

# International Farmers Suicide Crisis



We urge the UNCSO to recognize and address the growing problem of suicide among the international community of farmers.



# The Global Perspective

- The suicide rate for farmers throughout the world is higher than for the non-farming population.
- In the Midwest of the U.S. suicide rates among male farmers are twice that of the general population.
- In Britain farmers are taking their own lives at a rate of one a week.
- In India, one farmer committed suicide every 32 minutes between 1997 and 2005.
- All over the world the impact of an industrial approach to boosting crop yields has stripped many small farmers of their self-sufficiency and thrown them into despair.

# The impact on farmers worldwide

- While the prices of crops have been pushed down - often even below the cost of production - the prices of inputs such as seed, fertilizers and pesticides have gone up.
- With limited resources, farmers depend on borrowed money to purchase seeds and other inputs and to farm their land. A drop in their farm income could quickly lead to farmers owing more than they own.

# Even So, Why Are Farmer Suicide Rates So High?

- Financial Stress - constant financial pressure related to the “Farm Crisis” and ongoing drought and flood which add to the economic problems
- Loss of independence and control: many of the issues are not within the farmer’s control – disease, weather, government policy, but the debts are personal
- Sense of Loss: repeated sense of hopelessness, loss of crops, loss of land, loss of income, loss of community, loss of family farm, loss of a way of life
- Geographical remoteness and the potential for social isolation
- Untreated Mental Illness: Lack of access to mental health services in rural areas and the stigma attached to treatment
- Depression arising from exposure to agricultural chemicals/pesticides may increase the risk for mood disorders and ultimately suicide

# Indian Farmer's Crisis: History and Background



- 66 per cent of rural laborers in India are dependent on agricultural activity for their income.
- Exacerbated by two years of drought in 1965 and 1966, the Indian government turned to high yielding, genetically modified, “miracle-seeds” provided by the World Bank and the United States.
- These seeds, coupled with the Indian government's assistance and price incentives, sparked the Green Revolution in India.

## Chemicals and Drought produce zero yield in late 1980s



- Although these farming methods worked for several years for many farmers, they began to show adverse effects in the late 1980s.
- The overuse of chemical fertilizers caused the soil to become infertile.
- This, coupled with a reduction in the genetic variety of crops, and three years of drought led to zero yield.
- Without crops to sell farmers were unable to pay their debts.

## The Legacy Today



*“Rates of growth of agriculture in the last decade have been poor and are a major cause of rural distress. Farming is increasingly becoming an unviable activity.”*

-Manmohan Singh, Prime Minister of India, 2007

## Why is it happening?



- 15 years of economic reforms have given farmers access to expensive and promising biotechnology
- These reforms have not led to crop insurance, land irrigation, or enough bank loans
- Reforms opened Indian farmers to global competition, such as with the United States and UK who receive over \$18 billion a year in subsidies
- For farmers in India such foreign subsidies have driven down the price of crops in the global market, such as cotton



## Farmers receive minimal financial support



- In order to compete, many farmers turned to high-cost seeds, fertilizers and pesticides, believing in easier returns.
- Modified seeds cost nearly twice as much as ordinary ones, necessitating larger loans.
- There has been minimal financial support from the government for small farmers.
- Many small farmers don't qualify for bank credit, forcing farmers to turn to moneylenders, who charge up to 20% interest on a four-month loan.
- As collateral, farmers often sign away the title to their land.
- The benefit of India's 2008 farmer relief package remains to be seen.



## The tipping-point is relatively low

- A crop failure, an unexpected health expense or the marriage of a daughter are perilous to the livelihood of these farmers
- Suicide has spread like an epidemic among the distraught farmers.
- Many farmers have committed suicide by drinking the very pesticides that no longer work on their crops.

# The number of famers committing suicide is staggering



- **More than 100,000** farmers have **taken their lives** since **1997**.
- **86.5 percent** of farmers who took their own lives were **financially indebted**
- Their **average debt** was about **\$835**.
- On average, there has been **one farmer's suicide every 32 minutes** since 2002.

# Where is it happening?



- Punjab
- Haryana
- Rajasthan
- Karnataka
- Kerala
- Madhya Pradesh
- Maharashtra

## Cotton Farmers are hardest hit by global competition and poor yield



*“The cotton belt is where the suicides are taking place on a very, very large scale. It is the suicide belt of India.”*

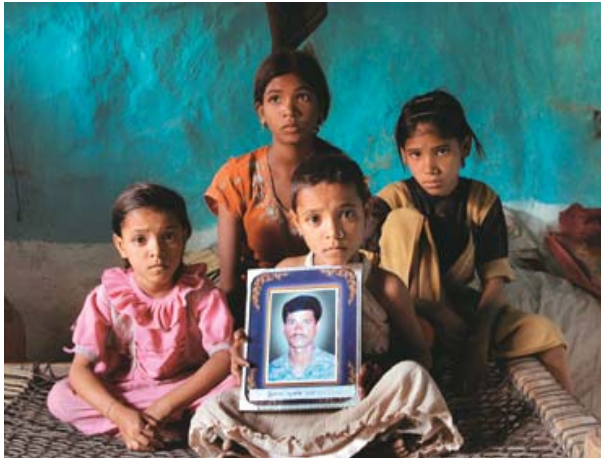
- Vandana Shiva, Agricultural Economist, 2006

## Vidarbha, State of Maharashtra



- Home to 3.2 million cotton farmers.
- Over 200 suicides from July 2005 to February 2006
- In this state alone there were almost 2 suicides a day in this eight month period
- According to a study by the government of Maharashtra, almost 6 in 10 of those who kill themselves had debts between \$110 and \$550.

# What happens to the families after a farmer commits suicide?



- Farms are confiscated due to inability to pay back high interest loans.
- Harassment of the family by corrupt moneylenders.
- Widows burdened with the new responsibility as the sole breadwinner.
- Children sometimes lose both parents to suicide. Forcing their education to a halt, especially if they have to work in order to provide for their needs.

## M.A. Math's Relief Efforts



*“ The problem cannot be solved through economic packages alone. What is needed is social and spiritual interventions so that the farmers realize that suicide is not the way out...they should understand that they need to develop self confidence. The future generation should have the mental strength to face life's challenges.”*

- Amma, March 2007





## Amma's actions to date:



- Amma met with Vilasrao Deshmukh, the Chief Minister of Maharashtra, in March 2007 to discuss a farmer relief package.
- M.A. Math (MAM) pledged a \$43 million in a financial support package towards farmer suicide relief efforts.
- Amma felt that counseling and education would immensely help farmers overcome this dire situation.

# Amrita SREE (Self Reliance Education and Employment)



- Free vocational training to 25,000 groups of women from impoverished agricultural families.
- After completion of their training, the women are given the necessary start-up capital to begin small, home-based businesses.
- Financial counseling provided in order to prepare these women to qualify for proper bank loans.

# Vidyamritam – Educational Scholarships



- Initially, MAM planned to provide full scholarships to 30,000 children (ages 10 to 15) of farmers living below the poverty line.
- Due to the number of unanticipated applications received, the MAM pledged to sponsor the education of 100,000 children all over India.
- Conducting awareness campaigns, special advanced education camps, and symposiums on environmental prevention.

## First phase of the Amrita Sree Program implemented on February 5, 2008

- Working capital was distributed to 101 women self-help groups
- The capital was distributed by Opposition Leader Oommen Chandy in the presence of Amma, on behalf of the M.A. Math.
- Senator Veerendrakumar, distributed the working capital to a self-help group for starting a fashion-designing institution.

## Research



- The MAM is currently studying cases of suicide amongst Indian farmers and has established programs to help end such tragedies.

# Working together to solve the crisis



- Social support provides a buffering effect for stress
- The greater the support from friends, family, local communities, national policies and society as a whole, the less impact stress will have on individuals and families
- Everyone who eats has a stake in small farmers' well-being
- It is crucial for governments and NGOs to work together, on a local, national and global level, to address and solve this critical issue

## Unity and compassion on a world scale



*“In truth, the situation is worse than a third world war. If it were war, there would be instant death—not this long, drawn out suffering. Rectifying the situation is a Himalayan task. Only if we generate love and compassion in our hearts and come together as one can we hope to make a change.”*

- Amma

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