

A conversation with the Centre for Pesticide Suicide Prevention, August 14, 2019

Participants

- Professor Michael Eddleston – Director, Centre for Pesticide Suicide Prevention
- Dr. Leah Utyasheva – Policy Director, Centre for Pesticide Suicide Prevention
- Mark Davis – Director for Agriculture & Regulatory Outreach, Centre for Pesticide Suicide Prevention
- James Snowden – Senior Research Analyst, GiveWell

Note: These notes were compiled by GiveWell and give an overview of the major points made by Professor Eddleston, Dr. Utyasheva, and Mr. Davis.

Summary

GiveWell spoke with Professor Eddleston, Dr. Utyasheva, and Mr. Davis of the Centre for Pesticide Suicide Prevention (CPSP) for an update on its progress and future plans. In August of 2017, CPSP received a GiveWell Incubation Grant of \$1,336,409 (<https://www.givewell.org/research/incubation-grants/centre-pesticide-suicide-prevention/august-2017-grant>) to start work aimed at reducing deaths from deliberate ingestion of pesticides. Conversation topics included CPSP's proposed study and its long-term strategy for pesticide regulation in Sri Lanka.

Update January 2020: Since this conversation, CPSP is no longer planning to conduct this study.

Proposed study

CPSP is considering conducting a randomized controlled trial (RCT) that measures the impact of pesticide bans on agricultural productivity and suicides in Sri Lanka.

The Sri Lankan government would like the proposed RCT to begin within the next year. However, the timeline of the study would likely be delayed if CPSP requests and receives funding from the Wellcome Trust, which typically disburses funds on a nine-month cycle.

Methodology

The proposed study would be a cluster RCT, with a large sample size and lasting 3-4 years.

Outcome measurement

To ensure the RCT's cost remains relatively low (\$1-3 million), CPSP would limit data collection to only a few key outcome measures, while still maintaining large scale.

CPSP would work with its existing hospital partners to assess health outcomes. It could track agricultural productivity by collecting qualitative information from farmers on the effects of pesticide bans, as well as by measuring price changes in products sold at large markets (prices should reflect any potential increase in farmers' expenses). Pesticide bans could also positively impact agricultural productivity if farmers are able to price their pesticide-free products at a premium for export markets (or domestic markets, if local consumers are also willing to incur the higher costs). Overall, however, CPSP does not expect pesticide regulation in Sri Lanka to have a significant effect on agricultural inputs or outputs.

Impact

Impact on health and agriculture

Previous pesticide bans have been successfully enacted by the Sri Lankan government without a significant effect on agricultural productivity. Furthermore, the most recent data on pesticide suicide rates in Sri Lanka (from [Knipe et al. 2017](#)) demonstrates that these rates have broadly decreased over time—likely due in part to pesticide bans.

Impact on global policy

CPSP believes that its proposed RCT in Sri Lanka could have broad influence on global health and agriculture policy. Historically, health research in Sri Lanka (including both clinical trials and studies of community-level public health interventions) has influenced policy domestically and in other Asian countries.

Political feasibility

The Director General of Agriculture for Sri Lanka previously expressed concerns about a study involving pesticide bans because alternatives to these pesticides had not been formally identified. CPSP has since initiated studies on chemical (but significantly less toxic) and non-chemical alternatives to the pesticides that would be banned.

Long-term strategy for pesticide regulation in Sri Lanka

Rather than advocating for the replacement of hazardous pesticides with other harmful chemicals, CPSP's long-term strategy in Sri Lanka is to encourage movement towards a toxic-free agricultural system, which it believes could better ensure sustainable food production and long-term suicide reduction, among other health and environmental benefits. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations has also exhibited interest in promoting a shift to pesticide-free agriculture in the short term.

CPSP's proposed study on pesticide bans, which would involve replacement of pesticides with either non-chemical or less toxic chemical alternatives, aligns well with this broader focus on agroecology.

*All GiveWell conversations are available at
<http://www.givewell.org/research/conversations>*

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