

# FARMER'S HEALTH: THE CONSCIENCE CALL FOR ACTION

*Posted on January 31, 2020 by Edmond*



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India's history of agricultural progress dates back to the Indus Valley Civilization as per historical records. In terms of farm outputs, India ranks second. Over 50% of the India workforce was driven by agriculture and contributed to more than 18% of the country's GDP.

Yet the farming community, agricultural sector at large has gone through a lot of turbulence and the healthcare sector has conveniently side-lined it given the nature of pressing concerns that surround the sector and the nation state.

## Healthcare Concerns

Agriculture along with allied sectors contributes towards being the largest source of livelihoods in India. And a social policy that protects them from hazards stands grossly missing. Farm-workers get exposed to number of biological, respiratory, environmental and safety issues related to chemicals, heat, grain bins and silos, musculoskeletal injuries and also a disconnection from the usual privileges of schemes applicable for them through line departments in government establishments.

Insufficient intake of potable water, urinary tract infections due to absence of toilets and also due to unhygienic existing toilets, parasitic and microbial exposure, lack of handwashing facilities and ignorance related to the need for handwashing, heat stress and heat exhaustion all add in concert to the health impact of farm labourers and particularly women farm labourers.

Farm workers work hard to put food on the plate of others, but compromise their own health in the

process with no real time protection offered through visible means.

Farm workers have been found to be at increased risk for asthma and immunologic conditions due to reactions arising from grain-dust, fungal antigens, cereal pollens, livestock danders, also mites. Farmer's lung is also commonly noted which is an immunologic mediated pneumonitis caused by fungal spores from mouldy grain or hay. There is also zoonotic diseases which affect the farm labour community and interventions around it remain much necessary.

## **Cross - Sectoral Issues:**

The Asia pacific region has seen a rise in natural disasters affecting people, health, causing economic loss and also destroying crops and livelihood. As per FAO estimates, the agricultural sector absorbed 23 percent of the losses due to natural disasters in developing countries between 2006 to 2016. Around the world, 2.5 billion people depend on agriculture for their livelihood and sustenance.

Farm level disaster risk reduction factoring in protective mechanisms for farm health and decreased crop loss calls for stronger technological advances through a commercial and social determinant of health approach.

Climate change is creating heightened anxiety among farmers, leading to crop losses, and poor yields subsequently. Crop losses directly means less food to eat for the household which means the burden of malnutrition slowly setting in, besides water scarce diseases.

Uncertain weather conditions will increase vulnerability of crops to pests, added with other extreme weather events. Droughts and extremes of flooding will create ecological disturbances affecting agricultural productions and human health. Climate change impact on crop production changes from regions, seasons, temperature thresholds and the nature of crop itself.

Oilseeds, cereals and protein crops depend on temperatures and length of day to reach maturity stage. Yields will naturally reduce with increased temperature thereby shortening the length of day and absence of compensatory mechanism to respond to such weather events. To expect farmers to solve these problems is like expecting God to come on earth to clean our own backyard. These problems will ought to be addressed through the processes of science, through civil society and social responsibility, through a conscience call for action.

## **The way forward:**

Indian Government and other country governments dependent on an agrarian economy to some extent must bring out a white paper on the state of the health of farmers to understand and ascertain the burden of the problem since what is visible is only the tip of the iceberg.

Convergence of industries working in this sector to secure occupational health and farm labour health remains the cornerstone of progress to leapfrog the agriculture sector ahead. Corporations must understand that one cannot merely boost agricultural outcomes without safeguarding the farming community health and also protecting their social, physical and mental well-being. In many

low and middle income nations, out of pocket spending in healthcare is the norm. Money earned through farms, is drained through private healthcare. This needs to be strengthened urgently.

Investing in disaster risk reduction technologies at a farm level is one of the ways in which risk exposure can be reduced, thereby building resilience of farm families and creating safety nets to march ahead.

Having a social policy established by respective governments to protect farmer's health and the farm labour community thereby customizing the policy based on the crop production and geography will possibly go a long way towards reducing farmer suicide, improving farmer's occupational health in general and also bettering mental health outcomes among the people.