

Opinion Commentary
Agriculture, Seed Industry and Post Pandemic Era

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Abstract

Collectively we experience an unprecedented time in the history of humanity. This is true not only of the agricultural seed sector of Pakistan but of the world's agricultural economies. The culprit being Coronavirus, oft dubbed as Covid-19. A culprit of pandemic proportion. What might be the ultimate impact on Pakistan's seed sector? On the global agricultural economy? I share my personal musings. I do not claim to be clairvoyant but rather to simply raise questions of import related to various possible impacts that might emanate from the pandemic. Granted, I am not a Pakistani nor do I live in the nation. However, I am an observer having established ties to agricultural development efforts in the country. Those ties span and are intertwined with academic, industry and governmental initiatives and realities since 1992. My interests have been somewhat hybridized over the years to address issues within the context of agricultural extension and seed industry development. Issues and impacts, classified as being either near-term or long-term, will be explored. First, let us address the seed itself. The following thoughts address the seed industry. Last thoughts focus on the broader industry of agriculture. My reference points being observations across the US Midwest (corn and soybean production regions) and information gleaned from and about Pakistan.

Near-Term

Pakistan experienced some seasonal disruption in official seed field inspections required of certain crop kinds. Thus, quality standards may have been lowered to meet immediate planting requirements and the quantity of seed intended to meet future crop planting demand may have been reduced. Travel restrictions affected physical delivery of some finished planting seed intended to meet current season farmer needs in some production regions. Thus, some finished quality seed may have been diverted to the grain channels in some areas. While some fields intended to produce seed for future plantings may now be destined to produce grain as opposed to the higher valued seed.

The U.S. did not experience said disruptions. Seed company distribution networks appeared to have efficiently moved final product to farm production regions albeit somewhat in advance of the typical delivery times – meeting farmer demand. In addition, it appears that technology companies and seed company partners stayed the course with respect to the planting of scheduled regulated field trials of biotechnology induced seed products seeking approvals within the regulatory process. I believe this to be true for activities conducted in both the US and in other hemispheres. Therefore, in the short term, Pakistan has experienced more disruption than that of the US. However, the effects of these near-term impacts, as unpleasant as they be, should soon fade away.

Long-Term

The story, of long-term impacts, upon the seed industry and greater agricultural sector of Pakistan as compared to compatriots having more mature agricultural sectors likely will reveal certain differences. Yet, I expect there to be more similarities but those to be expressed in varying degrees.

What the future holds for global seed and agricultural economy sectors, post-pandemic, wholly depends upon the answers to key questions of today and of the questions that will surface tomorrow. Time alone will tell. But how much time?

A few of many questions that linger in my mind include:

- 1) Will government entities officially lower seed quality standards simply to assure product quantities will meet farmer demands?
- 2) Will the general economic impact, from Covid-19, allow public and private sector investment in seed development that can operate under ethical standards and to offer quality seed products of value to farmers?

- 3) Will the general economic impact, from Covid-19, allow on-going efforts to create, identify or supply improved inputs and technologies (in addition to seed) in support of farmers?
- 4) Will the general economic impact, from Covid-19, allow governmental initiatives that will assure orderly and timely introductions of new and improved crop varieties (including intellectual rights protections) and multiplication and proliferation of those varieties?
- 5) Will the general economic impact, from Covid-19, allow individual farmers freedom to operate in a progressive manner that incorporates the use of quality seed as a known best practice as opposed to sliding backward toward subsistence farming?
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Not only must we have the answers to deep questions such as these, we must then understand implications of those answers to each question upon the other. Only then, might the long-term impact of the pandemic upon seed and agriculture be known. Understanding that impact will take much longer as there will yet be much to learn.

My 70th birthday approaches. It is unlikely I will personally evidence the long-term impact from this present-day global atrocity. The atrocity being the pandemic that reared its ugly head in 2019. However, early career agricultural professionals are faced with a unique opportunity, nay an obligation, to help shape the global response to Covid-19 rather than to only sit back and “experience it”.

I entreat early career agricultural professionals in the extension and rural development arena to rise to the occasion. Truly, you can personally impact (verb) the impact (noun) of today’s pandemic on agriculture and the seed industry. I believe this to be true not only for Pakistan but around the globe.

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