

## **The Situation during COVID-19 Lockdown in Badora Village, Betul District, Madhya Pradesh**

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Situated on the banks of the Saapna River in Betul district of Madhya Pradesh, Badora is a large village with a population of around 7500. It is situated near National Highway 47 and lies at a distance of three km from Betul city, which also serves as the headquarters of the district. As on April 16, Betul district has one COVID-19 positive case. Seventy per cent of the households residing in the village belong to Other Backward Classes (OBCs), among which the prominent castes are Kunbi and Pawar. There are several households in the village that belong to the Scheduled Tribes. Around twenty-five per cent of households in Betul do not own any land and are primarily employed as casual labourers. Most farming households have small operational holdings, that is, less than five acres. There are only ten households that have operational holdings greater than twenty-five acres. The village is irrigated mainly by the Saapna dam. Almost fifty per cent of the cultivable area is under sugarcane cultivation. Wheat and black gram are the important rabi crops and soya bean is grown during the kharif season. Badora is the hub of agricultural equipment and fertilizer shops in the district.

### **Impact of the Lockdown on the Sugarcane Crop**

Most farming households in Badora grow sugarcane on fifty to seventy-five percent of their agricultural land. They sell the produce to a sugar mill that is ten km away from the village. Sugarcane farmers have been carrying out earthing-up operations in their sugarcane fields since mid-March. This is usually accompanied by the application of fertilizers. Many small farmers in the village obtain fertilizers from the co-operative society and have tried contacting the officials who run it in the last fortnight, but the society has not opened since the lockdown was announced. Moreover, all the agricultural input shops have been shut since March 22. Due to this, there has been a delay in the application of fertilizers to the sugarcane crop. This will adversely impact the height of the crop, resulting in decreased yield.

### **Impact on the Wheat Crop**

Wheat is harvested either manually or using small machines in the village. At the time of harvesting, labourers belonging to the Scheduled Tribes (known as adivasis), travel from Bhainsdehi, Athner and Chicholi tehsils of Betul district to work in the wheat fields. Due to restrictions on movement, there has been limited in-migration of labour this year. This has resulted in an acute shortage of labour during harvesting. Along with this shortfall, the required number of reaper machines was not brought to the village from nearby districts in time. Hence, the price of engaging these machines has increased from Rs 800 per hour to Rs 1100 per hour. On account of insufficient labour and machines, almost all the farming households are using family labour this season to complete the harvesting of wheat. Another major problem encountered during harvesting was the shortage in availability of binder rope, which is used to tie the bundles of wheat; the price of an eleven-kg bag of ropes went up from Rs 1100 to Rs 1800. A similar problem was faced in procuring storage bags. The increase in prices of these essential items has put additional pressure on the farmers.

Around eighty percent of the wheat crop in the village has been harvested. As the majority of farming households sow wheat in a small area, their wheat production is limited and they prefer to sell it immediately after harvesting. Badora agricultural mandi was opened on April 15 after having been shut for twenty-five days. On account of the need to observe social distancing measures, only six farmers were allowed to sell their produce on the first day that the mandi resumed operations. Given this, farmers are anticipating further delays in selling their produce.

### **Impact on Other Crops**

Most farmers in this region practice intercropping, and grow potato, onion and garlic along with sugarcane. The bulk of the produce is sold in the Badora mandi. On account of its closure, farmers had to make temporary arrangements to stock harvested produce at home.

There are three polyhouses in the village that are primarily used for vegetable cultivation. The owners usually transport their produce to major centres like Amravati and Nagpur. They incurred some losses due to the sudden and complete shutdown of transport facilities in the third week of March. They sold a part of their crop, mainly tomatoes and cucumbers, in the village. As the owners of these polyhouses are established businessmen, they managed to get a permit fairly quickly and were able to transport their crop in time.

### **Impact on the Dairy Business**

Small farmers in Badora supplement their income by selling milk on a daily basis. Though the trend of keeping livestock has been on the decline in this village, a large number of households still keep a few animals. The village has a local dairy that collects the excess milk. The collected milk is then sold to the Sanchi Cooperative run by the Government of Madhya Pradesh. Due to a fall in the demand for milk, following the imposition of the lockdown, milk collection was disrupted for around five days. There were no other alternatives available to sell the milk, as all the restaurants in Betul have remained closed during this period. Some households sell milk directly to sweet shops in the city, which continue to be shut during the lockdown. So, these households have been unable to sell milk in the last twenty-five days and this has severely impacting their earnings. Also, some of the animals needed urgent medical attention, but no veterinarian has visited the village. Finally, cattle feed remains unavailable, as the shops are closed.

### **Impact on Manual Workers/ Labourers**

Around a hundred people from the village are employed in the Kosmi industrial area in Betul. Some villagers also work in the nearby flour and oil mills. Due to the closure of factories, these workers are now at home. They received their wages for the month of March but are uncertain about their current employment status. Most individuals from landless households in the village are employed in the construction sector and in various shops in Betul city as daily wage workers. During the lockdown, these workers have not been able to get agricultural work as they lack the skills required to perform specific agricultural operations. These households are surviving on the rations received from the panchayat under the Public Distribution System. There are 555 beneficiaries in the village who have been provided rations for three months at

the beginning of March. This is a common practice in the wheat-growing belt of Madhya Pradesh; beneficiaries are provided rations for three months in advance before the start of the wheat procurement season.

Out of the 109 active workers from the village on the MGNREGA list, ninety per cent are women. The officer-in-charge at the village level has been given instructions to identify some small works in the village that would provide employment under MGNREGA to these women after the situation normalises. There was no work available under this scheme in the last few months and registered workers have not received any money from the government to get them through the lockdown. Three households registered complaints with the CM's helpline on account of the complete unavailability of food last week and they were provided rations by the village panchayat.

In order to help vulnerable households, a group of relatively better-off farmers distributed ration kits comprising five kg of rice, two kg of wheat flour, two kg of daal and one packet of salt to some SC and ST households. There are five anganwadi centres in the village but their regular work has been suspended; anganwadi staff have been employed to conduct a survey of the village households to identify the people who returned to the village just before the lockdown. Ninety such people were identified and they have been asked to quarantine themselves in their homes.

120 migrant labourers from Chhindwara district who had been returning to their homes from Tamil Nadu were intercepted by the police in Betul and sent to Badora on March 29. These workers spent several days in the village and were allowed to proceed to their homes after undergoing a medical examination. This has created a sense of unease among the residents of the village.

### **Impact on the Prices of Essential Commodities**

The prices of milk and vegetables have remained unchanged due to enough of these commodities being produced in the village and its surroundings. Grocery shops were given permission to open for only three hours every day in the district. However, there are several small grocery shops in the village which function from the homes of owners. These remain open for the customers. This has ensured the availability of grocery items. But the prices of some essential commodities have risen in the last twenty days; vegetable oil from Rs ninety-nine per litre to Rs 130 per litre; sugar from thirty rupees per kg to forty-five rupees per kg; the prices of pulses and rice have also gone up by ten per cent.

Input dealers are worried due to the lack of supply of essential fertilizers and pesticides. One of the shop owners had placed an order for 100 tonnes of the commonly used fertilizer DAP some time before the lockdown was announced and is yet to receive its delivery. Owing to the current unavailability of fertilizers for the sugarcane crop, farmers are anticipating a rise in the prices of these fertilizers.

There are three ATMs in the village and a branch of the Bank of Maharashtra. Even though the branch is operational, not many people have visited the branch since the lockdown began.

## **Conclusions**

This report tries to assess the impact of the restrictions imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic in the context of Badora village in southern Madhya Pradesh. Disruptions caused by these restrictions have exacerbated the distress of the already strained population of the village, comprised largely of small farmers and casual labourers. The crisis is still unfolding and the long-term implications of it remain to be seen. However, given the magnitude of the situation, immediate state support is needed to help households in the village survive the adverse economic effects of this pandemic.

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