVID-19 and Agriculture in South Asia

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INTRODUCTION

In April 2020, one month after countries across the world had announced nationwide lockdowns, there were several reports of farmers destroying their crops. Fruits and vegetables were dumped into dry tank beds or thrown onto the streets; thousands of litres of milk were emptied into ponds and drains.¹ In the South Asia region, especially India and Pakistan, the rabi harvest season was delayed due to a shortage of labour. Furthermore, grain procurement became impossible at a time when agricultural markets and other allied activities such as selection, weighing, loading, processing and packaging came to a sudden halt.²

In the initial stages, there were several misconceptions about the nature of the disease and its relationship to wet markets, livestock and the poultry industry. As poultry industries faced losses, so did the feed industry and other animal-based industries. Unlike food grain, these industries rely on daily, fast paced logistics, both to ensure that the animals are fed on time and to distribute fresh eggs, meat and dairy products. Such a high turnover rate can also be observed in the fruit and vegetable market, which also suffered from delays in transportation and the closure of wholesale markets. Shortage in labour and high perishability made it difficult for farmers to harvest and transport produce to markets, resulting in crop destruction, wastage and a crash in prices.

One of the biggest concerns during the lockdown was access to food through ration shops, open-air markets and retail chains. If production suffered from a lack of inputs and bottlenecks in logistics, the consumption side witnessed large-scale hoarding and skewed access to food. Massive job losses and wage cuts reduced people's purchasing power, and demand reduced significantly.³ Although retail supermarkets and grocery stores were operational during the lockdown, smaller stores and informal food vendors were either closed down and subject to harassment by law enforcement or forced to stop operations due to poor business. This made life difficult for the urban poor, who depended on informal food vendors

for a cheap source of food. Some indicators show that shocks in the demand side have a longer impact on the incomes of farmers resulting, in a cyclical threat to food security.

In situations where adequate grains were available, fiscal priorities (such as in the case of India) and austerity measures (such as closure of utility stores in Pakistan) took precedence, leaving several people hungry at a time when the proper distribution of food was essential. Movement of migrant labour experienced two distinct problems. First, several migrant workers were stuck at the borders of their home countries or within provinces or states and unable to return to their homes. Second, those who came back to their respective hometowns still grappled with the loss of livelihood. Many migrant workers going from urban to



rural areas invoked agriculture as a saving grace in these difficult times.⁴ In some cases, the influx of people increased agricultural activities and improved the availability of labour. However, the promise of rural work and farming remained short-lived for many. One survey reported that 69 percent of migrant workers in India who fled cities during the lockdown wanted to return, despite poor conditions, citing a lack of regular paid employment in villages.⁵

Rural women, who make up a high percentage (60-98 percent) of agricultural labour across South Asian countries⁶, faced several economic and psycho-social burdens during the lockdown. High food insecurity has led to further malnourishment among mothers; the

lack of movement has increased incidents of intimate partner violence and mental health issues such as depression and anxiety.⁷ In countries such as Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, where microfinance institutions are prevalent in the rural credit infrastructure, women, who are the primary borrowers, were caught in a heavily gendered debt crisis. The additional physical, unpaid work required to repay debt, in turn, forces them back into a cycle of undernutrition and poor health.⁸

Undergirding the general state of affairs is a set of policies and policy reforms that favour large

agribusiness, both foreign and domestic. In India, a set of new farm laws have become a serious point of contestation and nationwide protests.⁹ These reforms will significantly change the structure of

agricultural trade and the regulated wholesale marketplace, or mandi, to the detriment of the farmer whose precarity is pushed even further without the promise of a minimum support price and a fair redressal mechanism for dealings with large corporations. In Sri Lanka, there has been reduced spending in input subsidies and reduced prices for essential commodities. Last year, the agricultural ministry released an Overarching Agricultural Policy Draft (2019), which charts a path for making Sri Lanka an "export and market oriented" agrarian culture.¹⁰ The emphasis on international agribusiness, monoculture crop productivity and its lack of attention to land dispossession and sustainability has drawn criticism from peasant movements.¹¹

Even in countries with governments elected on the plank of progressive politics, such as Nepal, the parliament is still on the fence about pacts with foreign aid initiatives such as the Millenium Challenge Corporation (MCC), which places several complex, asymmetrical demands on the legal framework of the partner country. Foreign aid and international financial institutions form a significant part of the policy landscape in small countries within the region and extend conditional support, often in terms of neoliberal reforms.

At the regional level, the complex geopolitics and a lack of trust between neighbouring countries has created an impasse in terms of regional economic and socio-political initiatives. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) forum has remained suspended for four years following a cancelled session at Islamabad in November 2016. This stands in stark contrast with the ASEAN or the EU, which has seen better plans for absorbing shocks both in terms of containing COVID-19 and its related macroeconomic uncertainties.¹² Given the geo-spatial implications of the global health crisis and regional dependencies, there is a renewed opportunity to reflect on the gaps in regional cooperation and its potential, both at the national policy level and among peasant movements.

On the one hand, we are looking at a complete disruption of supply chains. On the other hand, in terms of policy imagination, there seems to be a return to the status quo

in terms of the inflow of credit, emphasis on free-trade neoliberalism and greater corporate entry into agriculture. Even in countries with a largely welfarist approach to food, little attention is paid to the rise of big food companies and the movement of capital in agribusiness in terms of policy. Hence, this is the most appropriate time to ask questions about the opportunities and limitations of globalised supply chains and their implications for food sovereignty¹³ and the South Asian peasantry.

This report discusses the ongoing realities of the COVID-19 pandemic through a series of

interviews with multiple peasant movements. A separate chapter is dedicated to each of five South Asian countries, namely, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and India. These country-specific chapters offer a general overview of the status of food and agriculture before the pandemic and the ground situation, including measures taken during the peak of the first wave of COVID-19. We take a special look at how peasant movements

have responded to the situation and their list of concerns and demands on moving forward.

We then analyse the broader situation at the South Asia regional level to focus on some gaps in policy and discuss potential opportunities for a renewed regional cooperation both at the national level and between movements in terms of food sharing, input exchange, knowledge-building and research initiatives.

EVEN IN COUNTRIES WITH A LARGELY WELFARIST APPROACH TO FOOD, LITTLE ATTENTION IS PAID TO THE RISE OF BIG FOOD COMPANIES AND THE MOVEMENT OF CAPITAL IN AGRIBUSINESS IN TERMS OF POLICY.



PAKISTAN

Agriculture is one of the largest economic sectors in terms of workforce and labour participation in Pakistan with 39 percent of the country's active labour force directly engaged in agriculture.¹⁴ According to the latest economic survey (2019-2020), the sector's contribution to the GDP was recorded at 19.3 percent following a general trend of decline.¹⁵ Improved productivity has been a priority for agricultural policy in Pakistan but the pandemic has exposed several fault lines in the food system at large. Food security, land governance, sustainability and labour rights remained tenuous under lockdown.

In March 2020, when COVID-19 struck Pakistan, the main agricultural season was the rabi harvest, which is usually conducted between the months of April and May. These months are also important sowing months for the kharif harvest, which takes place from October to December. The harvest of important crops such as wheat and barley as well as the sowing of crops such as sugarcane, rice and maize both came at a time when the global health crisis was acute and developing. Although wheat and rice productivity experienced some growth in the year 2019-20, the pandemic disrupted harvest and marketing—with a domino effect that hit marginalized farmers and farm labourers. Rural farmers, cut off from major cities and ports, lost access to markets to both sell their produce and buy farming inputs such as seeds, fertilizers and pesticides.

In the sections that follow, we look at the landscape of food and agriculture in Pakistan before COVID-19 struck the country and the impact of the first wave of the pandemic on the agrarian community.

PRE-COVID CONTEXT

A majority of Pakistan's agricultural exports are cash crops such as cotton, sugarcane and wheat, which provide the bulk of foreign exchange earnings. Although a procurement system is in place for wheat, subsidies are shared by farmers, intermediaries (beoparis), banks and consumers, often leaving poor and marginalized farmers with little benefit despite their greater

IN PAKISTAN, THE FIRST FEW CASES OF COVID-19 WERE RECORDED AS EARLY AS FEBRUARY BUT SIMILAR TO OTHER COUNTRIES, THE VIRUS WAS FOUND TO HAVE SPREAD TO ALL MAJOR PROVINCES AROUND THE MONTH OF MARCH.

needs.¹⁶ Sugarcane, another important crop, is plagued by a nexus of sugar mills that regularly mark down prices, delay the crushing season and stall payments due to which cultivators suffer tremendous losses.¹⁷

Over the years, cotton production has seen a constant decline due to a number of reasons such as poor quality seeds and inputs, locust attacks and a shift to sugarcane and wheat cultivation. In 2019-20 an estimated 43 percent of decline in total cotton production saw a serious price crash for cultivators who had made advanced deals with ginning mills.¹⁸ Another underlying issue that Pakistani cultivators faced in the run up to the pandemic was unseasonal rains which delayed the harvest of rice and cotton and the sowing of wheat.¹⁹

Decline in production or surplus production—small and marginalized farmers are caught in a lose-lose situation either way. For example, there is often a crash in the price of potatoes at the time of harvest, which is a surplus crop in Pakistan. Farmers who are able to store or export their crop survive the wave of low prices and make profit whereas small farmers without the infrastructure or facilities face a major loss.²⁰ The inequality which lies at the root of dispossession and the continued exploitation of the rural working class can be explained partially through the feudal nature of agrarian communities in Pakistan. However, the entry of MNCs has deepened the crisis. As Hashim Bin Rashid (2020) points out, the gamut of solutions offered in the vein of free trade and neoliberalism benefit only those countries that use it for “dumping grains/milk into the global south” while also importing cheap food from these countries.²¹

As we travel up the food system, we notice a similar withdrawal of the state from the public distribution of food. In 2018, the government announced a decision to close down 1,000 utility stores—ration shops that provide basic grains, lentils and other sundries to people below the poverty line.²² One week before the lockdown was announced, utility workers went on a strike to protest these closures.²³ A wheat and sugar shortage was also on the brink in the run up to the lockdown, with these commodities being imported despite being major export crops.

FOOD, AGRICULTURE AND THE PANDEMIC

In Pakistan, the first few cases of COVID-19 were recorded as early as February but similar to other countries, the virus was found to have spread to all major provinces around the

month of March. By 1 April 2020, a nationwide lockdown was imposed although some of the restrictions/extensions were province-specific. As in most countries, manufacturing and processing, markets and other activities came to a brief halt following which there were 'smart' lockdowns. Neighbourhoods were barricaded and cordoned off to restrict movement and contain the virus.

The first major industry to be hit by the lockdown was textile. Textile accounts for almost 70 percent of Pakistan's exports and was already going through a crisis—with several workers being laid off and factories shutting down. The pandemic exacerbated the large scale layoffs and dip in production which, in turn, hurt cotton cultivators. The sharp decline in exports—cotton and otherwise has implications for Pakistan's debt crisis—with both fiscal and current account deficit likely to increase. When the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) came into power, debt relief was a major agenda but an estimated 2.4

percent decrease in economic growth and an expected increase in the social/developmental expenditure due to the pandemic—the country is likely to be caught in a cycle of foreign debt. It is also disputed as to whether an official request for debt relief was made to the IMF.²⁴ We discuss debt specifically here, to also highlight some of the conditions and other players that come with an international debt package—the IMF, World Bank and the Asian Development Bank and their consistent demands for structural adjustment programs to be put in place.

In terms of relief, a package of PKR 190 billion (1.2 billion USD) for emergency funding, PKR 570 billion (3.6 billion USD) for citizens and PKR 480 billion (3 billion USD) for business and economy was announced. Of this, PKR 280 billion was announced in support of farmers.²⁵ A one-time payment of PKR 12,000 (75 USD) was given to citizens who had less than PKR 10,000 (63 USD) in their bank accounts, no vehicles and had not travelled abroad.²⁶ However, there were



no schemes announced in support of employment guarantee. Several Pakistani citizens and opposition party members have taken to the streets in protest against the high rates of inflation, especially in wheat prices. Furthermore, protests were held by the Pakistan Kisan Rabta Committee²⁷ against police brutality on a member farmer and against low support prices for wheat in favour of imported wheat from countries such as Ukraine.²⁸

The public health infrastructure in Pakistan was insufficiently equipped to deal with the challenges of the virus, with only 9.1 COVID-19 tests conducted per 1,000 people and 0.6 hospital beds per 1,000 people.²⁹ While there has been a decline in active cases, the economic fallout and pressure on the healthcare system continues to be a challenge, especially with uncertainty about COVID-19 vaccines and how the pandemic will pan out in 2021.

The challenge for Pakistan as is the case for other countries is to ensure producers, including farm labourers, receive fair and adequate input subsidies, support prices and proper wages while also controlling food inflation and ensuring adequate access to rations.





SRI LANKA

Sri Lanka is well known for its plantation crops such as tea, rubber and coconut. The tea sector is the largest employer in the island nation with more than one million people connected directly or indirectly to tea for their livelihood. About 82 percent of the rural population is engaged in some form of cultivation. Agriculture's contribution to the GDP was about 30 percent in the 1970s but this share went down to 8 percent in 2018. Tea constitutes 2 percent of the GDP and is the most widely exported commodity.³⁰ Rice is the major food crop besides horticulture. Eight hundred metric tonnes of fruit and vegetable are produced annually in Sri Lanka and 90 percent of the trade is currently with middle eastern countries and Maldives. Seventy five percent of trade especially in spices and tea is with Europe.³¹

Sri Lanka's civil war which spanned twenty years between 1983 to 2003 has had a severe impact on agriculture and landholdings, especially in the northern and eastern regions of the island. Heavy explosives, bombing and shelling have destroyed agricultural land and forests and displaced several people including farmers from their lands.³² In addition to this, periods of drought and floods have had an impact on agriculture and the fisheries sector.

PRE-COVID CONTEXT

In 2019, the Sri Lankan cabinet discussed major economic and policy reforms in the agrarian sector, including a reduction in agricultural subsidies.³³ In the paddy sector an oligopoly of three major companies decide the prices and buy cheap from the farmers and sell it at high prices. Despite several promises from political candidates to increase subsidies and provide better irrigation and prices, rice farmers have been unable to break this cycle.

Small producers still suffer from high rates of food insecurity and malnourishment. A disease known as CKDU—chronic kidney disease of unknown etiology has been especially associated with the farming community—more than 20,000 farmers have died and more than 200,000 farmers are afflicted.³⁴ In the Padaviya district where this disease was prevalent, it has also brought on social ostracization with people refusing to marry into families from the region due to the mysterious illness.³⁵ Healthcare for the rural community therefore has become a multifold challenge in Sri Lanka with no conclusive evidence on chemicals/contaminants used in agricultural practices or elsewhere being a major threat to the farming community.

In the Global Hunger Index (GHI), Sri Lanka ranks 64th out of 107 countries scoring a ‘moderate’ in terms of child undernutrition, food supply and infant/child mortality.³⁶ It ranks 66th in the global food security index out of 117 countries.³⁷ In terms of wasting and stunting, Sri Lanka fares worse than some of its neighbouring countries such as India and Bangladesh despite performing better in overall food security. Given the sensitivity of the ecosystem and a heavy dependence on agricultural imports, the pandemic posed a grave challenge to food systems in the island.

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FOOD, AGRICULTURE AND THE PANDEMIC

On 17 March 2020 an island wide lockdown was announced. It was the strictest of the lockdowns in the region—no one was allowed to go out except health and essential workers. Severe movement restrictions and stringent contact tracing were set in place with the collaboration of primary health centres and military intelligence units. The restrictions in movement severely affected daily wage workers, some of them unable to migrate to their home villages and towns. As of 12 December 2020, the total number of recorded cases in Sri Lanka stood at 31, 375.³⁸ Given the small size of the island, there were initial concerns about the rapid spread of the virus. With the help of two lockdowns, the island nation managed to slow down and control the transmission as per officially reported figures. However, the impact of the pandemic on economic activities, agriculture and access to food was devastating.

On the supply side, access to inputs such as seeds, fertilizers—in Sri Lanka’s case imported from Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia became difficult due to closed ports; export bans in these countries; and bottlenecks in logistics and distribution. Shamila Ratnasooriya from the Movement for Land and Agricultural Reforms (MONLAR) spoke of alleged black markets for fertilizers during the height of the pandemic.³⁹ Post the lockdown, the government released urea reserves but subsidies were restricted to certain crops such as paddy. Retail prices of essential commodities and food grains such as rice and wheat rose by 10-20 percent in Sri Lanka but producers were forced to sell their crops at cheaper rates. The cost of food increased by 9.2 percent in December 2020.⁴⁰

Although the agricultural department undertook procurement in the initial months of the lockdown, this was discontinued due to lack of resources and improper planning. Agricultural marketing was stalled as regulated wholesale markets also known as Dedicated Economic Centres (DECs) were closed. Farmers selling perishables such as fruits and vegetables were hit the hardest.

The military was proactive in distributing food rations in addition to supervising contact tracing efforts. The heavy militarization of COVID-19 prevention measures has also been criticized for normalising military occupation and exacerbating ethnic divides; infringing upon minority groups rights to worship and; prohibiting burial according to customs.⁴¹

The lockdown was so strict in Sri Lanka that at some points, people could access grocery shops only once a week for a set period of time.⁴² In bigger cities such as Colombo, a small section of people resorted to online purchase of groceries. Informal workers, self-employed people and wage labourers found it difficult to access food due to stringent restrictions, wage cuts and loss

of business. In terms of relief, the government provided LKR 5,000 (25 USD) per family during the period of the lockdown for low income families.⁴³ In villages, those registered under the Samurdhi scheme⁴⁴ availed food stamps from their government officers. However this was not extended to migrant workers and those not registered under the scheme in particular areas of jurisdiction.

Export of cash crops, spices and tea decreased as demand fell from both neighbouring countries such as India and other trade partners such as Europe. As in the case of Pakistan and Bangladesh—the garment industry was hard hit, with several textile workers left unemployed and at greater risk of food insecurity.⁴⁵ As a small nation, Sri Lanka relied on India for imports, especially in foodgrain such as rice and wheat. India's temporary export bans for onions, potatoes, turmeric and other produce in countries disrupted trade and led to shortage and price inflation.

Rural women faced several adversities during the pandemic. One of the biggest issues they had to face during the pandemic was the payment



of microfinance loans. Unable to pay their instalments, there were several recorded cases of suicide. According to Anuka de Silva of MONLAR, during the lockdown, there were more than 774 suicides due to the inability to pay back loans, loss of harvest and income. Although there was a government order to ease loan repayment from March to May, this was often not adhered to by credit institutions.

Wage labourers in tea estates were caught in another predicament, being forced to continue picking tea with minimal protective gear and health insurance. Agricultural labourers saw a spike in unemployment

as cultivation decreased in farms. In the industrial sectors, workers were stuck in the boarding houses in unsanitary conditions often without electricity and water.⁴⁶ They could not move away from these settlements due to restrictions in movement. Anuka de Silva states that women plantation workers were forced to migrate back to the villages with little income. As a consequence, they suffered a threat to their dignity and higher rates of domestic violence were reported.

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One of the biggest fears of local farmers is the shift in focus away from domestic production of food crops such as rice. The focus on export-friendly production in the overarching agricultural policy also raised concerns about cropping patterns and its subsequent effects on soil and natural resources. Policies such as ‘one crop one village’ which focus on monoculture ignore the challenges of climate change and the wellbeing of small farmers in the face of land consolidation, soil degradation and lack of access to markets. MONLAR and other civil society members argue that the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be mitigated by short sighted neoliberal reforms. The pressures of structural adjustment programs such as the Millenium Challenge Corporation (MCC)

whose Sri Lanka compact (a type of agreement) was approved in 2019, push small farmers and agriculture towards a more precarious situation. Although the Sri Lankan government has declined to sign the agreement as it stands, an invitation to discuss the terms and conditions bodes to the uncertainty of its future in the island nation.⁴⁷



NEPAL

According to the National Economic Census 2018, 74 percent of Nepal's population is dependent on agriculture for their livelihood.⁴⁸ Despite being a small land-locked country, Nepal's terrain ranges from the lowlands of the Terai rich in grasslands, sal forests and tropical swamps to the temperate hills at the heart of the country. Rice is the primary crop, and is grown along with maize in the summer months. Wheat, barley and vegetables are grown in the winter months. Besides food crops, producers grow jute, tobacco and some medicinal herbs both for export and internal consumption. As a net importer of food, the COVID-19 pandemic has spelled serious trouble for Nepal's producers and consumers. High cost of production due to the lack of availability of proper inputs such as seeds and fertilizers has made it difficult for domestic produce to compete with neighbouring Indian and Chinese products. While small, family owned farms have shown some resilience, the shocks of the pandemic have adversely affected food availability, agricultural marketing and migrant workers.

PRE-COVID CONTEXT

Over the years, the policy framework in Nepal has tilted towards improving agricultural productivity in a sustainable manner with several provisions under the National Seed Policy 2056 (1999)⁴⁹ to regulate the import and export of seeds and conduct research on genetically modified (GMO) crops and regulate/ban the import of anything that may prove harmful to the environment. On the peasant rights front, major peasants organizations such as All Nepal Peasants' Federation (ANPFA) have been working towards the goals set out in the United Nations Declarations On The Rights of Peasants (UNDROP).⁵⁰

Two of the main issues that agriculture in Nepal faces are abandoned farms and a sensitive ecosystem. Much of Nepal's agriculture is subsistence based due to fragmented land holdings and low agricultural productivity.⁵¹ Several natural disasters such as flash floods and landslides have destroyed the course of streams and changed the terrain making agriculture more vulnerable to climate change over the past few years.

Nepal heavily relies on foreign aid for several of its development projects, including agriculture and food. There is an inflow of bilateral/multilateral aid as well as from financial institutions such as the Asian Development Bank, World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Much of aid conditionality calls upon the Nepali government to practice austerity measures and privatize various sectors—including agriculture. Aid disbursement has also been inconsistent and less than the promised amount in many cases. In the short run, this has created impediments to economic growth whereas in the long run, there has been a conditional restructuring of public infrastructure.⁵²

FOOD, AGRICULTURE AND THE PANDEMIC

On 21 January 2020, there were 268, 646 total recorded cases of COVID-19.⁵³ Similar to other

countries in the region, the first cases were recorded in February 2020, among students who had returned from China. On 24 March 2020, Nepal imposed a countrywide lockdown which continued for about 100 days. Educational institutes, transport, shops and other activities were closed or suspended.

The lack of movement and transport hit farmers the most as March and April were important sowing and harvesting months. Although farming was permitted with COVID-19 protocols in place, the limited access to seeds, fertilizers or any other machinery delayed or stopped the process. Fruits, vegetables and other perishable goods wasted away in the fields⁵⁴ due to lack of cold storage and infrastructure facilities. This was a disappointing development considering recent efforts by farmers and the government to shift to vegetable farming, especially in the districts of Dhading, Baitadi and Dadeldhura.⁵⁵ On the consumption side, there was a serious shortage of fruits and vegetables at inflated prices sometimes up to 300-400 percent.⁵⁶ On the other hand, food from neighbouring countries such as India continued to flood the markets whereas local producers could not compete with cheap prices.⁵⁷

One week into the lockdown, the government distributed food rations to the most vulnerable sections of the population. These distributions took place at the provincial and the municipal level with different distribution mechanisms in



place. There were also independent relief efforts in terms of food rations on the side. The Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock Development put together 'rapid response teams' in all three tiers of government to distribute food, sanitizers and masks as well as to help farmers collect inputs and market their produce. However, these measures did not see much success two to three months into the lockdown. The rations consisted of dry food grains and pulses but most of this was market produce (mostly imported goods). There were some efforts to connect the small producer to the larger ration distribution system. However, these efforts did not bear fruit in the absence of formal government procurement specifically in the context of COVID-19.

One of the key takeaways from the response in the agricultural sector was how the devolution of powers from federal to provincial and local governments helped in providing quick, effective support to the farmers on the ground. In their recent study on the impact of COVID-19 on Nepali agriculture, J. Adhikari et al (2020) report: Likewise, a few best practices have also emerged from the actions of local governments across the country during this pandemic. These include, as observed by authors while working in the field, free threshers for wheat harvesting (e.g., Saptari district in eastern Terai); a system of buying vegetables from farmers and distributing them free to the affected people (e.g., Khotang district in eastern hills); a program to pay four months'

interest for loan taken by the affected people (e.g., Province 2 government); 'agriculture ambulance service' for transport of farmers' products (e.g., Province 5 government), and cash grant to farmers if they use existing fallow lands for farming (e.g., Gulmi district in western hills) (p. 4).⁵⁸

Cash transfers were another example of a relief measure that was debated at the national and provincial levels. In some provinces such as Gandaki, cash was transferred to those who could cultivate fallow land. The central government however sent out a notice which asked relief organisations and local governments to distribute ration instead of cash as peoples' ability to buy food and supplies from the market would still be affected during the lockdown.⁵⁹

Net import of food items was not too severely affected by the lockdown. Rice, particularly basmati rice from India, continues to be imported in Nepal despite a temporary halt in rice exports from India. Given the large local paddy harvest in January 2020—of 5.5 million tonnes in paddy, many Nepali farmers see this as an opportunity to market local produce within the country but export figures remain low given high physical, non-tariff and tariff related barriers to trade.⁶⁰ With respect to rice export from the lowlands, Nepal is at a disadvantage. Rice is bought by contractors from India at a low price and then milled/processed to be sold back to Nepal. Cash crops such as coffee, tea, ginger and cardamom



are facing issues due to an increase in standards and requirements.

The rural population that was hit the hardest were the agricultural workers, workers who can be classified as semi-bonded workers, rural to urban migrant labour within Nepal and migrant labour to other countries such as India. Of the nearly 8 million Nepalis who live and work in India,⁶¹ much of the seasonal and permanent migration happens in the field of agriculture/horticulture. In some municipalities there was a minimum work program that was provided in the initial months of the lockdown but it was not effective given the lack of data on the various categories of informal sector workers.

Migrant workers bore the biggest brunt of closed borders, uncertainty in terms of livelihood

and concerns about health and safety. There were news reports of several thousand migrant workers stranded at the borders with some people crossing the Mahakali river on the Nepal-India border.⁶² Workers stranded in middle-eastern countries struggled to be repatriated. A lack of proper planning and crowded conditions was also feared to have increased the rates of infection.



The challenge for Nepal is that it is a small country with poor economic diversity, contractor-led trade, and a heavy presence of international financial institutions. The pressures of the pandemic have further pushed the government to pursue solutions in the same

vein as other aid-dependent countries in the region. A 500 billion USD Millenium Challenge Corporation (MCC) compact is currently under debate in parliament. There are contrasting opinions within the ruling party and uncertainties about the implementation of the compact.⁶³

WHAT IS THE MILLENIUM CHALLENGE CORPORATION?

The Millenium Challenge Corporation, originally introduced as the Millenium Challenge Account, is a bilateral foreign aid agency based in the United States. As an independent agency, it provides development grants to partner countries following a selection process that reviews eligible countries on the basis of three main criteria: i) ruling justly; ii) investing in people and iii) economic freedom.⁶⁴ Eligible countries then work with the MCC to develop a compact based on potential development project proposals. There are two main controversies that surround MCC compacts: i) compact implementation is conditional to precedent conditions, which includes institutional reform and policy reform and; ii) the role of the MCC in US national security strategy and economic hegemony. Apart from a threat to sovereignty, the MCC raises several red flags in the context of agriculture in the form of privatization (as in the case of Cape Verde which privatized ports following the MCC compact), displacement (as in the case of the compact with Honduras) and increased vulnerability to world markets. ⁶⁵



BANGLADESH

Bangladesh is located in the world's largest river delta—the Ganges delta, alongside the Indian state of West Bengal. The fertile floodplains of the delta is at the heart of agriculture in Bangladesh—rich in alluvial and other soil nutrients replenished by the Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna rivers. Rice is the primary crop and it is cultivated in three successive seasons—*aus*, *aman* and *boro*. In the *aus* season, rice is planted in the months of March-April⁶⁶ and harvested in June-July followed by *aman*, planted in June-July and subsequently harvested in the months of November and December. The *boro* season begins in December-January and ends with a harvest around March-April. Besides rice, plantation crops such as tea and jute have a significant share in agricultural production and contribute to export. Fishing is another major activity in the delta—with over 12 million people employed in the fisheries sector⁶⁷. Given the flat geography of Bangladesh (with most elevations under 10 m. above sea level), rising sea levels and climate change continue to pose some of the biggest threats to agricultural communities and the Bangladeshi population as a whole. Natural disasters such as cyclones, erratic rainfall and the erosion of riverbanks have imposed another layer of vulnerability on coastal communities and small farmers along the delta.

PRE-COVID CONTEXT

One of the biggest challenges that the agrarian community in Bangladesh is facing besides climate change is land conversion or the shift from agricultural land to non-agricultural. In the last 30-40 years, there has been a reported 1 percent decline in agricultural land owing to land transfers which is expected to increase further in the coming years.⁶⁸ The shift in land use has serious implications for subsistence farming but also in the greater self-sufficiency of

food systems in Bangladesh. Although there has been some success in achieving food security in terms of rice, which is the most staple crop, access and availability to food is not uniform. Ten to 18 percent of the population is categorized as suffering moderate-severe chronic food insecurity (CFI).⁶⁹

A rise in the cost of production and inputs without adequate government intervention has also given rise to a twofold problem. First, there is overdependence on corporations for seeds and Genetically Modified Organisms (GMO) crops such as BT Brinjal and Golden rice. As large agribusiness corporations enter the seed market, the state is moving out of research and development and promoting a selection of companies in importing High Yielding Variety (HYV) seeds. HYV seeds are four to five times more expensive than traditional varieties. While it is claimed to give a larger yield, the indiscriminate allotment of land under hybrid cultivation has drawn criticism from farmers groups and agricultural experts.⁷⁰ Secondly, there are growing concerns that the country will become a dumping station for HYV seeds with grave implications for soil health, sustainability and the influence of large seed companies like Monsanto

and Cargill in food and agricultural policy. There are several public procurement mechanisms in place in Bangladesh. The government procures rice and wheat and stores them in publicly owned warehouses to be distributed through the public distribution system. One of the biggest procurement events that takes place every year is the boro paddy procurement. In 2019, boro paddy which contributed 58.8 percent of the total paddy production suffered low prices. This negatively impacted sharecroppers, cash-lease tenant farmers and small marginal farmers the most.⁷¹ The procurement scheme extended the amount/scheme but one of the biggest concerns that the farmers have is that middlemen benefit from procurement more than the producers—as in the case of boro rice purchased from the millers who have been able to receive better prices as compared to those selling paddy.

FOOD, AGRICULTURE AND THE PANDEMIC

On 21 January 2021, the total number of COVID-19 cases in the country stood at 530, 271.⁷² Until 26 March 2020, there were no formal announcements



of a lockdown but COVID-19 testing had begun and movement restrictions were slowly being put in place. Three migrant workers who had recently returned from Italy were said to be among the first COVID-19 cases in the country. Bangladesh follows India in being the second-most affected country in the South Asia region.

As agricultural marketing broke down in the months of the lockdown, there were several reports of perishable crops such as fruits and vegetables—watermelon, mangoes, jackfruits and lychees being completely destroyed and left to rot in the fields. Prices of fish plummeted as fishing activity declined during the pandemic with several disruptions in the value chain. In some districts such as Naokhali, fish was added as a relief item but fish procurement has not been a priority for the government.⁷³

The direct measures that the government took were distribution of rations through local government administration. Food supplies such as rice, pulses, oil and salt were distributed to people below the poverty line. There was a lot of mismanagement in the distribution process and the sections that it was targeted at failed to receive rations—especially those belonging to the informal sector and wage labourers. The government had announced two digital initiatives—a website called ‘Food For Nation’ and a portal named ‘Corona Info’ to manage disruptions in the food supply and spread awareness about the disease. The ‘Food For Nation’ platform is an initiative to connect farmers with traders/customers in order to compensate for disruptions in agriculture marketing. In terms of income support, there was a transfer of 2,000 BDR (24 USD) to people below the poverty line in the form of mobile/net banking transfers. Additionally, certain seeds were provided free of cost to farmers.⁷⁴

Golam Sarovar from the Bangladesh Agricultural Farm Labour Federation (BAFLF) mentions in our interview that 90 percent of the fish varieties grown in Bangladesh were being exported to

China with 60 packaging centres in Dhaka that package a variety of seafood such as prawns and crab. As China was reeling under the pandemic in the early months, an import ban disrupted this particular supply chain. Only 10 of the 60 packaging centres were open during the later months of the lockdown. Golam Sarovar reports that 400 crores BDR (47 million USD) worth commodities were destroyed in this process.

The jute industry in Bangladesh is a completely homegrown industry both in terms of seeds, processing, milling, packaging and marketing. The lockdown forced the closure of several state-owned mills and up to 50,000 workers were laid off. Golam Sarovar and Nasrin Sultana from BAFLF mention that while other industries received subsidies, the jute industry was ignored during the lockdown.

One of the concerns that surround the boro harvest season in the pandemic year is the sudden increase in mechanisation of the harvest. About 95 percent of the population saw a reduction in income and unemployment increased by 28 percent with 60 million people falling below the poverty line.⁷⁵ BAFLF members say that farm labourers in state-owned farms were better equipped in terms of health and safety but they comprise a minority of the total farm workers—the majority of whom work as part of private farms or categorised as informal agricultural workers.

In the Haor region in Bangladesh wherein 50 percent of the boro cultivation takes place, harvesting has to be completed in a time sensitive manner because crops may be destroyed due to excess rainfall or landslide. In this region, about 900,000 hectares of boro paddy is cultivated and 84 lakh workers are employed (of which 18 percent are migrant workers). Farm workers found themselves in a precarious situation during the lockdown. The government tried to promote mechanisation to remedy a labour shortage in the harvesting sector. Although farm subsidies were said to have been given by the government

to improve mechanisation, there is little data on what percentage has benefited farmers vis a vis larger agro-companies. On the other hand, mechanisation would have repercussions for agricultural labour with further uncertainties in terms of employment during the season without an alternative plan in place for displaced labourers.

The export ban in neighbouring countries like India affected price inflation especially in rice, potatoes and lentils. The May 2020 Amphan cyclone and subsequent flooding in the region also led to crop damage in the mango and litchi farms of Satkhira, Bhagelghat and Firozpur districts.

As in the case of Sri Lanka and Nepal, microfinance institutions have been one of the weakest points

for women who have found themselves in the middle of a debt crisis. Predatory lending practices coupled without debt relief in the wake of the pandemic trapped several borrowers—especially women, towards whom these programs are targeted. Restrictions on physical movement have seen an increase in mental health issues such as depression, anxiety and a correlated increase in intimate partner violence.

Although Bangladesh began opening its economy towards the month of May-June, it remains the second most affected country in the region in terms of the pandemic. The challenge going forward into 2021 is both to combat the economic fallout as well as curb a second wave of COVID-19 before a blueprint for vaccination is in place.





INDIA

India is an agricultural powerhouse in the South Asia region—it is the largest exporter of milk and pulses in the world and the second largest producer of rice, wheat, fruit and vegetables, cotton and sugarcane.⁷⁶ About 60 percent of the population is dependent on agriculture and 41 percent are employed in the agricultural sector with a majority of the population being small and marginal farmers. Its share in the GDP went down from 18.2 percent in 2014-15 to 16.2 percent in 2019-20.⁷⁷ According to the latest estimates, the Kharif (winter) foodgrain crop has been pegged at 144.52 million tonnes in 2020-21.⁷⁸ While the year of the pandemic has been forgiving on the production of foodgrain, COVID-19 has unleashed disastrous consequences for the small farmer, agricultural labourer and rural populace as a whole. As soon as a nationwide lockdown was announced—wage employment suffered and, as a result—food insecurity increased remarkably. According to the latest Global Hunger Index scores, India ranks 94th out of 107 countries doing much worse than its neighbours Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.

In March 2020, when the nationwide lockdown was announced in India, farming activities were temporarily stalled. Sowing and harvest suffered due to insufficient labour. Even in areas where farming activities were not affected, agricultural wholesale markets were closed. With little access to markets, farmers either destroyed perishable goods such as milk, fruits and vegetables on their fields or were forced to sell it to mills and traders at low prices. The poultry industry in India has suffered an estimated loss of 3 billion USD⁷⁹ owing to an arrest in logistics, supply chains and a drop in demand. Similarly, dairy was affected by a drop in demand by 25-30 percent with several farmers resorting to distress sales at low prices,⁸⁰ especially in the absence of cooperatives in certain areas.

IN ONE OF HIS EARLIEST ADDRESSES TO THE NATION, THE PRIME MINISTER OF INDIA SPOKE OF “TURNING THIS CRISIS INTO AN OPPORTUNITY” AND THIS APPLIED TO THE NEW FARM LAWS WHICH WERE PASSED, TAKING SEVERAL LIBERTIES IN THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS.

In June 2020, in the midst of the pandemic, the government promulgated three ordinances related to agricultural marketing, procurement and contract farming that would significantly alter the existing regulatory framework. On 14 September 2020—with little consultation with the state governments and farmers’ organizations (agriculture is a state subject), the government introduced the ordinances as bills in parliament, which were subsequently passed as Acts. The biggest point of contention over these bills is how it will erode the infrastructure of the Agriculture Produce Marketing Committees⁸¹ and allow greater participation of private corporations in the food supply chain. This has led to a growing concern that the regulatory framework will be tilted towards large agribusinesses and private players who have a competitive advantage.

In one of his earliest addresses to the nation, the Prime Minister of India spoke of “turning this crisis into an opportunity” and this applied to the new farm laws which were passed, taking several

liberties in the democratic process. Although agricultural marketing needs serious reform, Vijoo Krishnan from the All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) states that the government’s approach is to “throw the baby out with the bathwater.”⁸² At the time of writing this report, a nationwide farmers’ protest is taking place that is raising demands for a complete rollback of the new farm laws and an assured minimum support price for certain agricultural commodities.

PRE-COVID CONTEXT

According to the Global Hunger Index (GHI), India ranked 102 out of 117 countries in 2019 with approximately 194 million undernourished people in the country. Despite being one of the fastest growing economies in the last decade, India has consistently faced the double burden of hunger and undernutrition. The issue of food security in India is not necessarily solved by looking at yield, productivity or income growth alone—for an increase in each of these parameters have not improved food availability, distribution and nutrition.

Almost 86 percent of landholdings in India are small and marginal holdings.⁸³ Given the small sizes of operated farm areas, income from farm activity has been on the decline. Over half of Indian agricultural households are heavily indebted⁸⁴ and over the decades this agrarian distress has resulted in farmer suicides. There has been a steady trend of people moving out of farm labour but without any rural non-farm work or allied industries being set up—many end up migrating to work in urban areas.⁸⁵

Wholesale agricultural marketing in India largely takes place in regulated wholesale markets called Agricultural Produce Marketing Committees (APMC) otherwise known as the mandi or at a smaller level in villages, to local traders, millers and at farmers’ markets. While APMCs provide safeguards in the form of price discovery mechanisms, they are also rife with problems—



farmers do not get fair prices; certain traders capture the entire market and poor infrastructure has increased farmers' dependence on middlemen and traders for credit, price information and sales. Several states have long been making reforms to the APMC by either adopting the Model Act (2013) or scrapping it altogether in some states such as Bihar. The entry of medium to large private players in agriculture through contract farming or direct procurement at farms has been a cause for concern for two main reasons: i) farmers are skeptical about written contracts and have weak redressal mechanisms under the existing legislative framework and ii) direct procurement comes with the threat of firms exercising control over land, monoculture and a shift in cropping patterns.

In 2018-2019, the entry of retail giants such as Walmart and Amazon following a relaxation of rules on FDI in food has created concerns about shifting food supply chains and the role of private capital in agriculture and food. These companies also look towards making backward linkages and have launched pilot projects to buy directly from farmers.⁸⁶ As domestic and international

agribusiness expand their presence in agriculture, there are legitimate fears of consolidation and agribusiness normalization.⁸⁷

FOOD, AGRICULTURE AND THE PANDEMIC

On 21 January 2021, the number of COVID-19 deaths in India stood at 10, 623, 920.⁸⁸ India is the second most affected country in the world after the United States of America. Although the first few cases were reported as early as February 2021, widespread transmission began to take place in the month of March. On 23 March 2020, the government ordered a 21 day lockdown with strict restrictions in place for movement outside of essential services. Schools, colleges, restaurants, shopping malls, offices and other establishments were closed. On 1 May 2020, the lockdown was further extended for a 17 day lockdown following which a gradual 'unlock' plan was formulated by respective state governments.

Although farming itself was not explicitly prohibited, the initial appeal to stay home was

extended to people across the country. There was strict policing of the lockdown, making it difficult even for essential workers to escape brutality.⁸⁹ For instance, Kannaiyan Subramaniam from the South Indian Coordination Committee of the Farmers' Movements (SICCFM) mentions that farmers crossing state borders to sell their produce were often held by the police and subject to harassment. Agricultural marketing suffered the most especially in the case of perishable goods. Despite being able to harvest their produce, farmers either did not sell their produce or sold at throwaway prices. The whole market ecosystem suffered from the lack of movement including labourers who load and unload produce, transport/logistics agents and other allied services.

One of the biggest challenges that farmers faced was the dip in prices. Kannaiyan from SICCFM

states that in his own farm, prices of cabbage and tomatoes fell as low as Rs. 3/kg (4 cents) or Rs. 5/kg⁹⁰ (6 cents). In one survey, it was found that paddy was selling at Rs. 1,000-1,500 per quintal (14-21 USD) with the minimum support price being pegged at Rs. 1,815 per quintal⁹¹ (25 USD). Maize was selling at Rs. 800-1,000 per quintal (11-13 USD). In the case of perishables, many crops were destroyed on the field as packaging, labour and cost of transportation would outweigh any returns. In rare cases, as Chukki Nanjundaswamy of the Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha (KRRS) points out—leftover vegetables were collectively processed at a small level such as in the case of tomatoes which were sun dried or preserved through community level efforts. However, the lack of village level agro-processing units in most villages limited any such efforts in terms of scale and impact. There was also a shortage of farm inputs in certain areas. Chukki Nanjundaswamy



points out that in the Chitradurga and Davangere districts of Karnataka, farmers had to line up in advance to buy inputs such as urea, seeds and pesticides.

In some cases, such as the floriculture industry, which was also hard hit by the pandemic, the government compensated a small amount to cultivators—such as in Karnataka, where a Rs. 25,000 payout was given to floriculturists during the lockdown. The same was not extended to other perishable industries such as fruits and vegetables. In terms of national relief measures, the Ministry for Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare announced a Rs. 1,008 crores payment to farmers under the Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana (PMFBY)⁹² and Rs. 19,100.77 crores under the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PMKSN) scheme.⁹³ Additional measures included the extension of credit through the Kisan Credit Card scheme.⁹⁴ These relief measures have elicited

mixed responses, especially from small and marginal farmers who are either not interested in further loans in the face of losses or have been unable to register for such schemes due to lack of identity proof or other such impediments.

In the initial months of lockdown, state governments provided some relief in the form of rations such as rice, pulses, edible oil, wheat and sugar but this often did not include fresh produce such as fruits, vegetables and dairy products. On account of school closures—mid day meal services were shut down in most states, leaving several children without cooked meals. The lack of proper access to nutritious food increased incidences of stunting, wasting in children and malnourishment among mothers.⁹⁵ Primary health centres in many villages were closed during the lockdown and made it difficult for pregnant women and new mothers to access immunisation



and health check-ups. In some areas such as in Chamrajnagar in Karnataka, women were specifically prohibited by local governments from moving outside during the lockdown.⁹⁶

The pandemic and the lockdown have been unforgiving to farmers and the rural population due to unprecedented reforms, lack of employment and uncertainty in the trajectory of the agricultural sector in the country. As India begins to enter the first phase of one of the largest vaccination programs, already mired in controversy, the challenge ahead is to listen to members of the agrarian community and farmers' movements to chart a path to recovery.





REGIONAL COOPERATION

The COVID-19 challenge for the South Asian region is multifold. There is a tremendous pressure on the public health and safety of its citizens especially in its most populous countries; the economic fallout of nationwide and worldwide lockdowns will push the most marginalized sections of society into greater vulnerability. Agriculture and food systems suffered on two major fronts: i) the disruption of transport, logistics, markets and labour made it difficult for agricultural production and distribution to function as usual (these systems were already plagued by other problems) and ii) the pandemic made access to food even more difficult to the subset of the population who were already suffering from malnutrition and chronic food insecurity.

Underlying geopolitical tensions within the region have made it even more challenging for a concerted regional effort to combat the pandemic. Given the limitations of existing structures of regional/ international trade—there is a need to reimagine regional cooperation. In this section, we will look at existing avenues for regional cooperation and initiatives in terms of food and agriculture and the role of capital and agribusiness in shaping the landscape of agriculture/food systems within the region. We then look at how local peasant movements envision regional cooperation and trade given the current structural deficiencies in the global and regional food systems.

SAARC, SAFTA AND SOUTH ASIAN REGIONALISM

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was established in 1985 and comprises eight countries in the region—Afghanistan,⁹⁷ Bhutan, Bangladesh, Maldives, Sri Lanka, Nepal, India and Pakistan. The primary diplomatic goal of the organisation was political and economic cooperation. However, efforts on these two axes were limited due to underlying

geopolitical tensions (such as those between India and Pakistan) and the hegemonic hold of India—which accounts for about 75 percent of the GDP in the region and has the largest military force. This complex interplay of power is nevertheless predicated upon regional dependence in terms of trade flows, migration, geographical borders and cross-cultural relationships.

One of the main thrusts of the SAARC was intra-regional economic cooperation but trade between the seven countries remains relatively low compared to other regional organisations such as the EU and ASEAN. There are also wide trade disparities within the region—with countries like the Maldives, Nepal and Bhutan largely dependent on imports from India while constituting a very small portion of India's exports.⁹⁸ As import barriers in the region reduced following a wave of liberalisation in the early 90s, tariffs are the primary mechanisms to control and protect domestic industries. Even these tariffs have seen a steady reduction over the years and promulgation of free trade agreements such as the South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA)⁹⁹ have been unequal with the easing of tariffs.¹⁰⁰

Trade is a heavily contested topic within the food sovereignty movement. Legitimate concerns arise for small producers and farmers who are both dependent on export markets for their income and countries who are import dependent for food security. Avenues such as the World Trade Organization on the other hand are often criticised by farmers groups across developing countries as being undemocratic and illegitimate in their approach to removing the barriers to trade with several countries from the SA region left with little power to negotiate.¹⁰¹ In the Asia Pacific region, trade agreements such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) spell problems even for bigger countries like India which besides increasing corporate concentration in industry and agriculture will also allow foreign

companies the right to sue the government owing to dispute settlement mechanisms provided in these FTAs. Though India was expected to be a signatory, it opted out of the treaty in November 2019 in part due to these concerns.¹⁰²

THE WAY FORWARD

Given the many similarities and differences in the COVID-19 experience across South Asia, there is benefit in countries and organisations/movement groups within countries sharing their experiences with each other. At the inter-governmental level, the SAARC was a forum for intra-regional dialogue but has been suspended ever since the 2014 summit in Islamabad was cancelled.¹⁰³ A renewed proposal to host the 19th



A RENEWED PROPOSAL TO HOST THE 19TH SAARC SUMMIT IN PAKISTAN HAS BEEN PUT ON HOLD WITH COUNTRIES CITING PANDEMIC RESTRICTIONS BUT ALSO INTER-COUNTRY TENSIONS ESPECIALLY BETWEEN INDIA AND PAKISTAN.

SAARC summit in Pakistan has been put on hold with countries citing pandemic restrictions but also inter-country tensions especially between India and Pakistan. There was an effort in March 2020 for a video convention between SAARC leaders and an emergency fund was launched for COVID-19 relief. However, less than 20 percent of the emergency fund has been disbursed by India, which is its biggest donor, and in a selective manner.¹⁰⁴

The fund is a necessary first step but comes at a time when SAARC relations are weak in most other aspects. Rival economic treaties such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) are indicators of a shift away from SAARC towards other regional alliances for economic growth and trade. Some experts believe that SAARC itself is a moribund institution and that countries are better off with bilateral treaties. This however misses some key aspects of a regional organisation such as SAARC. Certain provisions within the SAARC framework—such as the meeting of health ministers and the comprehensive framework for disaster management¹⁰⁵ are useful for the sharing of information and pools of healthcare resources. Furthermore, there is a broader geographical and cultural relevance to the regional body.

In the context of food and agriculture, cross-border migration and supply chains that span across countries reinforce the need to articulate policies that will strengthen existing regional supply chains and minimize disruptions. However, the main need of the hour is to strengthen the SAARC Food Bank (SFB). Regional food reserves are especially important during an emergency for import dependent countries to mitigate widespread hunger because trade turnover can take up to several months. Although the SFB was established in 1985, it has not been sufficiently operationalized ever since owing to a number of

issues including inadequate reserves, no special funds for the food bank and strict rules for withdrawal from the SFB.¹⁰⁶ In order to strengthen the regional food reserve, the SAARC forum needs to:

- i) Arrive at a mutual consensus about trade restrictions and export bans during the time of an emergency, especially providing for production deficit/import dependent countries such as the Maldives and Nepal.
- ii) Arrange for a special SFB fund and strengthen infrastructure that will ensure proper distribution, especially at existing Public Distribution System nodes in individual countries.
- iii) Expand foodgrain reserves to include reserves of input seeds and fertilizers and facilitate greater information sharing between countries.

REGIONAL SOLIDARITY, RESISTANCE AND THE ROLE OF CAPITAL

A quick glance at the food policies of major South Asian countries indicates a mix of both welfarist schemes and a simultaneous shift towards neoliberal reforms that have eased the entry of large agribusiness companies to dominate the supply chains. International financial institutions such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and foreign aid agencies such as the MCC have consistently nudged developing countries across the region towards free market policies that restrict government expenditure, restrict external debt and promote trade liberalization. In fact, one of the first

recommendations in the World Bank's report on COVID-19 in South Asia¹⁰⁷ is extensive debt management, which has in the past led to poor social expenditure by governments in borrowing countries for fear of borrowing restrictions.¹⁰⁸ In a recent study on income inequality and structural adjustment programs, Forster et al (2019) demonstrate that policy reforms outlined by the IMF have led to greater income inequality in borrowing countries.¹⁰⁹

There are several concessional loans and grants underway in the South Asian region from institutions such as the World Bank¹¹⁰ and the Asian Development Bank¹¹¹ for COVID-19 recovery projects. The tangible effects of these loans on structural reforms and income inequality not only need to be thoroughly studied but governments and policymakers need to consider the conditions under which these loans are provided, especially in the face of a crisis.



Farmers' movement organisations have brought up several key concerns about the continued interference of neoliberal policy reforms in the face of the crisis. Pramesh Pokhrael of the All Nepal Peasants Federation (ANPFA) states that for smaller countries in the region, the crisis presents a ripe occasion for reforms such as the Land Bank Act and FDI in agriculture despite resistance from local producers. Some of the common demands of farmers' organisations across the region are:

- i) **Immediate relief:** Insufficient stimulus, delays and issues in fund transfers pushed several peasants and workers into further poverty as they continued to face losses during the lockdown. In many cases, such as in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, informal labourers did not receive access to rations outside of their registered jurisdictions. Migrant labourers were stranded without proper housing, food and healthcare in most countries. In India, about 40 percent of those with Jan Dhan accounts¹¹² did not receive COVID-19 relief provided by the government.¹¹³
- ii) **Fair prices:** In the previous sections, we saw how farmers were affected by a dip in prices during the lockdown. There was also a wide discrepancy in prices as commodities moved from the farmer to the miller/trader. This was particularly reflected in boro paddy in Bangladesh and sugarcane in Pakistan. A just procurement system will help ensure farmers get fair prices especially during a crisis.
- iii) **Input subsidies:** The pandemic hit farmers across South Asia during key harvesting and sowing seasons. Disruptions in the supply chain shrunk the supply of important inputs such as seeds, fertilizers and pesticides. In the case of Sri Lanka, as we saw earlier—black markets for fertilizers cropped up during the lockdown. Shamila Ratnasooriya from MONLAR stated that there should also be price controls for inputs. As farmers move into the next production cycle, governments need to ensure that there are sufficient input subsidies that will help revitalize production.
- iv) **Rural agro-processing:** One of the biggest tragedies of the pandemic was the amount of food wastage as farmers could not sell or turn a profit during the heights of the lockdown. Chukki Nanjundaswamy and Kannaiyan Subramaniam both spoke about the importance of village level infrastructure for grading, sorting, packaging and other post-harvest activities as a means to empower farmers.



- v) **Focus on sustainability:** Given the climate vulnerability of the region as a whole, most farmers' movements have emphasised on promoting sustainability as part of future agrarian reforms. In many countries such as Pakistan, Bangladesh and India, the lockdown was accompanied by devastating natural disasters such as floods, cyclones and landslides. There needs to be a special emphasis on fighting soil degradation, water scarcity and incentivize ecological farming practices.
- vi) **Promote food sovereignty and peasant rights:** Food sovereignty was mentioned multiple times through our discussions with movement leaders. Broadly speaking, food sovereignty can be defined as "the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods and their right to define their own food and agricultural systems."¹¹⁴ Although the concept of food sovereignty and what it entails has morphed over the years and in different movements, the leaders we spoke to alluded to a few common themes—adequate protections from the global trade regime; promotion of local and national markets; access and control over productive resources in the hands of producers; and lastly, protection of peasant and workers' rights.

At the inter-governmental level, the presence of avenues such as the SAARC can help invigorate regional cooperation. At the farmers' movement level, the presence of networks such as La Via Campesina South Asia has the potential to connect several producers, farmers organisations and cooperatives at the grassroots level. In our conversations with movement leaders, one of the main difficulties that was cited besides restrictions in physical movement in current COVID-19 conditions was language barriers and geopolitical constraints reducing the scope to respond as a collective. However, there is a shared optimism that the future is rife with potential to undertake exchange programmes such as between the Korean Women Peasants' Association (KWPA) and Indonesian Peasants' Union¹¹⁵ (SPI) to share knowledge, practices and experiences with each other.



CONCLUSION

The impact of COVID-19 on food and agriculture in South Asia will be felt for many years to come. Most countries in the region are predicted to experience deep recessions while simultaneously handling the public health crisis and shouldering the task of vaccinating large populations. The future of the agrarian community depends on both a national and regional level response to the many stressors that the pandemic has placed upon them such as disruptions in the supply chain, crash in prices of commodities, hunger and malnutrition. Policymakers will be prudent not to blindly return to neoliberal reforms, structural adjustment programs and privatization at the cost of people, food systems and the environment. Governments in the region, now more than ever, need to focus on expanding their social security nets and enable farming communities with better infrastructure, procurement and other incentives.

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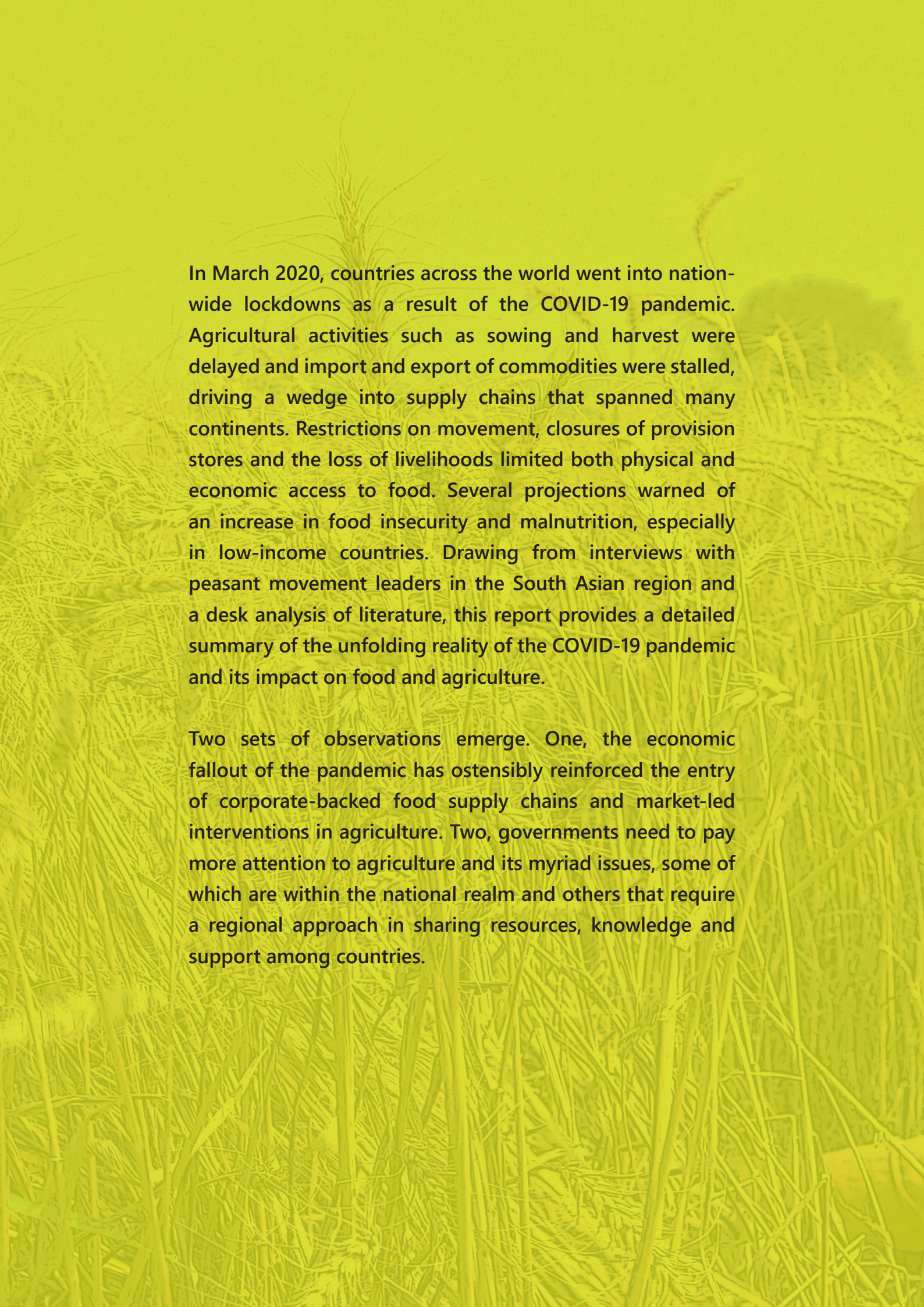
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The Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung (RLS) is a Germany-based foundation working in South Asia as in other parts of the world on the subjects of critical social analysis and civic education. It promotes a sovereign, socialist, secular and democratic social order, and aims to present alternative approaches to society and decision-makers. Research organisations, groups for self-emancipation and social activists are supported in their initiatives to develop models which have the potential to deliver greater social and economic justice.economic justice.



In March 2020, countries across the world went into nation-wide lockdowns as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Agricultural activities such as sowing and harvest were delayed and import and export of commodities were stalled, driving a wedge into supply chains that spanned many continents. Restrictions on movement, closures of provision stores and the loss of livelihoods limited both physical and economic access to food. Several projections warned of an increase in food insecurity and malnutrition, especially in low-income countries. Drawing from interviews with peasant movement leaders in the South Asian region and a desk analysis of literature, this report provides a detailed summary of the unfolding reality of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on food and agriculture.

Two sets of observations emerge. One, the economic fallout of the pandemic has ostensibly reinforced the entry of corporate-backed food supply chains and market-led interventions in agriculture. Two, governments need to pay more attention to agriculture and its myriad issues, some of which are within the national realm and others that require a regional approach in sharing resources, knowledge and support among countries.