

Perpetually on antibiotics

Poultry feed is a thriving business in India, with 63.8 per cent of the feed manufactured in the country catering to poultry, followed by dairy (29.6 per cent) and aquaculture (5.8 per cent), as per the global feed survey of 2019 conducted by Alltech—a private multinational company headquartered in the US.

Concern -

- All the companies accept that their feeds contain antibiotics or medicines.
- A variety of antibiotics such as ciprofloxacin, levofloxacin, erythromycin, nalidixic acid, neomycin, kanamycin, avilamycin, apramycin and flavomycin, are administered to poultry through feed for growth promotion.
- Antibiotics are under the purview of the Central Drugs Standard and Control Organization (CDSCO) under the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MOHFW). In the Drugs and Cosmetics (D&C) Act, 1940, antibiotics are typically placed under Schedule H which makes it mandatory. However, when antibiotics are added to feed, the resultant product no longer remains under the purview of CDSCO or any other authority.

Government advisories -

- The Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) provides norms for various animal feeds, such as cattle, fish and poultry. The poultry feed specifications (IS 1374) of 2007 mention that use of antibiotic growth promoters with systemic action are not recommended.
- Even the Department of Animal Husbandry and Dairying (DAHD) under the Union Ministry of Fisheries, Animal Husbandry and Dairying, had issued an advisory to all states and Union Territories in 2014 stating that antibiotics should not be allowed in feed and feed supplement as growth promoter.

What must be done?

- To contain anti-microbial resistance, antibiotics should not be allowed in feed. We should begin with phasing out all antibiotics medically important for humans. CDSCO should amend the D&C Act to ensure that antibiotics are not available without prescription for any use in human and veterinary sector.
- Additionally, the D&C Act should be modified to give necessary powers to drug officials so that antibiotic misuse in feeds can be regulated. This will also help CDSCO regulate the import of antibiotic-laden feed supplements, which otherwise is not under its purview. CDSCO should also regulate the addition of loose antibiotics to feed separately. BIS should make the poultry feed specifications mandatory and develop necessary standards for other sectors.
- To complement the above, MOHFW should consider banning all medically important antibiotics for humans from use in feed or feed supplements. It should also ensure that colistin-laden feed supplements are not marketed or sold, as CSE found during its research despite ban. To support these measures, DAHD should encourage farmers to adopt better farming practices.

A dirty US fight to control WIPO

Early in March, the World Intellectual Property Organisation, or WIPO as it is known, said it had nominated Daren Tang Heng Shim as its new director-general to take over from Francis Gurry whose term ends in September. The announcement followed several rounds of voting which eliminated eight of the 10 aspirants, leaving Tang of Singapore and Wang Binyang of China to fight it out. In any case, the contest to gain control of the UN agency which oversees the international property (IP) system globally was only between these two.

The issue -

- Chinese candidate Wang Binyang was undercut by a fierce US campaign against China which came in the wake of trade war that Donald Trump had launched against the Xi Jinping regime, accusing it of IP theft.
- It must be remembered that WIPO is not a repository of patent secrets but only promotes the protection of IP.

Why the conflict?

- The reality is that China has established itself as an IP powerhouse in the last couple of years, overtaking the western nations and Japan in its scientific and technical prowess.
- This has unsettled the US which has been toppled from its decades long top position. With the China emerging as the world's most prolific filer of patents— according to WIPO it accounted for nearly half of the 3.3 million global patents in 2018—and leading in next generation technologies such as 5G and Artificial Intelligence, the country has become as tough in enforcing and protecting IP rights as its worst critics.

Extreme Disorder

By April, the COVID19 pandemic metamorphosed into everybody's crisis. Currently half of the world's population—3.1 billion people—is under lockdown, as per the Johns Hopkins University. The pandemic has forced countries that account for two-thirds of the planet's output and income to embrace containment policies, suggests the Centre for Economic Policy Research, a London based association of over 1,300 economists engaged in research.

Issue -

- The lockdown in India has kept the workers from working and consumers from consuming. This effectively has killed the demand and supply at the same time. The economy has ceased to exist and nobody knows for how long.
- Globally, at least 25 million people will be unemployed, which will translate into \$3.4 trillion loss in workers' income, estimates the International Labour Organization (ILO). The economic loss will precipitate further because an estimated 55 percent of the world's population does not have access to social protection.
- According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the global economy would slow down to below 2 per cent in 2020, leading to over \$1 trillion losses. According to the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), one percentage of global economic slowdown pushes poverty levels by 2 per cent. This means the pandemic will leave 14 million new poor in the world. Disruptions in labour markets will reduce labour productivity and supply by 1.4 per cent in 2020, as per IFPRI.
- The World Bank estimates that 100 million people fall back into extreme poverty each year due to unexpected catastrophic health expenditures. This number is likely to increase due to COVID-19. Over 40 per cent of the world's population has no health insurance or access to national health services. They spend close to 10 per cent of the family budget on healthcare every year.
- The current crisis has further precipitated food insecurity. Currently, 820 million people endure chronic hunger. Of them, 113 million are so food-insecure that they will die without external assistance.
- The current scenario has disrupted the livelihood chain and global support system. This will result in large scale hunger deaths. The scale of the crisis has prompted UNCTAD to seek a \$2.5 trillion rescue package to save developing countries from financial distress. It includes writing off debt worth \$1 trillion.
- Africa alone needs \$100 billion of immediate emergency financing to deal with the "pandemic shock" that will result in drastic revenues losses and economic slump.
- It will also jeopardise the progress of the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly in developing countries. A financing gap of \$2-3 trillion will be faced by developing countries for the next two years, as per UNCTAD.

Disturbing influx

A recent submission made by the Union government to the Supreme Court suggests that of the 41.4 million migrant workers in the country, more than 2.5 million are living in relief camps and shelters and 9.93 million are being provided food.

Concerns -

- Most of these migrant workers would start moving towards their towns or villages once the lockdown is lifted or relaxed, resulting in the second wave of mass exodus and adding to the rural burden.
- About half of the country's working population—231.8 million of the 474.1 million workforce, as per the last National Sample Survey Office report— are engaged in agriculture and allied activities, which is the mainstay of rural economy. Despite the government exempting farmers and farming activities from the lockdown rules, reports show that most are unable to sell their produce.
- With a share of almost 90 per cent of people working in the informal economy, about 400 million workers in the informal economy are at the risk of falling deeper into poverty during the crisis. A statistical brief released by its ILO in January 2019, notes that almost 67 per cent of the informal workers in the country belong to poor households.

Government response -

- Though the Union government has announced a special fiscal package of Rs 1.7 lakh crore to help the country's 800 million poor tide over the pandemic, economist activist Jean Drèze says the amount “discounting the creative accounting and window-dressing” is just 0.5 per cent of GDP, or less than what the Centre blew on corporate tax cuts last year.
- Economist like Arvind Subramanian says the country needs to release a fiscal package of Rs 8 lakh crore, or 5 per cent of its GDP.

Way forward -

- The government should take all measures to ensure safe harvesting and post-harvesting activities. Procurement at minimum support price and storage by the Food Corporation of India and state agencies needs to be enhanced to prevent a famine like condition from evolving, states the letter.
- Government should rather focus on being fast and disbursing relief package to most of the households without thinking whether there is some duplicity or not.

Water under fire

The World Health Organisation (WHO) recommends at least 20 seconds of thorough hand-scrubbing to get rid of the novel coronavirus. But a rough calculation shows the amount of water required for this is more than what people in several parts of the world can afford.

Example -

- If a person spends 30 to 40 seconds in hand-washing, it would require 4 litres of water when the tap is left on, and two litres when the tap is closed, estimates Delhi-based non-profit Centre for Science and Environment (CSE).
- WHO recommends frequent hand-washing to check the spread of COVID-19, so if a person cleans hands 10 times a day instead of the usual average of five times daily, 20-40 litres water would be used in a day. This means a five-member family would need 100 to 200 litres daily only to wash hands.
- More water use also means more wastewater. If one washes hands as indicated above, the water demand will increase 20 to 25 per cent. It also increases health risks. For instance, in India 65 per cent of wastewater is not treated and makes its way to various water bodies.

Concern -

- There are 160 million Indians and a total of two billion people in the world without access to clean water, states non-profit Water Aid in its report '*On the Frontline: The State of the World's Water 2020*'.
- Though no transmission has been proved so far, the investigation stresses that enough and safe water is important to maintain sanitation and hygiene facilities. The research was published *Lancet Gastroenterology and Hepatology in April 2020*.

Way forward -

The pandemic has thrown open opportunities for the world to learn how to tackle the effects of climate change—groundwater can be recharged by harvesting rain and protecting the water

bodies; and safe technologies to manage excreta and wastewater can protect surface as well as groundwater.