SUMMARIES OF GROUP DISCUSSION

Subject I

Covid and the Agricultural and Rural Economy

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The Covid-19 pandemic has affected lives and livelihoods of millions of population, and has raised newer challenges to humanity. The pandemic which began during early part of 2020 has been impacting our lives in various ways over the last two year period in varying intensity and levels. The loss of lives and livelihoods during the last two waves of the pandemic and the ongoing challenges of the third wave has adversely affected human welfare. The pandemic and the associated measures adopted to deal with it has resulted in significant social and economic changes—in addition to the public health challenges that affected millions of people in the country. Although this has impacted all the sectors and spheres of life, the short term and long term impact on the agriculture sector, which is the most significant source of livelihood for rural India is a matter of grave concern. It is important to analyse and understand the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, the nature and extent of impact on agriculture and allied sectors, and the potential ways and strategies to overcome this crisis.

In this background, the 81rst Annual Conference of the Indian Society of Agricultural Economics organised a session by inviting contributions from researchers on the subject of ‘Covid-19 and the Agricultural and Rural Economy’. In spite of all the challenges there were 34 paper submissions focusing on the theme, out of which after screening and review, three papers in full length and 22 papers in summary form were published. Among the 25 papers on the theme 18 were presented and deliberated in the conference. The papers presented focused on performance of the agriculture sector in terms of trends in trade, commodity movements and market arrivals in domestic markets, prices, issues in supply chain management and losses during the period, constraints in input management, labour use patterns, employment, indebtedness, migration, income levels of various categories of population, consumption patterns and role of institutions in dealing with the challenges of the pandemic.

The papers focusing on the performance of agriculture sector during the pandemic points out that Covid-19 has not adversely affected production, growth, and

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trade in the agricultural sector. But the lock downs resulted in unemployment, erosion of incomes, and decline in consumption in both rural and urban areas. Also, there has been a differential impact on people where those in the urban areas suffered more than those in the rural areas, and those in the lower rungs impacted more than those at the top. There has been a growth in agricultural trade and there is a need to focus on diversification of agricultural exports to more products and more destinations. With respect to the impact on agricultural markets and prices in different regions of the country, there has been disruptions in market arrivals, prices received by the farmers which has adversely affected the income and livelihoods of the farmers. So although there has been a positive trend in terms of production, returns to farmers suffered due to disruptions in the supply chain and challenges with respect to demand. The papers which looked at impact on the livestock sector also raised similar concerns about adverse impact on incomes and livelihoods.

A silver lining in the crisis is the support provided by co-operative institutions and other community based organisations like SHGs in supporting the livelihoods of those affected. Participation in community organisations like FPOs have a positive impact on agricultural income and improved their resilience against incidents like Covid pandemic. Studies also indicated that despite several constraints and losses, women-led micro enterprises contributed to the social cause through running community kitchens and supply of materials.

The issue of migration remained at the centre stage of the challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic. The two contributions which focused on migration finds that the pandemic has impacted the pattern of livelihoods, caused a decline in incomes and shifts in consumption patterns. The most challenging task in the event of a disaster of this scale and magnitude is to bring in strategies and implement programmes that help communities to tide over the short term and long term impacts. The public support programmes implemented by the State has a major role to play in this. Unfortunately, there was only one contribution to the conference that focused on this aspect of the crisis. Although MGNREGA could provide some support in the crisis, the beneficiaries expressed general dissatisfaction with employment opportunity, asset creation and its overall impact on their livelihood. This calls for more attention towards implementation issues of such programmes in the event of crisis of this scale.

The papers presented on the theme analysed the important issues related to impact of Covid-19 on agriculture production and rural economy. The major focus was on understanding the trends in agricultural production, trade, issues related to marketing, supply chain management, prices, labour use, employment, migration, livestock sector, incomes and role of public programme. This generated interesting discussions and provided diverse insights on the impact of Covid-19 in the rural economy.

The discussions largely pointed out that the issues raised by the researchers largely are the initial short term impacts of the crisis. Although agriculture sector performance was not affected from a supply side perspective, in the long run there is
an invisible and much strong and adverse demand side impact on lives and livelihoods in the form of incomes, impact on food production systems, food and nutrition security, changes in consumption patterns, health effects and ultimately welfare of the vulnerable sections. These demand side impact of the crisis is slowly emerging and its impact need to be given attention. There are ripple effects of the shock by Covid-19 pandemic on various aspects of rural life and economy, particularly on agriculture. These needs to be studied in detail in the coming periods. Another major issue which has not received enough attention of the studies is the impact on vulnerable population belonging to various socio-economic backgrounds. It is also equally important to understand and address the gender dimensions of the crisis and its impact on gender relations. There was serious discussion on the issue of data quality that has been used for the analysis. Though Covid-19 throws challenges in conducting intense field works, enough attention should be given to critically assess the quality of data, databases and other information which are being used for analysis.