



Tropentag, September 15-17, 2021, hybrid conference

“Towards shifting paradigms in agriculture
for a healthy and sustainable future”

Direct Marketing Activities during Covid-19 Lockdown and Potential for Rural-Urban Linkages in Bengaluru, India

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Abstract

Rural-urban linkages are vital elements in a sustainable food system. As the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded, supply chains were disrupted and fear of infection impacted food shopping decisions, pushing consumers to seek local and safer options for procuring fresh produce. Direct marketing arose as a promising alternative for both consumers and producers. We undertook a study in Bengaluru, India, in order to understand how direct marketing activities have unfolded with the COVID-19 pandemic. Media reports highlighted the plight of farmers struggling to market their harvest during lockdown as well as the farm to fork initiatives and lockdown farmers markets that were created as a response.

This study conducted online and telephone surveys with both consumers and producers in Bengaluru to explore the elements of supply and demand that have fostered and hindered direct marketing schemes. We targeted urban, middle-class consumers for their role in driving consumption trends and their targetability through online data collection methods. We surveyed Resident Welfare Associations to understand their role in fostering direct marketing between urban households and peri-urban farmers. We also surveyed Farmer Producer Organizations to better understand how they pivoted and adapted their marketing activities to the changes caused by the pandemic and lockdown.

We found that consumers are interested in sourcing fruits and vegetables directly from farmers, but communication and logistics between consumers and producers are major hindrances. Although producers are diversifying their marketing strategies, operating these different channels at economically viable scales is essential to ensure long-term success. We find that the role of technology, specifically messaging apps, can streamline direct marketing activities and remove the barriers that currently hamper rural-urban linkages. Finally, existing community and farmer organisations have the size and scale to make direct marketing schemes a worthy endeavor for both consumers and producers and bolster the overall sustainability of the local food system.

Keywords: City Region Food System, COVID-19, Direct Marketing, Farmer Producer Organisation, India, Resident Welfare Association, Rural-Urban Linkages, Supply Chains