



KVK KODAGU AND PUTHARI FPO COMING TO THE AID OF FARMERS DURING THE LOCKDOWN



While farmers face new challenges from the lockdown imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, local agricultural extension centres, such as Krishi Vigyan Kendras, have to step in and support farmers. In this note, Saju George, Prabhakar B and Subbaiah KP illustrate how ICAR-KVK Kodagu and Puthari FPO is supporting farmers to deal with these new challenges.

CONTEXT

The lockdown announced by the Government of India in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic has thrown up unique challenges for farmers and farmer-related institutions. There is a sudden drop in demand for agricultural produce as movement of agricultural output has come to a standstill. The traditional market and supply chain of fruits and vegetables have come to a sudden grinding halt. Under this situation wherein there is a need to relieve farmers' distress and help move farm produce, the government came up with subsequent clarifications that exempt agricultural produce and agricultural operations from lockdown restrictions. However, farmers are still facing problems because of the lack of transportation facilities to send their goods to other districts. It is a herculean task to send goods even to neighbouring districts, let alone other States.



Vegetable outlet operating at KVK during lockdown

The situation has been worsened by strict interstate border controls that have been implemented. There is a drastic reduction in the demand for high value vegetables due to closure of the hotel industry, and ban on large events. Though there was panic buying at certain points of time, it is difficult to predict the demand and market produce on a regular basis. The local institutions at the district level, such as Krishi Vigyan Kendras (KVKs) need to step up their efforts to help farmers. They need to connect farmers directly to consumers. [ICAR-KVK Kodagu](#) (Box 1) is playing an active role in addressing some of these challenges.

Box 1: ICAR-KVK, Kodagu

ICAR-KVK, Kodagu hosted by ICAR-Indian Institute of Horticultural Research, Bengaluru, was established in 1976 to meet the technological needs of Kodagu, Karnataka (India). It is a hilly district, and at its lowest elevation it is 900 metres above sea level and at the highest 1750 meters. The annual rainfall is 2800 mm with major precipitation during July and August. Much of the land in the district is used for agriculture. While paddy fields are found on the valley floors, coffee and pepper are cultivated in the surrounding hills. The Kodagu KVK has been promoting farmers' produce through an FPO, with support from NABARD since 2017, for coffee, pepper, paddy and other horticultural crops such as arecanut, coconut and vegetables. This FPO, named as Puthari Farmers Producer Company Limited (PFPC), currently has 750 farmers as members (George and Prabhakar 2019).



ICAR-KVK, Kodagu

KVK INTERVENTIONS DURING COVID-19

Advisory Services: The KVK is regularly providing agro advisories to help farmers maintain their farms through different WhatsApp groups, newspapers, radio and SMS services. KVK-Kodagu has disseminated crop specific advisories, general government advisories relating to agriculture, and Arogya Setu App to more than 7000 farmers through an mKisan portal message advisory, to 3800 farmers through different WhatsApp groups, and also through four local newspapers. A new service of online consultation has also been launched by the Community Service Centres (CSCs) under an MOU with ICAR, so that the farmers from remote areas need not visit KVKs. They can approach the CSCs established by the government and ask for timeslots to discuss their problems. The timing is determined in consultation with KVK online and farmers can directly interact with KVK scientists online. All KVK heads have been registered in the [CSC advisory portal](#) as per the MOU between ICAR and CSC. Farmers can take advantage of this facility by visiting the nearest CSC facility.

Supply of Planting Materials: The KVK farm and nursery are functioning normally and the nursery is preparing high quality planting material of coffee, pepper and arecanut to cater to the demands of farmers. KVK is also preparing about 12,000 seedlings of pepper variety Arka Coorg Excel, 6000 coffee seedlings, and about 6000 arecanut seedlings of improved varieties.

KVK AND FPO INTERVENTIONS DURING COVID-19

Agri input outlet at KVK: The agri input outlet of Puthari FPO (initiated in September 2017), located at KVK Campus is functioning in compliance with the district administration's directives. The outlet remains open from 7am to 12 noon on three days of the week (Monday, Wednesday and Friday). On average about 40 to 50 farmers are coming and purchasing critical inputs required for their farms. The outlet is mainly catering to their requirements of vegetables seeds, pesticides, fungicides, and plant nutrients like water soluble fertilizer, which are critical for maintaining plantation crops such as coffee and pepper. Apart from this agricultural machines – weed cutters, small farm implements, harvesting ladders – are also available in the outlet.

Farmers are advised to use hand sanitizers, face masks and social distancing while purchasing agricultural inputs. This also creates awareness among farmers about the importance of social distancing.

Sale of small farmer produce: At the same time the outlet is also facilitating farmers in selling their animal products like eggs, thus providing an outlet to market these items, which have also suffered a price crash during this period. Added to this were the fears about the incidence of bird flu, which had erupted in the neighbouring districts of Kodagu.

Marketing of fruits and vegetables purchased directly from farmers: The FPO was contemplating starting a rural mart which NABARD has already agreed to fund. But with this lockdown, the FPO has informally started that process by foraying into the marketing of fruits and vegetables that will greatly help both farmers and consumers. Whereas farmers are looking for minimum support price, consumers are looking for safe and fresh vegetables at reasonable prices. The FPO is purchasing vegetables and local fruits directly from local farmers and also from neighbouring Mysuru district, where the farmers have felt the blow of a sudden crash in vegetable prices. The FPO is voluntarily offering twenty per cent higher prices to such farmers while purchasing directly from them. The KVK has given space for marketing these vegetables inside the KVK campus itself, while maintaining all social distancing norms. The SMS staff from KVK and FPO staff insist upon carefully following the social distancing norms. Once again, the vegetable market is functioning on three days of the week (Monday, Wednesday and Friday) from 7am to 12 noon as per district administration guidelines. On average the FPO is selling INR 30,000 worth of vegetables on any day.

Coffee marketing: In these difficult times the farmer members of the FPO can look forward to the coffee marketing initiative taken up by the FPO from this year onwards. The Board of Directors of Puthari FPO has given a call to its farmer members to contribute coffee to the FPO. The aggregation effort was started during February-March season. The FPO has already collected 1000 bags (50 tonnes) of coffee from its members. Sixty farmers have contributed coffee towards this end. This will be cured in a cooperative curing works at Hunsur operated by the Kodagu Coffee Growers Cooperative Society. From there this coffee will be auctioned to national and international buyers with support from the Coffee Board. If successful, this will be the first such export initiative from an FPO. Otherwise coffee marketing is very complex with well-entrenched private players where individual farmers

cannot think of exporting their own coffee. As a result of this effort, the buyer can always trace back the origin of the coffee to a ‘farmers run FPO’ who are growing coffee in the most eco-friendly way.



Meeting of the Board of Director, PFPC

Scaling up: If the export initiative works well the model will be expanded by next year to cover all the 750 registered farmers (as on March 2020). A separate coffee marketing team will be formed by the FPO to scale up the export, and this will benefit a large group of coffee growers. If these initiatives bear fruit the farmers will have a lot of confidence in facing such calamities in future. They will be confident that whatever happens, the FPO is solidly behind them in helping them market their coffee and pepper produce. Thanks to all these reasons farmers will be able to realize higher incomes.

LESSONS

It must be noted that problems in every district within the country is unique and requires location-specific interventions. KVKs located in each district can help address – to some extent – some of these challenges faced by farmers. To do this, KVKs have to go beyond their normal mandate, and start mobilizing farmers into groups, strengthen their capacities (organizational, managerial and technical), and respond quickly to the new challenges that are emerging. It is our professional and moral responsibility too.

References

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