

# **Situation Assessment Report on the Fallout of the COVID-19 Pandemic: A case report on agriculture and food security from the district of Buxar, Bihar**

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## **Background**

The report is on the villages of Murarपुर, Chandudehara and Garahiya in two adjacent blocks, Itarhi and Nawanganr, in Buxar district of Bihar (Murarपुर and Chandudehara are in Itarhi block are adjacent to each other, while Garahiya is in Nawanganr block). The two blocks, Itarhi and Nawanganr lie in the alluvium tract and are the southern blocks of the district. Itarhi has 160 villages and fifteen panchayats, whereas Nawanganr has 104 villages and sixteen panchayats.

This district has seen very little urbanisation. The share of urban population in the district is only about 9.7 per cent. Out of eleven blocks in the district, nine are completely rural with not a single town. These rural blocks (including the two discussed in this report) are somewhat homogenous with regard to their physical attributes and the economic activities. Not surprisingly, agriculture is the major economic activity here, with cereals and pulses being the main produce. Buxar district is the major producer of wheat in the state and its net sown area accounted for 82.7 per cent of its total geographical area as in 2012-13 (Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Economic Survey Report 2015-16, GoB). In general, there are not many non-farm employment opportunities in the villages. MNREGA-related work had been taking place in Murarपुर and Chandudehara but this stopped once the lockdown began.

Farmers and agricultural labourers-cum-tenants were interviewed in three villages; the key respondents were two land owning farmers and one tenant farmer. This author spoke to them over the telephone on March 31 and April 1, 2020.

## **Agriculture in the district**

Unlike several other economic activities, agriculture requires workers to leave their homes, and the work is unambiguously seasonal in nature. During the rabi season, wheat is the main crop, but mustard, potato, pulses and peppermint are also grown. When the interviews for this report were conducted, the standing wheat and mustard crops were ready to be harvested. Pulse crops such as gram and masoor have been damaged due to bad weather (excessive untimely rains) that lasted until mid-March. The respondents reported that the production of gram and other pulses sown in this season has been adversely affected and is there no surplus for selling in the market. The farmers were contemplating harvesting the wheat crop in the first week of April. Any delay in the harvesting of wheat will affect the preparation of the fields for the next season.

In very recent times, peppermint is the only cash crop that is cultivated during this season but the acreage under it is very low, only a small portion of landholdings, especially among the big landholders. After the wheat harvest, the fields are burnt and left fallow until preparations for the next crop begin. The district follows a two-crop

pattern of cultivation, harvesting wheat and rice in the rabi and kharif seasons respectively, along with pulses, oilseeds and potato.

### **Harvesting the rabi crop**

The harvesting of wheat in this part of the country is nearly entirely mechanized; both landowners and tenant farmers independent of land size depend on mechanical harvesting and threshing. Every panchayat has certain number of harvesters owned by local landlords; these are usually hired out during this time. Crucially, the operators of these machines—the drivers, technicians and repair men—come from Punjab during this season, and the owners of the machines are responsible for recruiting these workers. Due to the lockdown, these workers have not yet arrived in Bihar, which has delayed the wheat harvest. This is a matter of some concern.

In the case of the mustard crop, some farmers have begun manual harvesting with women workers. The wages in general for this type of manual harvesting of mustard are about one-tenth of the total crop harvested.

### **Storage**

Even if the wheat harvesting eventually takes place despite the delays, the other big challenge for farmers is how to store the harvested wheat. Storage facilities help farmers sell at a later date and realise better prices but the respondents complained that the authorities have not paid enough attention to the major issues of harvesting and storage. There is no storage infrastructure at the village, panchayat or block levels. The warehouses and PACS godowns are at a distance of approximately ten or fifteen km from the villages and the district headquarters is further away, about thirty km or more—all of these are difficult or impossible to access during the lockdown, as there is no transport available. Some of the bigger landholding households can manage to store the crop in their homes but small and marginal farmers have no way out. Local sale is also not possible at this time.

### **Marketing and financial crunch**

The lockdown has created uncertainty regarding how and when the crop will be sold. Although the Minimum Support Price (MSP) of wheat has been decided by the government, farmers have been unable to sell their produce. One respondent, who is a big farmer in Murarpur, said, “the MSP has been decided by the government at INR 1800 per quintal of wheat but who will be the buyers in this lockdown, government has not announced anything in this regard and we need money”. Normally, local banyas purchase grain from the villages and take it to the procurement centre and elsewhere, but they have been unable to do this during the lockdown. Farmers need cash to purchase inputs and make preparations for the next season. Marginal landholders or tenants engaged in agriculture on land they have leased for the purpose need money in short term to pay their rent.

When asked about cash withdrawal facilities in rural Bihar, the respondents said that the Bank Mitra Kendra in the panchayats (a subsidiary unit of the Madhya Bihar Grameen Bank) is functioning, but only minimum amounts up to Rs 5000 can be withdrawn, and no new deposits can be made. However, important transactions under government schemes are facilitated for account holders of the Grameen Bank.

## **Dairy and livestock**

Most livestock owners used to supply milk and milk products to the nearest dairy collection units, to small market centres and to the district town. This supply chain has been largely disrupted under the lockdown. For instance, a farmer and livestock owner in Garahiya village reported that “around fifty kg of cottage cheese was the supply from our village on an average to the nearest market of Sikraul on a daily basis, which is now fully stopped due to the lockdown and milk also is not being regularly supplied to the collection units”. He added that during the lockdown period, “milk produced is left for self-consumption by the households and there is no source of income”. In other words, despite the sale of dairy products being categorised as an ‘essential service’, there has been a near complete cessation of milk collection from the village for sale in nearby markets. With regard to fodder, there seems to be enough at the moment and, with the upcoming harvest, shortage of fodder is not a concern.

## **Interventions by the district administration**

When asked about the district administration and the other local authorities’ interventions with regard to addressing these issues, the respondent from the Nawanagar block said, “The farmers’ group from several village panchayats in wake of the lockdown approached the district administration regarding permission to hire staff from Punjab to operate the harvesters for harvesting the standing wheat crop in the fields. We have written to the magistrate about this issue as harvesting time is nearing”.

After a few days, the district administration had issued a circular that allowed the farmers’ group or the owners of the harvesters to obtain passes from the district administration that would allow them to use their own vehicles to travel to Punjab and transport the machine operators back here. In terms of cost and otherwise, this is a very expensive proposition. But with no other option left to them, the farmers are willing to do this to alleviate the trying circumstances they are in.

In order to reign in prices and to prevent shopkeepers from hoarding and inflating prices, a list of the permitted maximum retail prices of essential commodities was released by the Zila Parishad. This was effective to some extent in the first week of the lockdown. Thereafter, however, the prices of essential food items and were solely decided by the sellers. The announcement of the central government regarding the supply of rations at the minimal rate will have limited impact for households do not have ration cards. In any case, previous surveys in the village have shown that there appears to be substantial leakage in the Public Distribution System in the district.

## **Returning migrants**

Bihar is one of the largest sources of out-migration in the country. Since the announcement of the lockdown, the state has faced a huge influx of return migrants. This upsurge is expected to continue in the coming days unless state governments act in cohesion to curtail the movement of migrants and provide them with essential

commodities and services wherever they are located. The district of Buxar borders Uttar Pradesh on the west and migrants, especially from the Delhi-NCR region enter through this corridor. There are check-posts at the district borders with Uttar Pradesh at various points and screening of incoming people is taking place. The district administration then places returning migrants in quarantine facilities that are mostly public schools in the district town and in some villages. For instance, four migrant workers returned to Chandudehara village after walking a large part of the 950 km from Delhi. On arrival in the district, they were quarantined for the fourteen days at the Kaithna High School. Rural people who have become aware of the pandemic and its transmission are readily informing the local authorities of any new arrivals in order for them to be isolated.

The pandemic is redefining caste and class boundaries in many ways. Untouchability continues to exist in different forms among the different castes in these villages but the pandemic has redefined this untouchability within the same caste and families as well. Migrants who have returned face social stigmatisation and hostility from their neighbours, and even their own families. Villagers see those who are coming from other states as threats as they may be potential carriers. Migrants' families are not letting them enter their houses and requesting the authorities to quarantine them in facilities elsewhere.

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