



Crop of ironies

Context:

- Issues being faced by the agricultural sector during the pandemic.

Reforming the agricultural sector:

- The devastating pandemic has forced the government's hand for long-overdue agrarian reforms.
- Amendments have been made to the **Essential Commodities Act, 1955**.



- The Centre has encouraged the State governments to adopt **three model laws on contract farming, agricultural land leasing, and marketing**.
- State governments have been urged to dismantle the Agricultural Produce Market Committees. Long-term changes such as fair pricing and e-trading have been made to the agricultural sector.

What are the challenges faced by the agricultural sector during the pandemic?

- The Indian agriculture sector was impacted by lockdowns across states following the COVID-19 outbreak.
- Migrant farm workers fled the fields en masse depriving the sector of the important labour component.

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- Crippling **bottlenecks in the supply chain** resulted in prices sky-rocketing in consumer markets, even as farmers, stuck with inventory, started dumping them at throwaway prices.
- Many remained hungry even as the Food Corporation of India's godowns overflowed with grain stock at three times the buffer stock norms.

Environmental pressures:

- Just as Rabi crops were set to be harvested, **unseasonal rain and hail** arrived at the beginning of the year leading to crop damage in some parts of the country. Parts of the country also witnessed **locust invasions** which could have a detrimental impact on the productivity for the year.
- Climate scientists warn about **climate change** and its impact on Indian agriculture.

Financial pressures:

- **Existing loans and their inability to pay could push farmers into poverty.**
- The Reserve Bank of India announced an extension of the moratorium on loan EMIs by three months, but given that **many farmers rely on a system of informal borrowing**, this negates the intended effect.
- Though the **MSPs of 14 Kharif crops have been increased** recently by the government, some experts have argued that this may not offer the intended extent of relief due to a lack of manpower, working capital, machinery and storage.

Food security:

- India has been witnessing a historic reverse migration. Migrant labourers face the prospect of an endangered food security. While the concept of One Nation, One Ration Card has potential, people are concerned about immediate relief for the hungry which is being provided with the release of fixed quantities of free foodgrains and pulses to the migrants, even to those without ration cards, for the months of June and July. Implementation needs to be seen through. India has always struggled to **fill the gap between policy prescriptions and implementation.**
- **India has been ranked 102 out of 117 countries on the Global Hunger Index.**



What are the steps to be taken by the government?

- Need to **increase government allocations to poor farmers through the PM KISAN scheme** by including even those who do not own land.
- Need to **ensure timely availability of seeds and fertilizers** for the next season by roping in gram sabhas and Farmer Producer Organisations in the process.
- Need to **redirect supply chains locally** which could ensure resilience of the sector.

Conclusion:

- The resilience of Indian farmers meant that the nation was fed even through multiple lockdowns. Acknowledging the fact that food security and farmer welfare are intertwined, there is a need for enhanced efforts to support the critical agricultural sector.
- Although agriculture accounts for around 17% of India's GDP, nearly 50% of the country's population depends on farm-based income.