



It Takes a Team – Newfound Inspiration in the Face of COVID

Lindsay Jaacks

May 12 –

Less than a month ago, the Director of the [Centre for Sustainable Agriculture](#) (CSA) in Hyderabad, India, invited me to collaborate with them on collecting empirical data to document the issues faced by farmers across the country since the lockdown. Together with CSA and the [Public Health Foundation of India](#) (PHFI), we are nearing the end of our first round of data collection.

While the COVID-19 pandemic is unprecedented, the World Bank reported that after the 2014-15 Ebola epidemic in Liberia, rice area planted and rice yields declined sharply, worsening food insecurity. We predict that something similar could happen in India and other parts of the world as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. But a catastrophic food crisis is preventable with timely data to inform effective policies and the distribution of emergency aid.

Good news has been hard to come by these days. And the preliminary results of our survey—which will be presented via webinar on May 20th—are worrying. But there is a shimmer of hope in all of this, and that is the many people who have mobilized to support informed policy outcomes that can benefit farmers and farm-workers. With the planting season coming up in a month, time is of the essence.

Within days of emailing the job announcement for surveyors to our networks, CSA received over a hundred emails from highly qualified individuals—many with degrees from some of the top institutes in India. Divya Veluguri, Project Manager, says, “Individuals from across the spectrum, from social science students to medical doctors, some with decades of experience, and from all parts of the country reached out to us to help.”

The survey itself takes about 10-15 minutes to complete, but our team is finding that many calls take almost an hour or more because farmers have so much to share. These calls are difficult; the current situation is difficult; and it's difficult to imagine a way out of this.

This sentiment was echoed by Rajesh Serupally, a Research Associate assisting with the project, who said, "All the thoughts and work of every single civil society organization, activist, and NGO are occupied with nothing but to help the vulnerable and marginal communities in immediate need of assistance. Despite this all-consuming work, they helped us reach farmers because of *hope*. They were filled with hope and optimism that this report would influence policymakers and the vulnerable would benefit as a result. Now we hold a tremendous responsibility to achieve this with the report."

The administrative support at Harvard and PHFI has similarly been incredibly responsive. The institutional ethics committees at Harvard and PHFI carefully scrutinized the study protocol, providing feedback within hours and approval within a week, while maintaining utmost standards of ethical research. This no doubt required long hours—many of them on the weekend and evenings—on the part of these committees. Similarly, the administrative team responsible for setting up the contract with CSA worked tirelessly—I got an email with the draft contract on a Saturday, and a week later our grants manager was on the phone on a Sunday ensuring that the wire was arranged to support this important work.

Academic research is often slow to implement and slow to reach the hands of policymakers and NGOs who can use it to improve the lives of those we seek to help in the first place. The COVID-19 pandemic has proven the remarkable ability of committed individuals working together on teams, even remotely, even across many time zones, to achieve shared goals. Here's hoping this is one aspect of the COVID-19 response that sticks around.

We would like to thank the farmers who generously offered their time to contribute to this research, and the study team, including: Shakir Ali, Aparna Bhagat, Suresh Gaddala, Lindsay Jaacks, Pooja Jhorar, Jahnavi Kanabar, Rahul Khare, Hari Krishna Nuole, Diksha Pandey, Karan Peer, Poornima Prabhakaran, Awadesh Kumar, Ramanjaneyulu GV, Akhil Ravella, Aditi Roy, Rajesh Serupally, Prakash Shukla, Md. Shazib Siddique, Vikramjit Singh, and Divya Veluguri.