

The Impact of the Lockdown on the Rural Economy: Mameran Village (Sirsa), Haryana

Harmanender Singh*

The study discusses the impact of the lockdown on the rural economy of Mameran village, Sirsa district, Haryana. The total population of the village is 4599; 2455 males and 2144 females (as per the Socio Economic and Caste Census 2011). The Jat/Jat Sikh community is dominant in this village; the communities present are Baniya, Kumhar, Meghwal, Nayak, Majahbi and Bajigar. The study is based on telephonic interviews conducted with ten respondents—one sarpatch, five panchs, one dairy owner, one individual milk producer, one mason and one vegetable farmer—on March 31 and April 1.

The rabi crops grown in Mameran are wheat and mustard. According to one of the respondents, farmers have been unable to hire labour and equipment due to the lockdown's restrictions on movement, and are thus facing hurdles in harvesting their crops. One farmer reported that the combine used for harvesting in Mameran usually comes from Punjab. Due to the lockdown, the machine has not yet returned from the other states where it is hired (like Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat), which has delayed the harvesting in Mameran.

The vegetable crops grown in this village are cabbage, chickpea, tomato, potato, capsicum, cucumber and green chili. Vegetable farmers presently have two worries: whether they will be able to sell their crops at all and whether they will get good prices for them. At present, vegetable farmers are selling their crops at low prices because they have no means of storing these perishable commodities. One of the farmers reported that cabbage is now being sold at the mandi for three to four rupees a kg—earlier, cabbage would have fetched eight to ten rupees per kg. Another respondent reported abandoning three acres' worth of cabbage as the price being offered for it would not have even covered the cost of harvesting the cabbage. Another farmer reported that the price of chickpea has fallen from twenty-five rupees per kg to between fifteen and seventeen rupees per kg.

The supply of milk in Mameran involves three players: the individual milk producer, generally a small farmer in the village; the middleman, usually a dairy owner in the village or in the city; and the district-level dairy plant. An individual milk producer in the village reported that the high price of milk three months ago—approximately seventy-two rupees per litre (ten per cent fat)—had led many producers to purchase more cows and buffaloes. At that point, the VITA dairy plant in Sirsa procured more than two lakh litres of milk per day. However, since the lockdown began, the milk procurement by the VITA dairy plant has come down to one lakh litres per day because of the decrease in demand for dairy products like ghee, curd, butter, paneer, lassi, kheer and sweets (these items are typically in demand for public functions, ceremonies, marriages, etc.). This has affected middlemen and small individual producers in the village. One of the middlemen, who reported selling 1000 litres of milk per day to the plant before the lockdown, said he is now selling only 600 litres per day to the plant. The middleman is also buying less milk from individual producers. The price of milk with ten per cent fat has now declined to less than sixty rupees per litre. A milk producer reported that even milk with four per cent fat, which

used to be sold at the price of thirty-five rupees per litre, it is now being sold at below twenty rupees per litre.

The majority of the village's inhabitants are self-employed cultivators, and therefore less precariously placed during the lockdown than those who are self-employed in non-agricultural occupations, such as tailors, barbers, mechanics, electricians, plumbers, shopkeepers, masons and informal workers/casual labourers in the unorganized sector. The village head (sarpanch) reported that between ten and fifteen per cent of the village's inhabitants are daily wage earners who travel outside the village to the nearby city of Ellenabad or the district headquarters of Sirsa to work. A mason reported that he used to travel to nearby villages and cities for work, but since the lockdown has restricted his mobility, he has lost his job.

Approximately one thousand residents of the village are registered under the MGNREGA scheme. One of the respondents reported that since there is no MGNREGA work during the lockdown, workers have not benefited from the increase in wages announced by the finance minister as part of the government's relief efforts. The state government of Haryana had announced financial support of Rs 1000 per week for casual labourers, street vendors and rickshaw pullers; the amount is to be deposited directly into their bank accounts. In addition, the central government had announced that BPL families would be provided rations (including rice, wheat, mustard oil, one kg of sugar) free of cost for the month of April. But none of the respondents reported having received any of the announced relief measures. PDS cardholders reported having received only five kg of wheat per person per month during the lockdown.

During the first two weeks of the lockdown, shops selling essential commodities like bakeries, and vegetable and grocery stores were open from 10.00 a.m. to 2.00 p.m. But from the third week, these shops are open on alternate days, and during specific time slots. Grocery, vegetable, fruit and other food shops are open from 8.00 a.m. to 12.00 p.m., chemist shops are open from 10.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m., petrol pumps are open from 7.00 a.m. to 7.00 p.m. and milk booths are open from 8.00 a.m. to 11.00 a.m. and again from 6.00 p.m. to 9.00 p.m. Vegetable and fruit vendors are allowed to sell their produce from 9.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m.

Villagers in Mameran are also finding it difficult to access cash to meet their daily needs. One of the respondents reported that, earlier, they could borrow money from local shopkeepers but that shopkeepers are now refusing to lend cash because of a cash crunch. The nearest bank branch is six km away, in Ellenabad. Respondents suggested that mobile ATMs could be made accessible to them in the village. A representative from ICICI bank who comes to the village to distribute old age and disability pensions has managed to make the trip to the village during the lockdown as well.

A village council member (panch) of the village reported that the panchayat is enforcing the lockdown by getting a team of young people to guard the village boundaries and restrict the entry of outsiders to only those providing essential services or members of the local administration. The village is also regularly sanitized. According to the village head, no one is under home quarantine in the village or the block, and no one has tested positive for COVID-19. However, the respondents reported that the village does not have a Primary Health Centre or a public dispensary

and there is only one private quack who the villagers consult for minor ailments. Villagers who require serious medical care have to travel to the Government Hospital in Ellenabad. It has been difficult for the poor and the ill to travel during the lockdown, due to both a lack of transport and the means to travel.

To conclude, the COVID-19 lockdown has put casual workers and daily wage earners into a financially precarious situation; farmers are anxious about their harvests being delayed; individual milk producers and middlemen involved in the dairy supply chain have been hit by the fall in demand; vegetable producers are unable to sell their produce at good prices; those dependent on the PDS, MGNREGS and other government schemes are largely yet to receive the relief promised by both the state and central governments.

*** Harmanender Singh is Assistant Professor, Department of Economics, Akal University Talwandi Sabo (Bathinda) Punjab.**