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Agrarian Crisis and Farmer Suicides in India: A Regional Analysis of Vidarbha

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Abstract

Indian agriculture continues to face persistent agrarian distress marked by income instability, climate vulnerability, and high incidences of farmer suicides, particularly in rainfed regions. This study examines the structural causes of agrarian distress with a focused regional analysis of Maharashtra and the Vidarbha region. Using a qualitative and analytical approach based on secondary data and policy review, the paper analyses economic, ecological, and institutional drivers of livelihood insecurity, including rising costs of cultivation, climate variability, weak market integration, and limitations of existing risk mitigation mechanisms. The study identifies conservation agriculture, strengthened Farmer Producer Organizations, and convergence of credit, insurance, and market support as critical pathways for stabilizing farm incomes and reducing vulnerability. It argues that fragmented and short-term interventions are insufficient and emphasizes the need for region-specific, livelihood-centered strategies to address agrarian distress and farmer suicides. The paper contributes policy-relevant insights for sustainable agricultural development in India.

Keywords: Agrarian distress; Farmer suicides; Conservation agriculture; Farmer Producer Organizations; Vidarbha; Livelihood sustainability

1. Introduction

Agriculture remains central to India's economy and rural livelihoods, yet the sector continues to experience persistent agrarian distress manifested through income instability, rising indebtedness, climate-induced production risks, and alarming incidences of farmer suicides. Although the contribution of agriculture to national income has declined with structural transformation, the sector continues to support a majority of the workforce, making livelihood sustainability a critical development concern.

Agrarian distress has intensified in recent decades, particularly in rainfed and semi-arid regions where dependence on monsoon rainfall, exposure to market volatility, and limited institutional support undermine farm viability. Maharashtra, especially the Vidarbha region, represents one of the most severe expressions of this crisis, consistently reporting high incidences of farmer suicides. Despite multiple policy interventions, distress persists, indicating deeper structural and institutional failures. Fragmented support mechanisms, inadequate risk mitigation, and weak market integration have limited the effectiveness of existing responses. Against this backdrop, the present study examines the structural causes of agrarian distress and farmer suicides through an integrated analytical lens, with a focused regional analysis of Maharashtra and Vidarbha, to identify sustainable, livelihood-centered pathways for agricultural transformation.

2. Sector Overview and Structural Transformation

2.1. Role of Agriculture in the Indian Economy

Agriculture continues to be a foundational pillar of Indian economy, serving as a critical source of food security and livelihoods. Although its contribution to national Gross

Domestic Product (GDP) has steadily declined with economic diversification, the sector remains the largest employer, directly or indirectly supporting more than half of India's workforce [1]. This imbalance between declining income contribution and high employment dependence lies at the core of persistent agrarian distress.

India's total geographical area is approximately 328.8 million hectares, of which around 180 million hectares constitute gross cropped area [2]. However, agricultural productivity remains uneven across regions due to disparities in irrigation access, soil quality, input availability, and technological penetration. Small and marginal farmers, who constitute over 85 percent of landholders, continue to face severe constraints in capital access, mechanization, and market integration [3].

2.2. Structural Transformation and Its Implications

Over the decades, India has undergone significant structural transformation characterized by rapid growth in the industrial and service sectors. While this transition has contributed to overall economic growth, it has also resulted in relative neglect of agriculture. Public investment in agriculture as a share of total investment has declined, leading to stagnation in infrastructure, research extension, and institutional support in rural areas [4].

The benefits of economic growth have not been equitably distributed. Rural incomes have grown at a much slower pace compared to urban incomes, intensifying rural–urban disparities [5]. The declining profitability of farming has made agriculture a high-risk, low-return occupation, particularly for rainfed regions such as Vidarbha and Marathwada in Maharashtra [6].

2.3. Regional Perspective: Maharashtra and Vidarbha

Maharashtra presents a paradoxical agricultural landscape. While the state is a major producer of cash crops such as cotton, sugarcane, and soybean, it also accounts for a disproportionately high share of farmer suicides in India [7]. The Vidarbha region, characterized by rainfed agriculture, monocropping of cotton, and high dependence on credit, exemplifies the adverse outcomes of structural and policy failures in agriculture [8].

Inadequate irrigation coverage, fluctuating market prices, rising input costs, and recurrent climatic shocks have significantly undermined farm viability in this region [9]. These structural weaknesses make Maharashtra, particularly Vidarbha, a critical case for examining agrarian crisis and livelihood sustainability.

Table 1: Structural Characteristics of Indian Agriculture

Indicator	Status
Share of agriculture in GDP	~14% [1]
Share of workforce in agriculture	>50% [1]
Small & marginal farmers	~85% [3]
Irrigated area	~50% of net sown area [2]
Rainfed dependency (Vidarbha)	High [8]

3. Agrarian Crisis and Lagging Growth

3.1. Nature of the Agrarian Crisis

The agrarian crisis in India is a complex, multi-dimensional phenomenon encompassing economic distress, social vulnerability, ecological stress, and institutional failure. It is reflected in stagnant or declining farm incomes, rising indebtedness, distress migration, and alarming incidences of farmer suicides [10]. Unlike short-term cyclical downturns, the present crisis is structural in nature, rooted in long-standing policy and market inadequacies.

One of the most distressing manifestations of this crisis is the persistently high number of farmer suicides, particularly in states such as Maharashtra, Telangana, Karnataka, and Madhya Pradesh [11]. Farmer suicides are not isolated personal tragedies but indicators of

systemic failure in agricultural risk management, income stabilization, and social protection mechanisms [12].

3.2. Economic Drivers of Agrarian Distress

Key economic drivers of agrarian distress include rising costs of cultivation, declining real output prices, and increased dependence on informal and institutional credit [13]. Input-intensive agriculture, promoted without adequate risk safeguards, has exposed farmers to debt traps [14]. Volatility in global commodity markets further aggravates income uncertainty, especially for cash crop growers [15].

Smallholder farmers often lack bargaining power in markets and face asymmetrical access to information. Weak procurement mechanisms and inadequate price realization under Minimum Support Price (MSP) regimes contribute to declining farm profitability [16].

3.3. Ecological and Climatic Stress

Climate variability and extreme weather events have intensified agrarian stress, particularly in rainfed regions [17]. Recurrent droughts, erratic rainfall, soil degradation, and declining groundwater levels have increased production risks. Vidarbha, for instance, has experienced repeated crop failures due to rainfall variability, directly contributing to farmer indebtedness and psychological distress [18].

The absence of widespread adoption of conservation agriculture, water-efficient practices, and climate-resilient cropping systems has further reduced the adaptive capacity of farming communities [19].

3.4. Institutional and Policy Gaps

Despite numerous policy interventions, the effectiveness of agricultural support systems remains limited. Fragmented institutional frameworks, delayed credit delivery, inadequate crop insurance coverage, and weak extension services have constrained the reach of government initiatives [20]. Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs), though promising, remain unevenly developed and under-supported in distress-prone regions [21].

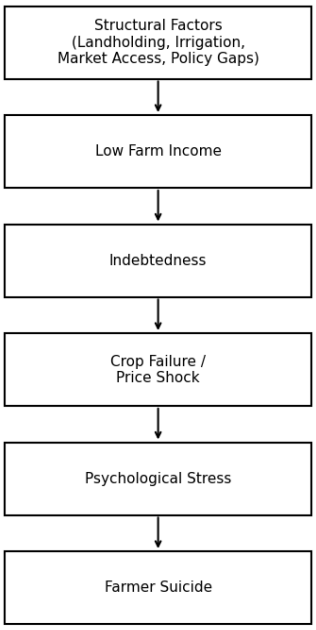

Figure 1: Causal Pathway of Agrarian Crisis and Farmer Suicide

3.5. Lagging Agricultural Growth

Agricultural growth in India has remained volatile and below the targeted 4% per annum required for inclusive development [22]. Productivity growth has been constrained by limited technological diffusion, declining public investment, and inadequate alignment between research priorities and field realities [23]. The persistence of low growth further weakens rural livelihoods, creating a vicious cycle of poverty and distress.

Table 2: Key Indicators of Agrarian Distress (India & Maharashtra)

Indicator	National Scenario	Maharashtra / Vidarbha
Farmer suicides	High [11]	Very High [7]
Rainfed agriculture	~55% [17]	Predominant [8]
Crop diversification	Moderate [22]	Low [18]
Institutional credit access	Uneven [13]	Limited [9]

4. Literature Review

Extant literature underscores that sustainable agricultural growth depends on a synergistic combination of technological innovation, institutional support, and effective market integration [24]. Agricultural development is no longer viewed solely as an issue of productivity enhancement but as a multidimensional challenge involving livelihood security, environmental sustainability, and social resilience.

4.1. Conservation Agriculture and Sustainability

A substantial body of research highlights conservation agriculture (CA) as a viable approach for improving soil health, reducing input costs, and enhancing resilience to climate variability [25]. Conservation agriculture practices—such as minimum tillage, crop residue retention, and crop diversification—have been shown to improve soil organic carbon, water-use efficiency, and yield stability, particularly in rainfed agro-ecological zones [26].

Studies conducted in semi-arid regions of India indicate that CA reduces production risk and input dependency, making it especially relevant for small and marginal farmers [27]. However, adoption remains limited due to institutional barriers, lack of awareness, and inadequate extension support [28].

4.2. Farmer Producer Organizations and Institutional Innovation

Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs) have emerged as a key institutional innovation aimed at aggregating smallholders, improving market access, and enhancing bargaining power [29]. Empirical studies suggest that FPO membership leads to improved price realization, reduced transaction costs, and better access to credit and technology [30].

Despite policy emphasis, the performance of FPOs varies significantly across regions. In distress-prone regions such as Vidarbha, FPOs remain underdeveloped due to weak governance structures, limited financial capacity, and insufficient linkages with formal markets [31].

This highlights the need for region-specific institutional strengthening rather than uniform policy prescriptions.

4.3. Agrarian Distress and Farmer Suicides

The literature on agrarian distress consistently links farmer suicides to indebtedness, income volatility, crop failure, and institutional failure in risk mitigation mechanisms [32]. Several scholars argue that farmer suicides are symptoms of deeper structural problems rather than isolated socio-psychological events [33].

Research focusing on Maharashtra and Vidarbha identifies monocropping, high dependence on rainfed agriculture, and exposure to market volatility as critical contributors to distress [34]. While policy interventions such as loan waivers and compensation schemes provide short-term relief, studies emphasize that they fail to address underlying causes such as low farm income and production risk [35].

4.4. Climate Change and Rainfed Agriculture

Climate change literature highlights increasing vulnerability of rainfed agricultural systems to erratic rainfall, prolonged droughts, and extreme weather events [36]. These climatic stresses disproportionately affect smallholders in semi-arid regions, exacerbating income instability and livelihood insecurity.

Adaptation studies emphasize the importance of climate-resilient cropping systems, water-efficient technologies, and diversification strategies to reduce vulnerability [37]. However, the integration of climate adaptation strategies into mainstream agricultural policy remains limited, particularly at the regional and district levels.

4.5. Research Gap

While existing literature provides valuable insights into conservation agriculture, institutional reforms, and agrarian distress, significant gaps remain. Most studies examine these dimensions in isolation, with limited integration of technological, institutional, and regional perspectives. There is a lack of holistic, region-specific frameworks that link agricultural growth strategies directly to farmer livelihood sustainability and suicide prevention.

This study addresses this gap by adopting an integrated approach that combines conservation agriculture, Farmer Producer

Organizations, and regional policy analysis, with a specific focus on Maharashtra and Vidarbha. By doing so, it contributes to policy-relevant knowledge aimed at addressing agrarian crises and sustaining rural livelihoods.

5. Objectives of the Study

The overarching objective of this study is to systematically examine the structural causes of agrarian crisis in India and to identify integrated policy and technological pathways for sustaining agricultural livelihoods and reducing farmer suicides, with specific reference to Maharashtra and the Vidarbha region.

The specific objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To examine the structural, economic, ecological, and institutional determinants of agrarian distress and farmer suicides in India, with a focused regional assessment of Maharashtra and the Vidarbha region [7], [10], [11].
2. To analyse trends in agricultural growth, farm income, and productivity in relation to landholding size, irrigation access, and dominant cropping systems in distress-prone regions [1], [2], [22].
3. To assess the role of rising costs of cultivation, indebtedness, and market price volatility in intensifying livelihood insecurity among small and marginal farmers [8], [13], [14].
4. To evaluate the potential of conservation agriculture practices in improving soil health, reducing production risk, and enhancing climate resilience in rainfed agricultural systems [25]–[27].
5. To analyse the effectiveness of Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs) as institutional mechanisms for improving market access, price realization, and income stability among farmers in agrarian distress regions [29]–[31].
6. To identify gaps and limitations in existing agricultural policy instruments and support mechanisms, particularly with respect to credit delivery, crop insurance, extension services, and price support systems [16], [20].
7. To develop an integrated analytical and policy framework that links technological innovation, institutional reform, and region-specific development strategies with the objectives of livelihood sustainability and farmer suicide reduction.

6. Methodology

6.1. Research Design

The study adopts a qualitative and analytical research design grounded in secondary data analysis and policy-oriented review. Given the complex and multidimensional nature of agrarian crisis and farmer suicides, the research follows an integrative approach that combines economic, ecological, institutional, and regional perspectives. A demand-driven and region-specific framework is employed to assess the underlying causes of agrarian distress and to identify sustainable intervention pathways [23].

The research is exploratory and diagnostic in nature, aiming to synthesize existing evidence and policy experiences rather than establish causal relationships through primary experimentation.

6.2. Data Sources

The study relies exclusively on secondary data collected from authoritative and publicly available sources. These include national-level datasets, government reports, policy documents, and peer-reviewed academic literature. Key data sources comprise publications from the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), Planning Commission/NITI Aayog, Reserve Bank of India (RBI), NABARD, Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), World Bank, and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) [1], [7], [13], [17], [21], [24].

District- and state-level data for Maharashtra and Vidarbha are drawn from official state government reports and national statistical databases to capture region-specific patterns of agrarian distress [8], [9].

6.3. Regional Case Study Approach

Maharashtra, with particular emphasis on the Vidarbha region, is selected as the focal case study due to its persistently high incidence of farmer suicides, predominance of rainfed agriculture, and exposure to climatic and market risks [7], [8]. The region provides a representative context for examining the interaction between structural agricultural vulnerabilities and livelihood outcomes. The case study approach enables in-depth analysis of region-specific factors such as cropping

patterns, irrigation coverage, credit penetration, institutional support mechanisms, and climatic variability. Comparative insights are drawn between national trends and regional realities to highlight divergences and policy gaps.

6.4. Analytical Framework

An integrated analytical framework is employed to examine agrarian distress and livelihood sustainability. The framework links four key dimensions:

- **Structural factors:** landholding size, irrigation access, and cropping systems
- **Economic factors:** costs of cultivation, price realization, indebtedness, and income volatility
- **Ecological factors:** rainfall variability, drought frequency, and soil degradation
- **Institutional factors:** access to credit, crop insurance, extension services, and Farmer Producer Organizations

The interaction of these dimensions is analyzed to identify stress pathways leading to livelihood insecurity and farmer suicides, as well as leverage points for policy intervention [10], [32].

6.5. Method of Analysis

The study employs descriptive and comparative analysis of secondary data to identify trends, patterns, and relationships relevant to agrarian distress. Policy analysis is used to evaluate the effectiveness and limitations of existing agricultural support mechanisms such as price support, credit schemes, insurance programs, and institutional reforms.

Findings from the literature are synthesized to develop an integrated understanding of how technological innovations (e.g., conservation agriculture) and institutional mechanisms (e.g., FPOs) can jointly contribute to sustainable agricultural growth and suicide prevention.

6.6. Limitations of the Study

The study is subject to certain limitations. As it is based on secondary data, the analysis may not fully capture micro-level household dynamics or psychological factors associated with farmer suicides. Variations in data quality and reporting across sources may also affect comparability.

Despite these limitations, triangulation across multiple credible sources enhances the robustness of the findings and ensures policy relevance.

7. Policy Drivers, Interventions, and Opportunities

Addressing the agrarian crisis and reducing farmer suicides require a coherent policy framework that integrates economic viability, ecological sustainability, and institutional strengthening. The persistence of agrarian distress indicates that fragmented and short-term interventions have been inadequate. Long-term, coordinated policy drivers are essential to restore agricultural livelihoods and confidence among farmers.

7.1. Key Policy Drivers in Indian Agriculture

Public investment, price support, institutional credit, and market access remain the principal policy drivers shaping agricultural performance. Expansion of irrigation infrastructure, promotion of improved inputs, and Minimum Support Price (MSP) mechanisms have contributed to productivity gains in some regions, but uneven implementation has limited their impact in distress-prone areas [1], [22]. Declining public investment in agriculture has further constrained infrastructure development, research, and extension services.

Institutional credit availability continues to influence farm viability. Despite increased credit flows, small and marginal farmers face barriers related to collateral requirements, procedural delays, and regional disparities in credit access [13]. Weak coordination between credit delivery, insurance coverage, and market access amplifies income risk.

7.2. Conservation Agriculture as a Policy Intervention

Conservation agriculture (CA) offers a viable technological pathway for reducing production risk and stabilizing farm incomes. Evidence indicates that CA practices lower input costs,

improve soil health, and enhance yield stability under climatic stress, making them particularly relevant for rainfed regions [25], [26]. However, adoption remains limited due to inadequate extension services, lack of localized knowledge dissemination, and insufficient policy incentives [27], [28]. Mainstreaming CA within national and state agricultural programs, supported by targeted training and incentive mechanisms, can strengthen resilience and reduce vulnerability among smallholders.

7.3. Farmer Producer Organizations and Market Integration

Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs) have emerged as key institutional mechanisms for addressing market-related constraints faced by smallholders. By enabling aggregation and collective bargaining, FPOs can improve price realization, reduce transaction costs, and facilitate access to credit and technology [29], [30]. Despite increased policy emphasis, FPO performance varies significantly across regions. In distress-prone areas such as Vidarbha, governance challenges, limited working capital, and weak market linkages constrain their effectiveness [31]. Strengthening managerial capacity and financial sustainability is critical to realizing their potential.

7.4. Risk Mitigation: Credit, Insurance, and Income Stability

Effective risk mitigation is essential to prevent livelihood shocks that contribute to farmer suicides. Crop insurance and institutional credit schemes are designed to protect farmers from production and price risks, yet their coverage and effectiveness remain limited [20]. Delays in claim settlement, low awareness, and poor alignment with local risk profiles undermine their impact. Greater convergence between credit, insurance, and extension services can improve income stability and reduce distress-triggering shocks [14], [32].

7.5. Climate-Resilient and Region-Specific Policy Approaches

Climate change has intensified vulnerabilities in Indian agriculture, particularly in rainfed and semi-arid regions [17], [36]. Policy responses must therefore prioritize climate-resilient practices such as diversified cropping systems, water-efficient technologies, and adaptive farm management strategies [19], [37]. Uniform national policy prescriptions are insufficient. Region-specific planning based on agro-climatic and socio-economic conditions is essential for addressing localized agrarian challenges [9], [18].

7.6. Opportunities for Integrated Policy Frameworks

The convergence of technological innovation, institutional reform, and digital platforms presents an opportunity to revitalize Indian agriculture. Digital tools can enhance access to market information, extension services, and financial inclusion, reducing information asymmetry and transaction costs [24].

An integrated policy framework that aligns conservation agriculture, strengthened FPOs, climate resilience, and risk mitigation can contribute to sustainable livelihoods and suicide prevention without relying on short-term relief measures.

Table 3: Policy Instruments and Expected Outcomes in Agrarian Distress Regions

Policy Instrument	Expected Outcome
Conservation agriculture	Reduced input costs, climate resilience
Farmer Producer Organizations	Improved market access, income stability
Institutional credit & insurance	Risk mitigation, reduced indebtedness
Climate-resilient practices	Lower crop failure risk
Integrated policy framework	Sustainable livelihoods, suicide reduction

8. Regional Analysis - Vidarbha and Maharashtra

Maharashtra occupies a significant position in India's agricultural economy, contributing substantially to national production of crops such as cotton, sugarcane, soybean, and pulses. Despite this, the state consistently reports high levels of agrarian distress and farmer suicides, reflecting deep structural, ecological, and institutional challenges [7]. This contradiction makes Maharashtra a critical regional context for examining the agrarian crisis.

8.1. Maharashtra Agricultural Profile

Maharashtra's agricultural landscape is characterized by pronounced agro-climatic diversity, ranging from irrigated command areas in western regions to predominantly

rainfed systems in Vidarbha and Marathwada. Nearly half of the state's net sown area remains rainfed, making agricultural production highly sensitive to rainfall variability and climatic shocks [2], [18]. Small and marginal farmers dominate the agrarian structure, with limited access to irrigation, mechanization, and formal market linkages. Cash crops such as cotton and soybean constitute major income sources, increasing exposure to price volatility and input cost pressures [8], [9].

8.2. Vidarbha: Epicentre of Agrarian Distress

Vidarbha represents the most acute manifestation of agrarian distress in Maharashtra. The region's dependence on rainfed cotton cultivation, combined with recurrent droughts and erratic rainfall, has resulted in repeated crop failures and income instability [7], [8]. High input costs and limited diversification have further intensified farmer indebtedness. Empirical evidence links farmer suicides in Vidarbha closely with indebtedness, crop failure, and inadequate institutional support, underscoring the structural nature of distress rather than individual-level causes [10], [11].

8.3. Credit, Market, and Climate Vulnerabilities

Access to institutional credit in Vidarbha remains uneven, compelling many farmers to rely on informal sources at high interest rates [13]. Market vulnerabilities—such as weak procurement infrastructure, limited value-chain integration, and poor price realization—further aggravate income instability [16].

Climatic stress remains a defining constraint. Recurrent droughts, declining groundwater levels, and soil degradation have reduced productive capacity and heightened uncertainty, with climate change expected to intensify these risks [17], [18], [36].

8.4. Institutional Gaps and Regional Implications

Despite multiple policy initiatives, institutional responses in Vidarbha remain fragmented. Crop insurance schemes suffer from low coverage and delayed settlements, while extension services are insufficient to support technological transition [20]. Farmer Producer Organizations, though promoted as vehicles of market integration, remain weak due to governance and capital constraints [31].

Overall, the regional analysis highlights the need for integrated, region-specific interventions that combine climate-resilient production systems, strengthened farmer institutions, and effective risk mitigation mechanisms. Without such targeted approaches, agrarian distress and farmer suicides are likely to persist in Maharashtra's rainfed regions.

Table 4: Key Agrarian Stress Factors in Vidarbha

Dimension	Key Issues
Cropping system	Cotton monocropping
Irrigation	Predominantly rainfed
Credit access	Uneven, high informal borrowing
Climate stress	Drought, rainfall variability
Institutional support	Weak FPOs, limited extension
Outcome	High agrarian distress and suicides

9. Discussion

The analysis demonstrates that agrarian distress and farmer suicides in India are outcomes of interconnected structural, economic, ecological, and institutional vulnerabilities rather than isolated or short-term shocks. The persistence of distress in regions such as Maharashtra and Vidarbha indicates that existing policy responses have been insufficient in addressing the underlying causes of livelihood insecurity.

Low and volatile farm incomes emerge as the central drivers of agrarian distress. Rising costs of cultivation, unstable output prices, and frequent crop failures have significantly weakened farm viability [8], [14]. This finding is consistent with earlier studies identifying indebtedness and income uncertainty as critical triggers for farmer suicides [10], [32], [34]. Short-term relief measures such as loan waivers, while politically salient, fail to address structural income deficits and may weaken long-term credit discipline.

Ecological factors further intensify agrarian vulnerability. Climate variability and extreme weather events have amplified production risks in rainfed regions, exacerbating existing livelihood stress [17], [36]. The limited adoption of conservation agriculture and climate-resilient practices reflects a gap

between research evidence and field-level implementation, underscoring the need for stronger extension systems and incentive alignment.

Institutional mechanisms play a decisive role in mediating agricultural risk and opportunity. Evidence on Farmer Producer Organizations suggests that collective action can improve market access and price realization when supported by adequate governance, finance, and professional management [29], [30]. However, weak institutional capacity in distress-prone regions limits their effectiveness [31], highlighting the importance of region-specific and sustained institutional strengthening.

The regional analysis of Vidarbha illustrates that agrarian distress is highly contextual. Uniform national policies often fail to account for local agro-climatic and socio-economic conditions, leading to uneven outcomes [9], [18]. Interventions that integrate technological innovation, institutional reform, and climate adaptation are therefore more likely to generate sustainable impacts.

Overall, the discussion reinforces the need for a shift from fragmented, input-centric interventions toward integrated, livelihood-oriented agricultural strategies. Reducing farmer suicides requires coordinated economic, technological, and institutional responses supported by policy continuity. An integrated framework combining conservation agriculture, strengthened FPOs, effective risk mitigation, and region-specific planning offers a viable pathway for sustaining agricultural livelihoods and addressing agrarian distress.

10. Way Forward

Building on the empirical and regional analysis, the way forward for addressing agrarian distress and farmer suicides must prioritize sequencing, convergence, and regional specificity rather than fragmented interventions. The focus should be on stabilizing farm livelihoods, reducing risk exposure, and restoring confidence in agriculture as a viable livelihood.

Step 1: Stabilization of Farm Incomes

Stabilization of farm incomes is the immediate priority. Adoption of region-specific conservation agriculture, crop diversification, and water-efficient practices can reduce production risk and input dependency, particularly in rainfed regions such as Vidarbha [19], [25]

Step 2: Convergence of Credit, Insurance, and Price Support

Institutional credit, crop insurance, and price support mechanisms must operate in an integrated manner. Converged delivery can ensure timely credit access, effective insurance coverage, and protection against price shocks, thereby reducing indebtedness and distress [13], [20].

Step 3: Strengthening Farmer Institutions

Producer Organizations should be strengthened as functional market institutions rather than treated as standalone policy targets. Focused capacity building, professional management, and value-chain integration can improve price realization and income stability for small and marginal farmers [29]–[31].

Step 4: Climate-Responsive Regional Planning

Future agricultural planning must be grounded in agro-climatic realities. Climate-responsive strategies, including adaptive cropping systems and localized advisory services, are essential for drought-prone and rainfall-variable regions [17], [36].

Step 5: Long-Term Policy Coherence

Sustainable reduction in agrarian distress requires coherence across agricultural, climate, rural development, and social protection policies. Long-term commitment to livelihood-centered agricultural development, rather than short-term relief measures, is critical for preventing recurring agrarian crises and farmer suicides [16], [22].

Table 5: Stepwise way forward for addressing agrarian distress

Step	Focus Area	Key Outcome
1	Income stabilization	Reduced production risk
2	Policy convergence	Lower indebtedness
3	Farmer institutions	Improved market access
4	Climate-responsive planning	Enhanced resilience
5	Policy coherence	Sustainable livelihoods

11. Conclusion

This study shows that agrarian distress and farmer suicides in India arise from structural livelihood failures driven by income instability, climate risk, weak market integration, and institutional gaps. Evidence from Maharashtra and the Vidarbha region underscores that these challenges are systemic rather than episodic.

The findings emphasize that piecemeal and short-term interventions cannot resolve the agrarian crisis. A transition toward integrated, region-specific strategies that combine climate-resilient production systems, strengthened farmer institutions, and convergent policy support is essential.

By advancing a livelihood-centered and preventive framework, this study points toward a future in which agriculture is reimagined as a resilient, dignified, and economically viable occupation. Such a transformation is critical not only for reducing farmer suicides but also for securing inclusive and sustainable rural development.

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