

Small Farmers Willing to Quit, Jeopardizing India's Food Security



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India's rapidly developing urban economy and the legacy of its Green Revolution are posing an increasing threat to small farms. **Yet small farms produce 41 percent of India's foodgrains.**

The nation's ability to feed itself may suffer as a result. In fact, there is an increasing body of evidence indicating that the technologies ushered in by the Green Revolution — pesticides, chemical fertilizers, high-yield seeds — are to blame for India's current soil crisis.

An epidemic of farmer suicides (it is estimated that one farmer commits suicide every 30 minutes in India) and rising concerns about food security are underscoring just how critical small farms truly are. Despite the Green Revolution of the 60's, which transformed India into one of the largest agricultural producers in the world, India is still home to one-fourth of the world's 800 million under-nourished people. Rural people make up most of the country's poor.

Small farms contribute significantly to India's sustainable food supply. Each small farm typically spans only one or two hectares (the average farm size in the US is 170 hectares) and has significantly less access to irrigation and the latest farming technologies, yet statistics show that they out-produce their medium and large counterparts.

But small farmers face a multitude of barriers in eking out a livelihood. Small village farmers represent 80 percent of all of India's farmers, but they only own 33 percent of the land.

Small acreages mean they see small yields and are incredibly vulnerable in the face of problems like crop diseases, drought, and price fluctuations. Geographically scattered, they also find it difficult to pool resources and to access the latest information on growing techniques and the market.

"Many still follow age-old practices and do not accept the latest technologies," said Sundar Rajan Sampath, CEO of Janani Agriserve, which helps connect small farmers in India to agricultural resources and services via a network of local village kiosks. "India has the technologies, but the distance separating the information and the farmer might be 200 miles."

Distance has also caused farmers to rely on local brokers to sell their crops instead of linking directly with their customers. "The market is unorganized — there is no procurement system for most crops," Sundar explained.

"Typically, a local trader buys from each farmer, hoards the product, and then sells it at a high price. If a farmer sells a tomato to a trader for, say two cents, we might buy it at the market for 50 cents. By the time it reaches the consumer, it has changed hands at least eight times."

With an inefficient supply chain of many middlemen, the produce often gets damaged and wasted. Most importantly, the farmers see none of the profits.

This is just one of the issues present in India's under-developed agricultural infrastructure. With most governmental efforts directed towards urban development, India's agricultural infrastructure is severely in need of an overhaul.

The issue was recently brought to the forefront of public debate when the government reportedly allowed millions of tons of stockpiled grain to rot rather than be distributed to the poor, due to a lack of storage facilities. "There is no infrastructure to allow farmers to store their crops," Sundar said.

"Post-harvest management just does not exist in rural India."

Small farmers also lack access to credit to buy equipment and inputs like fertilizer. Instead, they borrow from money lenders that charge interest as high as 50 and 60 percent. The relationships are often highly exploitative.

"The money lenders force the farmer to purchase fertilizer and pesticides from their shops. These are sold at high prices and are very poor quality," Sundar said.

Janani Agriserve is a semi-finalist in the eBay Powering Economic Opportunity: Create a World that Works competition. Take advantage of the Facebook application before August 10, 2011 to vote for your favorite solution.

Saddled with debt, working with extremely low profit margins, and exposed to high amounts of risk (most have never heard of agricultural insurance), small farmers face a great deal of economic pressure today. Compounding this are complex social issues caused by the massive rural-to-urban migration occurring throughout the country, which is both eroding the social stability of rural villages and calling into question the future of India's agricultural sector.

"Many people think India is labor-rich," Sundar said. "That is a myth. There is a very acute shortage of labor in agriculture. Sometimes the cost of labor is so high that farmers are unable to harvest."

A 2005 government survey revealed that 40 percent of India's farmers said they would be willing to quit agriculture if given another option for making a living. If this scenario came to pass, India's food supplies would be in serious jeopardy. Sundar sees this as confirmation of the dire need to support small farmers' ability to make a profit.

Sundar's organization, Janani Agriserve, hopes to contribute to this effort by bridging the information and supply chain gaps in India's agricultural infrastructure. It uses a franchise model to establish service kiosks in rural villages.

The kiosks are connected to Janani's headquarters in Hyderabad via broadband technology and allow farmers to tap into the latest scientific information about growing, and soil and water management. Using mobile technology, farmers can even upload a photo of a diseased plant and ask agricultural scientists for specific troubleshooting assistance.

The service centers also sell competitively priced agricultural supplies and help farmers connect with financial lenders and agricultural insurance providers. And, Janani plans to help farmers market their goods directly to customers, including food processors and commodity exchanges.

Despite the multiple challenges faced by small farmers, Sundar is optimistic. "The government has begun making this issue a priority — perhaps a little late, but it's never too late. They are doing some good things like investing in the food processing industry," he said.

"Being able to process and preserve produce will increase their quality and what can be used and sold. More processing plants would produce even more rural jobs. The process is slow and much needs to be done. Still, I imagine that in another two or three years, we'll see a significant difference."

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