Lessons from a pandemic to repurpose India's agricultural policy

As the coronavirus crisis triggers a large scale exodus of migrant agricultural workers from India’s food basket, it's time the country diversified beyond labour and water intensive crops, write Arabinda K Padhee* and Prabhu Pingali**.

Television footages of hundreds of migrant labourers walking for thousands of kilometres amidst India’s country-wide lockdown shook the collective conscience of a nation this April. In the absence of livelihoods, shelters and square meals, these labourers desperately wanting to get back to their home states portrayed the vulnerability of India’s massive unorganised agricultural workforce.

Agriculture, food and nutrition have come into sharp focus as a fallout of the COVID-19 crisis in India. Though the pandemic may not have caused serious disruption to the food system, thanks to good harvests in the previous crop seasons and sufficient buffers of rice and wheat, this is as good a time as any to reboot the country’s agricultural policy, already facing the traditional twin challenges of climate change and malnutrition.

India’s nine-week-long lockdown has raised serious concerns about the reduced access to nutritious food by those living in the fringes. Agricultural operations have remained out of the purview of the lockdown restrictions, which started on 25 March 2020. A couple of days into the lockdown, India declared a slew of welfare measures to protect vulnerable people, including smallholder farmers, agricultural labourers and migrant workers. However, to make food accessible and affordable to the poor, the government will need to step up its game many folds.

In the last couple of decades, climate change – extreme weather events, loss of biodiversity, diminishing natural resources, land degradation and desertification – has impacted the agriculture sector profoundly. Add to that the burden of malnutrition. These challenges have now been exacerbated by the uncertainties around how the COVID-19 pandemic will finally play out.

**Tweaking policy and investments**

To transform the food systems in India following the COVID-19 pandemic, the government will urgently need to repurpose existing agricultural policies.

India’s policy regimes like the Minimum Support Price (MSP) and the Public Distribution Systems (PDS), coupled with subsidies on irrigation, power, and farm inputs, are skewed in favour of staple crops like rice and wheat. Even though some climate-resilient and nutritious cereals like sorghum and millets get some support pricing, this seems ineffective as the policy is biased in favour of the “big two” staples.

In the past, policy watchers have suggested crop diversification to correct such legacy incentives. But how do you convince farmers to switch to a new production system without the promise of a stable income. Read more..