

Declining cotton crop in Pakistan- a rapid study



Introduction

Pakistan is the fifth-largest producer of cotton in the world. It also has the third-largest cotton spinning capacity in Asia (after China and India), with thousands of ginning and spinning units producing textile products from cotton. Still the cotton crop is declining in Pakistan every year.

According to the Pakistan Economic Survey 2020-21, the total production of the cotton crop for 2020-21 **declined 23 per cent to 7 million bales** from 9.15 million bales a year earlier. Yet, the government has set the production target for the 2021-22 crop at 10.5m bales, a whopping 50pc higher than that of the current fiscal. The government has also set the target of cultivating cotton over 2.33m hectares, up 16pc when compared to this year's 2.01m hectares.

Keeping in view all these facts Labour Education Foundation and Crofter Foundation conducted six focus group discussion with farmers and cotton-picking women labor force in three major cotton producing cities of Punjab.

Following were the major findings in respect of **agriculture labor force and small farmers**.

1. Agriculture Labor Force



According to the Labour Force Survey of 2017-18 conducted by Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, thirty-nine per cent of the country's labour force is engaged in agriculture (30.2 per cent males and 67.2 per cent females). In total, the agriculture sector contributes 18.5 per cent to the country's GDP.

There are four main categories in the agriculture labour force

Self-employed or Family labour force

Those who have very small land holding, normally they farm on their own with help of their family including children under the age of 16.

Long term/tenant labour force

The Long term/tenant labour force are those who are hired by the landlords for a long time minimum of 6 months. The Long term/tenant labour force are hired on two main verbal contract propositions: 1) If they bear 50% running expense for any crop then they will be a shareholder of 50% profit. 2) If they do not share any running expense then they will get 8th portion of the profit. This group of the labour force is responsible for plough, sowing, herbal cleaning, watering the land, spraying the pesticide, spreading the fertilizer in the crop and overall responsibility for the care of a crop. In this category, the verbal contract is made with me; however, the labour is done by the whole family. For this group of labour force a law "The Punjab Tenancy Act, 1887" is available but no one knows about the law and no one is registered according to law.

Monthly labour

The monthly labour force is hired on a fixed salary, mostly @10000/= rupees per month. The major responsibilities are watering, spraying the pesticide, spreading the fertilizer in the crop and being responsible for any theft. Mostly men are hired for this job.

Casual or daily labour force

The casual labour force is hired on daily basis and it is mostly women. The casual labour force is generally hired for sowing and harvesting. In some crops like cotton, the harvesting is done by the women.

The major issue with agriculture especially the cotton picker women labour force

Twenty long term/tenants, 10 monthly wage labourers and 50 women cotton pickers (casual agriculture labour force), 10 were interviewed from Chishtian Mandi, Bahawalnagar and Khaniwal. These are the cotton-wheat zone of Punjab.

Overall, the agricultural labour force is informal. Although in Punjab there is an act that protects the rights of Long term/tenant labour force not a single tenant is registered according to law therefore the landowner can expel them any time without providing any compensation. This sector is running on verbal and traditional laws. No, another labour law applies to agriculture workers. All the workers are not aware of any social protection schemes of the government and occupational safety and health.

The average age of women cotton pickers was 10 to 60 years. The main reasons for cotton picking reported were to reduce family financial burden followed by better access to food, resource and better education of children. The cotton-picking wage rate was different in a different area; however, they were getting the wage in between Rs. 400 to Rs. 600 for harvesting 50 Kg of cotton. While responding to the question that how much time it took for picking the 50kg cotton, most of the women responded that it took 8 to 9 hours. The wage rate is set by demand and supply. All the workers were unaware of the minimum wage rate and formal work contract. The majority of the respondents reported that the mode of payments of cotton picking was in cash and they got wages in time. All the women were aware of pesticide risks and but they had poor knowledge of personal protection, mostly they did not use personal protective measures, however, they used a muffler/scarf/cloth to cover their face. Only a few respondents wear a mask during cotton-picking but no one wears gloves to protect their hands. The majority of the respondents wash their clothes after cotton picking whereas all the respondents wash their hands after cotton picking. The women cotton pickers faced health problems tiredness, mental disturbance, allergy, itching, headache, stomachache, asthma and fatigue. All the women take painkiller tablets at the night otherwise they could not sleep properly. All the women bring their toddlers and children to the workplace therefore they also face health issues.

It has been observed during the interview that the agriculture labour force wants to move out of agriculture and want to work in the manufacturing and service sectors because they feel these sectors are more formal. Therefore, there is a need to develop a policy for agriculture labour. The government should also bring the agriculture labour into Minimum Wage Rate Law, Punjab Employees Social Security Institution ambit.

2. Small-Scale cotton Farmer's perspective



Cotton producers especially small-scale producers are facing some challenges and difficulties regarding the cultivation of cotton:

- **Climate change:**

Cotton farmers in Pakistan are feeling the effects of climate change as unpredictable weather patterns and extreme heat are shortening growing seasons. Unusual heavy rains pelted, destroying the cotton plants just as they were fruiting.

Another season of erratic weather has crippled Pakistan's already ailing cotton sector, resulting in lost revenue and jobs.

Heavy rains and high temperatures during the whole of the cotton-growing season from April to September severely damaged the crop, said Tariq Mehmood one of the cotton growers from Chistian District, Bahawalnagar.

Yet again, Pakistan's cotton farmers have seen their cash crops devastated by unpredictable climate extremes. The farmers are continuously hit by changing weather conditions," he said.

- **Non-availability of climate-resistant seed:**

Cotton farmers are not satisfied with the quality of seed available in the market. They said that the seed is not climate resistant, sometimes the seed doesn't germinate and most of the time decrease in yield is observed every year.

Most of the farmers agree that their local seed gives them better results in production and is not very much affected by the pests.

- **High input costs and low market prices:**

Another important factor is the high input costs and low market prices for cotton, therefore cropping cotton is not feasible for small farmers. In the focused group discussion, all the farmers of three cities shared that every year the land for cotton cultivation is decreasing in their area.

- **No easy access to quality of seed, fertilizers and pesticide:**

Small scale cotton growers can't easily access quality seed, fertilizer and pesticides because they borrow these agri-inputs from the middleman and most of the time these middlemen sell them low-quality inputs. Which result in low production, no pests control and sometimes even no germination of seed. Also, these middlemen exploit the farmers and charge them double at the time of recovery.

- **Agricultural extension and Government's subsidies are not reaching out to small-scale farmers:**

Agricultural extensions and Government's subsidies are providing benefits to multinational companies and big farmers but these subsidies are not reaching the small growers of cotton. These benefits should be reached out to the small growers directly it will make a big difference.

- **Shortage of water:**

Small growers of cotton are also facing the issue of shortage of water in their areas consistently for the last few years. Especially, farmers who are at the tail are not getting enough water for their cotton crop. Some farmers have their tube wells but that water is not good for the crops and it is expensive too.