

India must detoxify its poisoned farmlands

Last week, the [Maharashtra government registered a police complaint](#) against three pesticide companies and Krishi Seva Kendras (agro-input centres) for selling pesticides not recommended for the region after 32 farmers from Vidarbha died of poisoning. The agriculture department, which is responsible for educating farmers about pesticides, found highly toxic and expensive ones were being sold to unsuspecting farmers by the firms to earn profits. While the deaths indicate failure of the department itself, the genesis of the crisis dates back to the time of the Green Revolution in the 1960s when the need was felt to sharply increase crop productivity to ensure food security. This problem --- increase in the use of pesticides --- is not an India-specific problem: Since 1950, population has doubled, yet the area of arable land used to feed these people has increased by only 10%. There are huge pressures to provide food, at low cost, on land that is becoming more and more degraded as nutrients are stripped from the soil. Naturally, farmers started to rely on external inputs – fertilisers and pesticides for short-term solution for large-scale commercially intensive agricultural systems, says a [report by Greenpeace](#).

PESTICIDES IN OUR ENVIRONMENT

This over-reliance has led to several problems: Many of these chemicals have become extremely pervasive in our environment as a result of their widespread repeated use and, in some cases, their environmental persistence. The report adds that some take an extremely long time to degrade, such that even those banned decades ago, including DDT and its secondary products, are routinely found in the environment today. What's important to understand here is that it is not just farmers and pesticide applicators are at risk from pesticide use: When women are exposed to pesticides during pregnancy, some of these chemicals pass directly to the child in the womb. During development, the foetus is particularly vulnerable to the toxic impacts of pesticides. Young children, in general, are more susceptible than adults due to their increased exposure rates, in that toddlers and crawling babies are more likely to touch surfaces in the home and put their hands in their mouths. Medical management of pesticide poisoning is difficult because there is little evidence with which to determine the best strategies for treatment and there is often an intermittent supply of antidotes, say experts.

WE MUST DETOX OUR FARMLANDS

The only sure-shot approach to reduce exposure to toxic pesticides is through a move towards a more long-term and sustainable approach to producing food. This will require legally-binding agreements to immediately phase-out all pesticides that are toxic to non-target organisms implemented at both national and international level. It will not be easy to achieve this but it's worth giving a strong push --- a similar one that is happening in the case of air pollution --- for a healthier tomorrow.

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