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Ensuring livelihoods: A critical review of the minimum support price's impact on small and marginal farmers

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Abstract

The Minimum Support Price (MSP) policy is a vital government intervention to safeguard the income and livelihoods of small and marginal farmers, ensuring economic stability and food security. This paper examines the historical evolution of MSP in India, its operational mechanisms, and the significant impact on agricultural sustainability and farmer welfare. MSP guarantees a price floor for agricultural produce, encouraging crop diversification and mitigating risks such as market volatility, input costs, and climatic challenges. While the system has positively impacted agricultural production, particularly in rice and wheat surplus regions like Punjab and Andhra Pradesh, its effectiveness is inconsistent across regions. Kerala's decentralized procurement system serves as a model for other states, emphasizing the importance of regional adjustments in policy implementation. Despite the benefits of MSP, various challenges, such as limited awareness among farmers, logistical bottlenecks, and market distortions caused by bonuses, limit its efficacy. This paper suggests reforms to enhance MSP's coverage and efficiency through better awareness, infrastructure investments, and policy restructuring to ensure that the benefits reach a wider segment of the farming community.

Keywords: Minimum support price, price floor, decentralized procurement system

Introduction

The Minimum Support Price (MSP) is a vital economic policy designed by the government to safeguard the livelihoods of small and marginal farmers, who are especially vulnerable to market uncertainties (Wadhwa and Nandal, 2023) [29]. In agricultural economies like India, where farming is the backbone of rural life, MSP ensures that farmers receive a minimum assured price for their crops, providing them with financial protection and reducing the risk of distress sales (Vohra and Sharma, 2024) [28]. Initially introduced in the mid-20th century, MSP has since become a cornerstone of India's agricultural framework, helping farmers manage price fluctuations, ensure food security, and encourage crop diversification (Shivani *et al.*, 2022) [25].

In today's context, the significance of MSP has only grown, as smallholder farmers continue to face numerous obstacles such as unpredictable weather, rising input costs, and fluctuating market prices. MSP serves as a critical buffer against these challenges, offering farmers a reliable income by guaranteeing a minimum price for their produce, which is particularly beneficial during bumper crop seasons when market prices tend to drop (Lal and Ranawat, 2022) [16].

MSP is declared prior to the sowing season, enabling farmers to plan their production with greater certainty. However, the effectiveness of this policy varies widely across different regions, crops, and farmer groups, depending largely on factors like awareness, accessibility to procurement facilities, and regional infrastructure (Dev, 2023) [9]. This paper examines the historical development of MSP, evaluates its contemporary role in agricultural policy, and explores the challenges and reforms necessary to enhance its effectiveness.

Historical Evolution of MSP in India

The roots of the Minimum Support Price (MSP) system in India can be traced back to the period following the country's independence in 1947, when the government recognized the urgent need to ensure food security for its rapidly growing population (Balkrishna *et al.*, 2023) [20]. In the early years, the primary focus was on building buffer stocks for public distribution by procuring essential food grains like wheat and rice at assured prices. These efforts, though vital for addressing immediate food shortages, were initially limited in scope and largely reactive in nature. However, a significant transformation occurred with the advent of the Green Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s, which marked a pivotal shift in Indian agriculture (Sumit *et*

al., 2022) [25]. During this period, the adoption of high-yielding varieties of wheat and rice, along with substantial improvements in irrigation, mechanization, and the use of fertilizers, led to a dramatic increase in agricultural productivity. To support this technological and production revolution, the government formalized the MSP system, offering farmers a guaranteed price for key crops, thus encouraging them to embrace these new agricultural technologies and practices. This assurance of minimum prices helped mitigate the risks farmers faced from market fluctuations and enabled them to invest confidently in modern farming techniques (Yadav *et al*., 2019) [30].

In 1965, the Agricultural Prices Commission (APC) was established to institutionalize the process of price support for farmers, which was later renamed the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices (CACP). The primary role of CACP was to recommend MSPs for various crops based on a comprehensive analysis of factors such as production costs, market conditions, and the need for farmers to receive a fair return on their investment. This marked a systematic approach to supporting agricultural incomes and stabilizing prices. By the late 1970s, the MSP system had expanded significantly, with the inclusion of additional crops such as pulses, oilseeds, cotton, and jute. This expansion reflected the government's broader agricultural strategy to promote crop diversification, reduce the dependency on staple grains like wheat and rice, and address the inherent risks of mono-cropping. The diversification effort was crucial for improving the resilience of Indian agriculture, helping farmers reduce vulnerability to market volatility and environmental risks while ensuring sustainable growth in the agricultural sector (Sharma and Saini, 1994) [21].

The Role of MSP in Modern Agricultural Policy

The Minimum Support Price (MSP) plays a pivotal role in promoting agricultural sustainability in India by insulating farmers from the negative impacts of market fluctuations (Reddy, 2021). As a safeguard, MSP ensures that farmers receive a guaranteed minimum price for their crops, providing them with financial stability and preventing distress sales, particularly during times of surplus when market prices tend to fall. This protection allows farmers to maintain a steady income, encouraging them to invest in improved agricultural practices and adopt modern farming techniques. MSP, by maintaining price levels even when there is an excess supply of produce, creates a buffer that shields farmers from the volatility of market forces. This income assurance is especially critical in a sector prone to unpredictable weather conditions and fluctuating input costs, where farmers' livelihoods are often at risk (Vanshika and Harsana, 2022; Roy, 2023; Lal and Ranawat, 2022) [27, 19, 16].

In addition to income stability, MSP plays an essential role in fostering crop diversification, reducing the dependence on a narrow range of staple crops like wheat and rice. By providing price support for a variety of crops, including oilseeds and pulses, the MSP system encourages farmers to shift away from mono-cropping, which poses risks such as soil depletion and vulnerability to pests. This shift not only improves soil health but also contributes to nutritional security, as previously neglected crops are cultivated more widely. For instance, the introduction of MSP for oilseeds and pulses has incentivized farmers to grow these crops, which are vital for maintaining soil fertility and ensuring a balanced diet for the population (Singh and Bhogal, 2021; Gupta *et al*., 2021) [23, 14].

Moreover, MSP contributes significantly to food security by enabling the government to maintain adequate buffer stocks of essential grains through its procurement process. These buffer stocks are crucial in stabilizing food prices, particularly during times of scarcity or inflationary pressures caused by supply shocks. The steady flow of essential commodities into the market, facilitated by MSP, ensures that both farmers and consumers benefit from price stability. For consumers, particularly those from economically vulnerable groups, MSP-supported buffer stocks distributed through the Public Distribution System (PDS) ensure access to affordable food. Thus, MSP not only secures farmers' incomes but also plays a fundamental role in stabilizing the broader agricultural economy by promoting crop diversity, ensuring food security, and preventing inflationary spikes in food prices. This multi-dimensional role makes MSP a critical tool in addressing both farmer welfare and consumer needs in India's complex agricultural landscape (Thomas, 2017; Sahoo *et al.*, 2019; Sharma, 2018; Duncan and Claeys, 2018) [26, 20, 22, 11].

Operational Mechanisms of MSP

The implementation of the Minimum Support Price (MSP) in India operates through two primary mechanisms, each designed to address different logistical and market challenges: The Storage-Based MSP and the Credit-Based MSP (Deficiency Payment System). The Storage-Based MSP is the more traditional and widely implemented system, particularly for staple crops like rice and wheat. In this system, the government directly procures crops from farmers at the predetermined MSP, providing them with an assured market. These procured crops are then stored in government warehouses, which requires a significant amount of physical infrastructure, including storage facilities and transportation logistics. The crops are later distributed through various channels such as the Public Distribution System (PDS), which helps maintain strategic food reserves that can be used during periods of scarcity or price fluctuations. This method offers a safety net for farmers, ensuring that they receive a guaranteed price for their crops and that the government can build up buffer stocks to stabilize food prices and supply in the market (Chintapalli and Tang, 2022) [6].

In contrast, the Credit-Based MSP, also known as the Deficiency Payment System, takes a more market-driven approach. In this system, farmers sell their produce in the open market. If the market price falls below the MSP, the government compensates the difference, ensuring that farmers still receive the guaranteed price without the need for the government to physically procure or store the crops. This system, while less commonly implemented than the storage-based model, is particularly useful for crops such as oilseeds and pulses, which are more perishable or where storage infrastructure may be inadequate. By eliminating the need for large-scale procurement and storage, the credit-based system significantly reduces logistical challenges and the costs associated with handling large volumes of crops (Chintapalli, 2022) [7].

Each mechanism has its advantages depending on the type of crop and the region in which it is implemented. The storage-based system provides a direct safety net for farmers by ensuring that their crops are procured at a guaranteed price, thus offering them greater financial security. It also enables the government to manage food supplies and maintain buffer stocks, which are critical for price stabilization and food security. However, this system can be costly and logistically challenging due to the infrastructure required to store and transport the procured crops. On the other hand, the credit-based system, while reducing these logistical burdens, offers a more efficient solution for crops that may not be easily stored or where infrastructure is lacking. This system provides flexibility by allowing market dynamics to dictate sales while still offering financial protection to farmers through compensation when market prices fall below the MSP (Chari, 2017) [5]. Both systems are crucial to ensuring the effectiveness of MSP in India, addressing the diverse needs of the agricultural sector.

Impact of MSP on Farmers' Livelihoods

The Minimum Support Price (MSP) system has had a transformative impact on the livelihoods of small and marginal farmers in India, particularly in regions where its implementation has been robust. States such as Punjab and Andhra Pradesh, which are key producers of rice and wheat, have witnessed significant improvements in farmer income security due to the effective functioning of the MSP program. In these states, the government's procurement systems ensure that a large proportion of agricultural produce, especially paddy, is bought at the guaranteed MSP, preventing farmers from resorting to distress sales during periods of market fluctuation or surplus (Das, 2020) [8]. This stability has contributed to greater agricultural productivity and income reliability, which is crucial for rural economies that are highly dependent on farming (Dhawan and Singh, 2019; Bagria, 2023) [10, 3].

The impact of MSP is evident from recent data showing substantial growth in paddy procurement across the country. Between 2018 and 2021, paddy procurement in India increased by 40.8%, rising from 40.2 million tonnes in 2018-19 to 56.6 million tonnes in 2021-22. This increase reflects not only the effectiveness of MSP but also the growing reliance of farmers on the system as a safeguard against market volatility. The procurement system has been particularly beneficial in states like Chhattisgarh, Telangana, and Odisha, where over 80% of small and marginal farmers have been able to access MSP for their paddy crops (GOI, 2016; GOI, 2017) [12, 13]. These states highlight the program's role in supporting vulnerable farming communities and providing a safety net in regions where smallholder farmers are most susceptible to market risks.

In addition to the rise in crop procurement, the number of farmers benefiting from MSP has also seen significant growth. The number of paddy farmers benefiting from procurement operations increased from 96 lakh in 2018-19 to 126 lakhs in 2021-22, marking a 31.25% increase. This growth in farmer participation underscores the importance of MSP as a tool for stabilizing rural economies and alleviating poverty among smallholders (CACP, 2023) [4]. By guaranteeing a minimum price and providing a reliable market for their produce, MSP has helped reduce the financial uncertainty faced by farmers, thus playing a crucial role in sustaining livelihoods in agrarian regions. The rise in both the volume of procurement and the number of beneficiaries illustrates the increasing awareness among farmers about MSP's benefits and the program's growing significance in securing the rural economy.

Regional Disparities in MSP Effectiveness

Despite its successes, the MSP system faces significant regional disparities. In states like Punjab and Andhra Pradesh, the system has been highly effective, with a large proportion of farmers benefiting from government procurement. However, in paddy-deficit states like West Bengal and Bihar, the system has been less effective (Ali *et al*., 2012) [2]. These regions have lower awareness of the MSP system (Singh *et al*., 2015) [24], and farmers are less likely to participate in government procurement schemes.

Moreover, the size of the farm plays a critical role in determining whether a farmer benefits from MSP. Small and marginal farmers, who have lower marketable surpluses, are more likely to sell their produce at the farm-gate or to local traders, where prices are often lower than the MSP (Aditya *et al*., 2017) [1]. Larger farmers, on the other hand, are more likely to be aware of MSP and have the resources to transport their produce to procurement centers, where they can receive the guaranteed price (Mehla *et al*., 2022) [17].

Challenges in the MSP System

Several challenges undermine the effectiveness of the MSP system (Jana and Manna, 2024) [15]:

1. **Awareness and Accessibility:** Many farmers, particularly small and marginal farmers, are unaware of the MSP system or do not have the means to access government procurement centers. This issue is exacerbated by illiteracy, lack of internet access, and logistical barriers in rural areas.
2. **Market Distortions:** In some states, the provision of bonuses over and above the MSP has led to market distortions, discouraging private sector participation in agricultural markets and reducing competition. This, in turn, has led to artificial shortages in some areas and an oversupply in others.
3. **Regional Disparities**: As mentioned, the effectiveness of MSP varies widely across states, with paddy-surplus regions like Punjab and Andhra Pradesh benefiting significantly more than paddy-deficit regions like West Bengal and Bihar. This uneven distribution raises concerns about equity and the overall efficiency of the system.
4. **Logistical Challenges**: The storage-based MSP system requires significant infrastructure, including warehouses, transportation networks, and trained personnel. In many states, the lack of adequate infrastructure has limited the effectiveness of MSP procurement operations, leading to delays and wastage.

Case Study: Kerala's Decentralized Procurement System

Kerala's decentralized paddy procurement system offers a successful model for other states. Under this system, the Kerala State Civil Supplies Corporation (SUPPLYCO)

procures paddy directly from farmers at the MSP, bypassing middlemen and ensuring that farmers receive a competitive price for their produce. This system has encouraged more farmers to participate in MSP and has contributed to the growth of paddy cultivation in the state.

The state has also implemented the Kerala Farm Fresh Fruits and Vegetables Base Price Scheme, which ensures that farmers receive a minimum price for selected fruits and vegetables. This scheme, based on a deficiency payment system, compensates farmers when market prices fall below the base price, thereby providing income security and encouraging the cultivation of these crops.

Base Price is the minimum price for a designated agricultural commodity which will be given to the farmer when there is a fall in the market price below the announced base price. It provides an assured income to the farmer and prevent price fluctuations in the market. At the same time, it motivates the farmer to cultivate the crops for which there is a base price, as a farmer is assured of minimum returns. Moreover, this will help increase the production of vegetables in the state and thereby help in the achievement of self- sufficiency in vegetable production. This programme indirectly benefits consumers as well, as they are provided with locally grown, healthy indigenous produce.

Objectives of Kerala Farm Fresh Fruits & Vegetables base price scheme

- To augment the marketing capacity by involving multiple stakeholder departments.
- To ensure price stability and better returns for our farmers.
- To protect the farmers from fluctuating market prices
- To act as a tool for the government to control sharp fall and rise in the prices of the selected crops.
- To encourage increase in area under cultivation of fruits and vegetables and ensure food security

The State Agricultural Prices Board had conducted a study on cost of cultivation of 16 fruits and vegetables and based on this base price was declared for 16 crops. Base price has been notified in the following 16 vegetables and fruits.

Implementation of the scheme

For implementation of the scheme 300 markets have been selected across the state and notified by the Director of Agriculture.

The price of the selected commodities in the above notified markets has to be updated daily in the portal by the officials concerned and this is used as reference for declaration of base price. Assistant Director of Agriculture (ADA - Marketing) at the district level will ensure the updation on the portal and preliminary data is analysed regularly.

Determination of fall in price and announcement of base price

For this, a District Level Price Monitoring Committee (DLPMC) is to be constituted with District Collector as Chairman, Principal Agricultural Officer as convenor and 8 other members as representatives from stakeholder agencies.

Responsibilities

1. This committee will assess whether the reference market price has fallen below the base price in the district and will recommend to the Director of Agriculture to declare base price for the crop.
2. District level monitoring –DLPMC will assess the reference market data to know whether the market price has fallen below the base price.

In the case of procurement by the Agriculture Department and its agencies, the decision of the DLPMC is communicated immediately to the Director of Agriculture online. Principal Agricultural Officers shall ensure that DLPMC is convened as soon as price fall for a particular commodity is noticed, as Base price for a commodity is declared with effect from the date of DLPMC meeting. Upon receipt of the decision, the Director of Agriculture declares the fall in price which will initiate procurement procedures as per the base price protocol by the various procurement agencies.

Standard Operating Procedure

1. Farmers Registration

Farmers desiring assistance under the scheme must register in the AIMS portal along with details of area, date of planting, expected yield, date of harvest before the specified time. For Banana, Pineapple and Tapioca, farmers should apply before 90 days after planting and for vegetables before 30 days after planting.

2. Analysis of Market price

Notified markets will update the daily market prices in AIMS portal. The concerned officers in charge of these markets will be responsible for these operations. Daily market price will be analysed from the data uploaded by the notified market. ADA Marketing will ensure that the data is uploaded and will analyse the uploaded data.

3. Declaration of base price

DLPMC will assess the price of the selected items and compare with the base price. If the reference price falls below the base price, DLPMC will make a recommendation to Director of Agriculture to declare the base price of that particular crop to be effective in the district.

4. What farmers must do?

On declaration of base price by Director of Agriculture, the registered farmers will bring their produce along with Smart ID to the notified markets. The notified markets will receive the goods and will provide the market price to the farmers. The price of the produce will be fixed based on its quality The difference in market price and base price will be credited to the bank accounts of the farmers through Direct Beneficiary Transfer (DBT). The daily details of procurement (item wise quantity, price, bill no. etc) must be uploaded in the AIMS portal by the procurement agency.

5. Claim processing

Agricultural Officer shall verify the claims, approve and forward to ADA for approval.

ADA should sanction the claim and forward to DBT.

6. Payment of difference of price to farmers

After the approval of the duly recommended statements by

Director, the payment will be credited directly to the bank account of the farmers.

Conclusion

The MSP system remains a critical tool for sustaining the livelihoods of small and marginal farmers in India. However, to maximize its effectiveness, policymakers need to address the challenges of awareness, accessibility, and regional disparities. Reforms such as improving infrastructure, policy changes and timely interventions in refixing the MSP as per the actual cost of cultivation, inclusion of new crops as per the geographical demands can enhance the resilience of small and marginal farmers in the face of various challenges.

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