How to solve Farmer suicide crisis?

Why in news?

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- The **sluice gate on the Bhakra main line canal** in Sangrur district, Punjab, has become infamous. It is a **suicide point for farmers** and their families. Typically, 30-45 corpses are found in the canal on average every month.
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What is the suicide data in Punjab & in India?

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- Over 2,632 farmers are reported to have committed suicide between 1995 and 2015, according to State government records. Adding farm labourers raises the total to 4,687 reported suicides.
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- **The reasons for this vary:** cotton crop has been whittled by whiteflies, basmati's market price has declined, the local moneylender has hiked up rates. The farmer ekes his way to penury.
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- While traditionally the blame is cast on the local moneylenders, NCRB data highlights that 2,474 of the 3,000 farmers who were reported to have committed suicide in 2015 had loans from local banks, while those who had loans from moneylenders were just 9.8 per cent of the total.
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- **A larger number of small farmers rather than marginal farmers reportedly committed suicide** in States like Maharashtra, Telangana and Karnataka.
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Why agriculture became unviable?

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- Agriculture in States like Punjab is typically a **monoculture of wheat and paddy**.
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- When input costs associated with fertilizers, crop-protection chemicals and seeds rose, along with fixed costs associated with agricultural equipment such as tractors and submersible pumps, agriculture became economically unviable.
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- Prices of seeds and fertilizers have risen. Hiring labourers and animals has become expensive. With an increase in application of crop-protection chemicals, soya bean has seen a massive jump in pesticide cost.
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- **Given a jump in input costs, cultivation costs have gone up in multiples.** The total cost of cultivation for wheat rose three times from 2004-05 to 2012-13.
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How to solve this crisis?

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- Our policies should encourage **integrated pest management,** an approach that focusses on combining biological, chemical, mechanical and physical means to combat pests with a long-term emphasis on eliminating / significantly reducing the need for pesticides.
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- **In Vietnam,** over 2 million of the Mekong Delta's rice farmers adopted a **"no spray early" rule,** curbing insecticide applications within the first 40 days of rice planting. Predatory beetles that commonly prey on rice pests were sustained, encouraging the crop while cutting pesticide use by over 50 per cent.
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- The local fertilizer industry needs support — timely delivery of subsidies would improve working capital requirements, enabling them to manage costs through internal sources rather than external loans.
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- State seed policies should focus on **encouraging contract farming,** along with identification of new genotypes for treating pest and disease syndromes, as well as adverse weather conditions.
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- Precision-farming techniques like Systematic Rice Intensification (SRI) can

help increase seed production in this regard.
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- Our **farm equipment policy needs to be retailored** with a focus on manufacturing farming equipment and implements that are currently imported.
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- Subsidies should be rerouted to ensure lower collateral requirements, longer moratoriums and payback periods for farmers seeking to buy equipments.
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- Companies with a **corporate social responsibility focus on agriculture** can be further encouraged to invest in capacity-building initiatives and skill development.
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- We need to ensure that institutional financing is available and accessible. States should seek to establish early warning signals and monitoring farmers. **Village-wise lists of deeply indebted farmers must be prepared** annually to identify farmers on the flight path to penury and potential suicide.
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- NABARD, along with the local administration, should be tasked with analysing such lists for macro and local policy interventions, along with devising timely **loan restructuring initiatives, insurance claim settlements** and better counselling.
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Way Forward:

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Finally, such individuals must be treated with the dignity and respect they deserve. Given the hard struggle of making a living in agriculture these days, such farmers face big odds for sustaining their families and educating their children. **Only systemic change can transform their situation.** The marginal farmer requires more than just hope now.

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Source: The Hindu

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