

Food and Nutrition Security in COVID-19 Times

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In the wake of COVID-19, any prevalent norms need infusion of flexibility clubbed with fall-back options based on localized solutions. In this backdrop the position on the food and nutrition security front is analyzed, covering major challenges, response and adding some conclusions and way forward.

Bountiful Production

As per the current estimates, any adverse impact on rabi production is quite unlikely. As per Second Advance Estimates for 2019-20, the total food grain production in the country is estimated at a record 291.95 million tonnes, which is higher by 6.74 million tonnes than the production of food

grains of 285.21 million tonnes achieved during 2018-19. Moreover, the production during 2019-20 is higher by 26.20 million tonnes than the five-year average (2013-14 to 2017-18) production of food grains.¹ India being a leading country in vegetables, fruits, pulses and milk the macro supply of quantities of these items also remains sufficient.

Brimful Food Grain Stocks

India's food grain stocks comprise of operational stocks to meet monthly distributional requirement, and the food security stocks/reserves to meet any shortfall in procurement or calamity. Amidst the unforeseen COVID-19 pandemic, it is a fact that the level of stocks procured, if stored and transported

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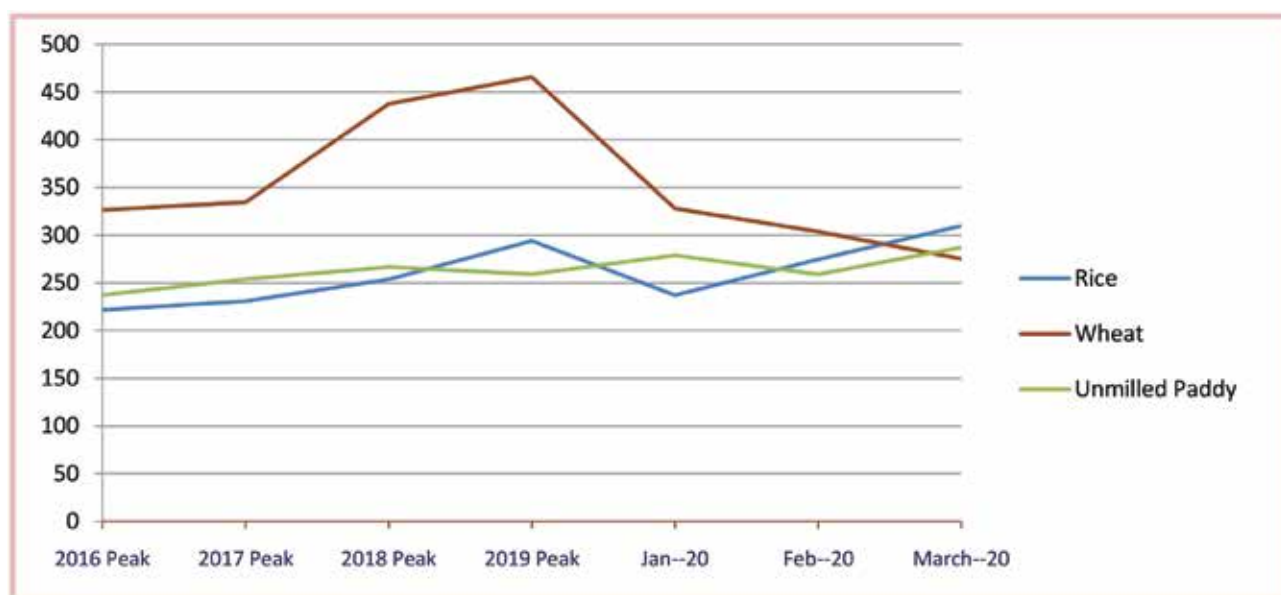
properly, can surely meet aggregate demand of the nation. Notably, continuing rake movement during the lockdown period, which takes lesser time due to stoppage of passenger trains, in the first 13 days since lockdown, FCI moved an average of 1.41 lakh MT food grains per day as against the pre-lockdown daily average of about 0.8 lakh MT. Further, becoming flexible FCI has allotted 1.38 lakh MT of wheat in 13 States and 1.32 lakh MT of rice in 8 States including wheat given for meeting the requirements of manufacturers of wheat flour and other wheat products based on the local assessment of requirements done by the respective district administration.

Over the last four years 2016 to 2019, the FCI stocks of each of rice, wheat, unmilled paddy and coarse grains were highest in 2019. Figure 1 indicates the peak stocks for each of the four calendar years 2016 through 2019 for the first three items, as well as the month wise stocks in January, February and March 2020; excluding coarse grains which were 24,000 MT in March 2020². Fortunately, FCI stocks in January 2020, before COVID-19 hit India, in each of the segments of rice, wheat, unmilled paddy and coarse grains were higher by 30, 21, 2 and 61 percent respectively compared to January 2019³.

Major Challenges

In these testing times, panic buying remains the biggest constraint, to handle which uninterrupted supply lines and longer hours of relaxation to buy can ease out. Creation of better awareness among consumers is also needed to avoid unduly stocking and fuelling demand. Further, harvesting of the record production of food grains can only be realized if necessary manpower, agriculture labourers, and facilities for harvesting and threshing are in place during lockdown and the ensuing period. Obviously the crops can not be allowed to stand longer in the fields due to the likely risks of adverse impact on the quality of grains, major post-harvest losses (chances of grains falling in the agriculture fields); impacting on the already stressed income, health and wellbeing of farmers. Labour crisis is a critical bottleneck as migrant labour is not available on the fields. Intensive use of combined harvesters, unfortunately all the more reduces prospects of wages for the labour. Formulation of a calibrated opening up plan allowing partial movement of farm labour and *Poshan* workers is the biggest administrative challenge on food and nutrition security front. District and sub-district level localized solutions for areas other than hot spots are much needed to provide food and nutrition to

Figure 1: FCI Stocks : Rice Wheat Paddy (2016 to 19 Peak) and January -March 2020 (Lakh MT)



Source: FCI.

vulnerable. Food grain distribution, especially to vulnerable people, including people without ration cards, and people hard-hit without wages even to buy at lowly PDS rates is another major challenge at hand.

Moreover, the challenge of raising the ensuing kharif crop is crucial especially for rain-fed areas. Towards it, arrangement of farm inputs, like seeds, especially for the large number of vegetables grown across the country, and production, movement, distribution and credit for fertilizers, pesticides etc. is a major short-term challenge.

Government Response

The Government Response to COVID-19 is spurred on a number of initiatives taken over the years like the JAM trinity, Pension Schemes, PM Kisan SammanYojana, PM Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana, PM Krishi Sinchayee Yojana, Soil Health Card Scheme, etc. Timely enhanced allocations and advisories issued in local languages by the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare etc., and institutions like ICAR, and their State/ UT counterparts are coming handy. These advisories encompass the entire gamut of food and nutrition security chain and are readily available on websites. Further, to facilitate farmers and workers engaged in Agriculture and allied sectors to operate, Agriculture Ministry has also called for strict compliance of the

exemptions granted, emphasizing on setting up of control rooms for regular monitoring. As per a government statement⁴ over 1,600 Vegetable, Fruit Mandis are functioning and more would operate further. Supply of essential commodities has remained at the core of these advisories, the proof of which is that there is no spurt in the prices at large.

Conclusions and Way forward

Harvesting of the wheat, mustard and other rabi crops, though maturing a bit late this year due to sub-long-term-average temperatures, can no longer be postponed. Notwithstanding, an overall better crop, State/UT wise and district wise frameworks should internalize the bumper standing crops in Punjab and Haryana; good standing crops in UP, Rajasthan, Assam, AP, Telangana, TN; and with crop status in other States not far behind. Wherever harvester machines are not available or can not be sourced and manual harvesting is necessary, different persons can undertake it in different line spacings of the crop, ensuring social distancing, frequent hand washing and fully adhering to protocols for face mask. As a part of localisation, even the used jute gunny bags can be treated by soaking in say 5 per cent *neem* solution, etc. Additionally, surfaces of the agriculture implements touched by one should not be touched by another till washed with soap water. Advisories should be



followed for the post-harvest, packing, storing, contributing to procurement and marketing, including direct marketing now permitted.

Calorific needs are but a part of the hygienic, nutritious and affordable food and nutrition security framework. It should include vegetables, fruits, milk, fish, spices, sugar, etc. besides the cereals. Notably, 'coarse' grains, being in reality 'finest of the fine', and now called nutri-grains, can be grown and harvested with lesser manpower, can come up in fallow and degraded lands, require lesser fertilizer, pesticides and irrigation and are relatively more nutritious. All the more low glycemic index makes these preferred for people down with diabetes a co-morbidity of COVID-19. Allocation of a higher proportion of land to coarse grains can be a much needed allocative strategy in the times of sub-optimal resources.

Checking the Food inflation

Expectations of shortages fuelled by rumors and panic buying are more lethal than the shortage *per se*. Local tastes and preferences, which strikingly vary across the country for the choice of vegetables, pulses, nutri-grains as well as rice and wheat varieties should be reassessed for each district through simple electronic surveys, with appropriate weightages to MPCE profile, subdued buying power, enhanced need for shelf life on the demand side; and availability of inputs (including sufficient quality seeds, and fertilizers, pesticides, etc. supplemented by local solutions), farming constraints, supply and processing chains on the supply side; ensuring hygiene and safe human touch and distancing. In the case of vegetables and fruits, as picking needs to be maintained at normal times, the lifting of lockdown for these sectors is helping to ensure that the supply lines hitherto maintained can sustain unabated.

Mid-Day-Meal Scheme and ICDS related mechanisms should be infused resilience to run these with the innovative synergy of school-cum-anganwadi with the help of local SHGs or Gram Panchayats in rural areas, and municipal bodies or CSOs in urban areas. Role of the State and Central Ministries of HRD and WCD should be to ensure

provision of requisite cereals, oil etc. and funds to source spices, etc. School grown vegetables can be supplemented with purchased vegetables, fruits, milk, pulses, etc. Instead of running the scheme on school days, it should be expanded to all days including school holidays, irrespective of closure of classes. In hot spots the operations should be shrunk to provide deliveries of hot meals or rations at the doorsteps. None of the hitherto covered sections like pregnant and lactating mothers or children below three years of age getting take home rations (THRs) should be left out.

Scaling up of home and school kitchen gardens, production of milk at village level, milk plants manufacturing milk powder and packed milk and milk products, preserved and processed items should be part of a district framework to squarely face COVID-19 and ensuing testing times, in which private stakeholders can play a critical role. The community kitchens with take away option of hot cooked meals and a commitment on the part of every one, 'no grain down the drain', should be the national policy and test of social camaraderie amidst social physical distancing.

Along with a plausible plan for the upcoming kharif crop should be chalked out to give a reassurance to the nation to sail through even if the upcoming monsoon is weak. These times are also the test that no one is left behind in the spirit of SDGs. A framework should be vibrant and flexible enough to meet unforeseen shocks-which would be frequent. Test of the efficacy of such plans would be the coefficients of variation of price of each essential commodity in each district, if not sub-district. Creation of better awareness and community responsibility would help in overcoming the immediate and short-term situation and bringing in gravitas to tackle medium to long-term situation on food and nutrition security.

Endnotes

- ¹ PIB, Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare, 18th February 2020.
- ² FCI Website.
- ³ Authors' calculations.
- ⁴ Ministry of Agriculture Statement on 8th April 2020.