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EXPLORING THE AGRICULTURAL RIGHTS OF TOMATO GROWERS AND WORKERS FROM SINDH: A CASE STUDY OF SUB-DISTRICT MATLI

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Abstract

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Tomato crops hold a distinct position due to their unique usage and combination of a short cultivation duration, high yield, and economic viability. Beyond its economic implications, the tomato boasts a nutritional profile that is not only diverse but also nutritionally dense, featuring essential minerals, vitamins, amino acids, sugars, and dietary fibers. Noteworthy among these are substantial concentrations of vitamins B and C, as well as essential minerals like iron and phosphorus. (Toor et al., 2005). The culinary versatility of tomatoes is unparalleled, contributing to their ubiquity in various cuisines. Whether enjoyed fresh in salads or meticulously integrated into cooked dishes, such as sauces, soups, or accompaniments to meat and fish, tomatoes add a distinct flavour and nutritional punch to meals. Furthermore, tomatoes undergo various processing methods to yield products such as purées, juices, and the ubiquitous ketchup, (Xu et al. 2018) further expanding their culinary footprint. However, the people who grow this crop face multiple difficulties related to government arrangements and natural disasters. Thus, these people and the tomato production itself are disadvantaged. This paper explores different issues about the wages of workers and the just prices for crop production. The paper also suggests workable policy recommendations to the government regarding small growers and workers of tomato crops in the area.

Keywords: Agriculture, Production, Growers, Rights, Purées

Introduction

Tomatoes hold significant importance globally, ranking among the most crucial vegetables. They serve as a vital cash and industrial crop in numerous regions around the world. (Babalola, 2010). In the Sindh province of Pakistan, it also plays a significant role in the agricultural landscape. With a diverse climate ranging from arid to semi-arid conditions, Sindh provides an environment conducive to tomato cultivation throughout the year. The consistent availability of tomatoes throughout the year is a testament to their cultivation in diverse areas. In Sindh, tomatoes are grown on an area of 8.7 thousand hectares from which 3.00 thousand hectares are grown under the Badin district (Memon et al., 2012). As per the RDF report, in the southern province of Sindh, approximately 27,000 hectares are dedicated to tomato cultivation, resulting in an annual average production of around 200,000 tons. Looking back at the fiscal year 2019-20, the cultivation area encompassed 22,542 hectares, yielding a substantial 164,658 tons. (RDF, 2021), however, the data of the Government of Pakistan is something different as described below.

Area of tomato production in Sindh (hectares) Government of Pakistan. (2023).

Year	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22
Tomatoes	24068	21002	22524	24100	23862
Year	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22
Tomatoes	382198	153282	164658	176811	172090

Production of tomatoes in Sindh (Tons) Government of Pakistan. (2023).

The agricultural landscape of lower districts of Sindh has garnered recognition for its noteworthy tomato production. Despite the year-round availability of tomatoes, the zenith of supply in these districts occurs predominantly during the period from January to March/April. It is during these months that tomatoes flood the market, becoming accessible to consumers at notably affordable prices. The conducive climate in these regions further fosters the cultivation of a diverse range of major and minor fruit and vegetable crops,

with tomatoes being a prominent player in this agricultural tapestry. However, the tomato crop production in such quantity does not equally benefit those who toil the land and put their labor right from the start of cultivation to the harvest. Because more benefit is accrued by the traders and market buyers. The government plays the role of a silent spectator and does not come to the rescue of laborers and small growers. This study, thus, sheds light on the intricate economic dynamics and challenges faced by tomato cultivators in the selected area, providing a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted tomato cultivation landscape in southern districts of Sindh.

Research Methodology:

The applied methodology for this research paper is based on both primary and secondary data sources. For the primary data, the author(s) visited the areas and conducted in-depth interviews with small growers, labor activists, and concerned government officials. For the secondary data, books, and research articles/reports were used as sources. For this paper, tomato crop growers and workers from southern Sindh were interviewed.

Limitations of the Study:

Due to time and capital, this paper/study is conducted on only one sub-district (Tehsil Matli) of Sindh province, and may not be representative of all districts of the Southern Sindh.

Literature Review

Dynamics of Tomato Cultivation Trends:

The soil and environmental conditions in these three districts are particularly conducive, attracting farmers and landowners to engage in large-scale tomato cultivation for immediate financial benefits. The tomatoes flourish in well-fertile sandy loam soil. The sandy composition of these three districts, attributed to their proximity to the sea, renders them particularly suitable for tomato cultivation. (Khokhar, 2015). The rapid turnaround time for tomato production, compared to other crops,

contributes to its popularity in these regions. During the fieldwork, an intriguing observation emerged that land in these areas is sometimes contracted for six months to wealthy individuals from other areas for cultivation. This results in many growers resorting to securing loans and advances from local rich people or the lenders of big cities like Karachi and other provinces under fixed terms and conditions. Unfortunately, this arrangement often proves disadvantageous for the tomato growers and workers, as predetermined rates are set by lenders who typically acquire the entire tomato production, leaving growers and workers with limited bargaining power. Once the crop is harvested, the labor and small growers are compelled to sell the production on the already fixed rates, and the labor and crop investment is not credited accordingly.

Tomato crop cycle:

Tomato cultivation in the selected districts unfolds in two distinct cycles: the first, sown in July-August, yields harvest in November-December, while the second, sown in January-February, yields harvest in March-April. (Talpur, 2018). However, growers in these regions typically eschew the second cycle due to anticipation of unfavorable market rates, extensive cultivation of tomatoes in various parts of Pakistan, and the resultant oversupply in local markets (Soomro, 2024). Additionally, the environmental conditions in these districts do not favor biannual tomato cultivation. Notably, water scarcity emerges as a significant challenge in the lower districts of Sindh province, further complicating the agricultural landscape. The grievances of tomato growers about the absence of off-season seeds and the lack of government support, discouraging them from engaging in biannual cultivation are also reported. Despite the higher consumption rate and the status of tomatoes as luxury food items in Sindh, the farmers, and workers contend with the perennial challenges of profit volatility and seasonal variations in productivity. The intricacies of marketing channels pose

additional hurdles during the production and transportation phases, with small-scale farmers facing disproportionate challenges in their pursuit of higher profit margins in the market. Often farmers and tomato field workers record protests every year to advocate fair market prices for their produce. This burgeoning issue necessitates thorough research to unravel the underlying reasons and contributing factors responsible for the instability in tomato prices. Delving into this matter will not only enhance our understanding of the challenges faced by tomato growers but also inform us about policy interventions aimed at fostering a more equitable and sustainable agricultural ecosystem in the region.

Primary purchasing markets and direct selling by farmers:

Tomato producers consistently seek optimal avenues to sell their yield, yet many small-scale farmers encounter challenges in accessing larger markets directly. (Noonari et al., 2015). During the peak season, lenders and profiteers establish purchasing points in high tomato production areas, prompting small farmers to sell their yields to these intermediaries. Subsequently, these lenders transport the tomatoes to major markets such as Karachi, Lahore, or Peshawar. Farmers, during fieldwork, expressed grievances regarding the incapacity of local markets at the town or tehsil level to handle such massive tomato production. Consequently, small farmers often find themselves compelled to sell to lenders, as ripe tomatoes are highly sensitive and prone to spoilage without proper storage. Various facets of the tomato production process involve distinct gender roles, with females predominantly engaged in picking, while males undertake tasks such as sorting, packaging, transportation, and marketing. Different modes of transportation and packaging are employed based on the destination market's proximity. Local sales involve the use of shopping bags, while wooden and plastic crates are utilized for distant markets. Trucks and pickups are the

primary means of transporting tomatoes to wholesale and regional markets, whereas rickshaws are commonly employed for local assembly markets. The marketing challenges faced by tomato producers, including high price fluctuations, traditional post-harvest handling practices, limited shelf life, inadequate cold storage, and refrigerated transportation, significant post-harvest losses in terms of quantity and quality, the absence of an organized price information system, insufficient training facilities for marketing, and limited value addition opportunities. The tomato production sector faces formidable challenges such as poor farm-to-market infrastructure, inefficiencies in factor and product markets, volatile prices, consecutive shortages and hoarding, insufficient storage capacity, and inadequate implementation of grades and standards. These challenges necessitate comprehensive intervention and strategic planning. Implementation of rules and regulations remains weak or nonexistent, as many farmers and stakeholders operate without formal registration. Consumers lament the high prices resulting from supply imbalances, while farmers bear the brunt when imports are permitted to stabilize market prices. There is a prevailing concern that the tomato price crisis may become a permanent feature of Sindh's agricultural economy, urging the need for a holistic and sustainable approach to address these complex challenges.

Price controls at farms and markets:

The government, despite its control and regulation of rates for various consumer and non-consumer commodities such as rice, wheat, and cotton, remains conspicuously absent in managing the pricing dynamics of tomato production. Assistant Commissioners at the sub-district level, while monitoring price check-lists for consumers, remain detached from those engaged in the actual cultivation of tomatoes in the fields. Farmers, grappling with the repercussions of fluctuating crop productivity, weather variations, and

plummeting prices, find themselves compelled to sell tomatoes at significantly reduced rates in the local market this year. The severity of losses has driven some to the drastic measure of abandoning or destroying their tomato crops. The government officials concerned and big landlords lamented the lack of government intervention despite their appeals to halt tomato imports, emphasizing that the import cessation only occurred after local prices had already nosedived. Farmers highlight a two-pronged challenge, the import of vegetables that could otherwise be exported, exacerbating the adversity faced by local farmers. This plea for support or floor price remains unmet, further amplifying the predicament. The plight of tomato growers underscores not just the economic challenges but also the multifaceted impacts of climate change, market dynamics, and policy shortcomings (Lohano et al. 2020). A comprehensive and supportive approach from the government is crucial to address these intricate challenges and safeguard the livelihoods of tomato growers in Sindh.

Tomato Preservation and Packaging opportunities

Establishing Tomato Industrial Zones in tomato-producing districts stands as the singular solution to mitigate market fluctuations of tomatoes. Yet, there exist other cost-effective methods at the local level for preserving tomato production. Despite the recent surge in tomato production due to its economic potential and nutritional significance, growers face losses primarily attributable to postharvest challenges. While good harvests have been abundant, the profitability for growers remains elusive, emphasizing the need to explore strategies for preserving the postharvest quality and shelf life of tomatoes. Critical postharvest handling practices such as harvesting, pre-cooling, cleaning and disinfecting, sorting and grading, packaging, storing, and transportation play pivotal roles in sustaining quality and prolonging shelf life. Although postharvest

practices cannot enhance the quality of harvested fruit, they prove instrumental in its preservation. The extension of shelf life becomes feasible with the adoption of appropriate postharvest handling practices and treatment methods.

The establishment of a National Tomato Research and Development Center is imperative to advocate for favorable policies in the tomato sector and to sponsor comprehensive research addressing all aspects of the tomato value chain, including harvest and post-harvest management and processing. Provincial research systems should establish tomato research stations in each tomato-producing district to support local growers. Numerous techniques and methods are available for preserving tomato production, benefiting both growers and consumers.

Industrial prospects in local areas:

There is an imperative need to initiate a comprehensive program aimed at elevating the tomato sector, leveraging its potential to generate significant foreign exchange through both fresh and processed exports. While tomato paste enjoys substantial demand both locally and internationally, the industrial potential of this crop, particularly in the regions of its cultivation in Pakistan, remains largely untapped. Currently, only two tomato paste units operate in Sindh, boasting a total capacity of 13 tons/hr. (Soomro, 2021) Considering the high demand for tomato paste and the ample availability of tomatoes, there exists considerable scope to harness this potential and establish additional manufacturing facilities for tomato paste. To catalyze this growth, promoting 'contract farming' arrangements between exporters/industrialists and farmers is essential. Such contracts would entail obligations from farmers to supply a specified quality and quantity of tomatoes within agreed-upon timelines and prices. Urgent measures should be taken to introduce specialized harvesting baskets and packaging

solutions tailored for tomato production. Strategies for promoting tomato processing at the national level include the establishment of puree extraction units as small-scale cottage industries, particularly in major tomato production districts. Additionally, the creation of tomato powder manufacturing units at the district level can enhance the value chain. Quality puree manufacturing and packaging initiatives can be championed through Farmers' Entrepreneur Groups (FEGs). Training and certification programs in food safety and quality management systems at tomato manufacturing sites are crucial for enhancing the overall value chain. Efforts should also be directed towards training farmers, logistics personnel, and storage operators to uphold the quality of tomatoes through contractor agreements and collaboration with Farmers' Entrepreneur Groups. Encouraging the establishment of tomato pack houses in villages dedicated to tomato cultivation, facilitated by FEGs, equipped with grading, packaging, cold storage, and other essential facilities, can further fortify the tomato processing industry. These strategic interventions aim to not only meet the existing demand but also unlock the full economic potential of the tomato sector, fostering growth, sustainability, and global competitiveness.

Official Perspectives:

When the researcher asked the Assistant Commissioner of Matli about the issues of laborers and small growers of tomato crops, he said that their role is more driven toward price control of agri products, and other consumer-related issues. It is the government's larger policy that deals with the credits for farmers and small land owners. He said that they are not approached by laborers and small growers before going into the vicious cycle of getting loans from private lenders. However, he agreed that the combatant government could have easy access to loans for laborers and small landowners.

Conclusion

Sindh urgently requires a dynamic, integrated, and proactive policy framework to revitalize its agricultural marketing system. A collective commitment from the government, private sector, and relevant stakeholders in the marketing system is crucial to align with the ongoing policy reforms initiated by the government. These reforms aim to enhance the welfare of the farming community, consumers, and market players (Ministry of Planning 2020). The recent challenges in food supply, marked by occasional surpluses and shortages of agricultural commodities, underscore the necessity for government intervention to enhance the functionality of the agricultural marketing system.

In addition to these concerns, the plight of daily wage farm workers remains largely unaddressed, despite their tireless efforts from cultivation to the harvest of tomato crops. A significant proportion of these workers are rural women, enduring meager compensation for their substantial contributions. Both small and large landlords involved in tomato cultivation lament the inadequate prices they receive for their yields in the market. Consequently, they find themselves constrained to pay low wages to workers who, in turn, are left in a vulnerable position within this complex scenario. While the government intermittently discusses policies aimed at improving the conditions for tomato growers, there is a noticeable gap in addressing the challenges faced by daily wage farm workers. Efforts should be directed not only toward policies benefiting tomato growers but also toward comprehensive measures that ensure fair wages, improved working conditions, and recognition of the invaluable contributions made by daily wage farm workers, particularly the rural women who form a significant part of this workforce. A holistic approach is essential to create an equitable and sustainable agricultural ecosystem that caters to the welfare of all stakeholders involved.

Recommendations:

The key issues and demands surfaced during the research necessitated the following policy recommendations:

1. It is imperative for the government to institute and enforce a 'Purchasing Price' mechanism for tomato production, akin to its annual practices for crops like wheat and rice. This measure aims to provide stability and fair returns to tomato growers.
2. Contemplating a ban on tomato imports from other countries, especially during the peak tomato production season, warrants careful consideration. Evaluating the costs and benefits associated with restricting imports can mitigate seasonal price fluctuations and protect local growers.
3. Ensuring the quality of fertilizers, pesticides, and hybrid seeds is paramount. The government should implement strict measures, including establishing tehsil-level laboratories, to monitor and enhance the quality of inputs. Introducing heat-tolerant seeds can address yield fluctuations caused by adverse climatic conditions.
4. Policies promoting value addition in the tomato industry, coupled with effective extension services, are vital. Training programs, particularly for farmers and their families, contribute to skill enhancement and improved practices.
5. Scrutinizing the regulatory systems for market intermediaries, specifically commission agents, is necessary. Exploring avenues to reduce the high commission rates charged in Wholesale Markets can bolster the income of producers.
6. Reorganizing subsidies and incentives for tomato growers is pivotal. Eliminating import duties on specified post-harvest tools and equipment, such as farm-level cold storage and packing house equipment, for a defined period can foster technological advancement.

7. The establishment of FEGs at the Union Council level, guided and monitored by the government-appointed business manager, is proposed. FEGs, equipped with an initial endowment fund, can generate resources through membership fees to sponsor tomato-related research and development activities.
8. Creating Processors/Traders Associations as a collaborative platform for domestic and overseas tomato trade is advocated. Enhanced collaboration among processors can streamline orders, reduce marketing costs, and promote tomatoes with a branded identity.
9. The agriculture department should facilitate tomato growers by establishing a dedicated desk. This initiative includes forging international connections, adopting new technologies, and participating in global events like food festivals and horticulture conferences to showcase tomatoes and their produce.

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