

A Study on Strategies for Minimizing Post-Harvest Losses in Agricultural Produce: Challenges and Sustainable Solutions

Dr. Neha Kumari*

Ph.D., Commerce, T.M.B.U Bhagalpur University, Bhagalpur, Bihar.

*Corresponding Author: nehasah525@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Post-harvest losses (PHL) remain a major challenge to food security, farmer income, and environmental sustainability, particularly in developing countries. Globally, about 13–14 percent of food is lost between harvest and retail, while India experiences even higher losses, especially in perishable commodities such as fruits and vegetables, where losses range from 30 to 40 percent. These losses result primarily from inadequate storage and cold-chain infrastructure, poor handling and packaging practices, limited access to modern technologies, weak market linkages, and low awareness of scientific post-harvest management. The present study examines the extent and causes of post-harvest losses and evaluates sustainable and cost-effective strategies for minimizing such losses in agricultural produce. The study is based on secondary data collected from FAO, World Bank, Government of India reports, and peer-reviewed literature, using a descriptive and analytical research approach. Findings indicate that perishable commodities suffer the highest losses due to temperature sensitivity and delayed market access, while cereals and pulses, though relatively less affected, incur significant absolute losses. The study highlights that low- and medium-cost interventions—including hermetic storage, improved drying, cold storage, value addition, farmer training, and digital technologies—can substantially reduce post-harvest losses while improving supply chain efficiency and farmer income. It concludes that an integrated approach combining technology, capacity building, digital solutions, and supportive policy measures is essential to strengthen agricultural value chains, promote sustainability, and achieve long-term food security.

Keywords: Post-Harvest Losses, Cold Chain, Storage Technology, Value Addition, Sustainable Agriculture.

Introduction

Post-harvest losses (PHL) in agricultural produce represent a critical bottleneck in global food systems, directly impacting food security, economic sustainability, and the profitability of farming communities. Globally, approximately 13.8 % of food produced is lost between harvest and the retail stage, as estimated by the Food and Agriculture Organization's indicators on food loss and waste, indicating significant inefficiencies before food reaches consumers. This phenomenon not only reduces the effective food supply but also leads to economic losses worth billions of dollars annually, undermining efforts to sustain rapidly growing populations.

In India, the magnitude of post-harvest losses is particularly pronounced due to the country's vast agricultural output and predominantly small-holder farming systems. India, the world's second-largest producer of fruits and vegetables, loses an estimated 30 % to 40 % of these perishable commodities annually because of inadequate infrastructure, suboptimal storage conditions, and

inefficient supply chains. Overall, it is estimated that about 74 million tonnes of food are lost each year, equating to roughly 22 % of foodgrain output or nearly 10 % of total foodgrain and horticulture production. These losses amount to staggering financial setbacks, with some studies suggesting annual economic impacts in the range of ₹1.5 trillion or more for the Indian economy.

The nature and extent of PHL vary widely across commodity types. For example, post-harvest losses in cereals and pulses typically range from 3.9 % to 8.4 %, while losses for fruits and vegetables—highly perishable items—may extend from 6 % to over 15 %. Losses also occur due to inefficient on-farm handling, inadequate grading and packaging practices, poor storage and transport systems, and limited access to modern cooling technologies. These systemic shortcomings are exacerbated by a lack of awareness among producers about scientific post-harvest techniques, further driving down marketable yield and diminishing farmer income.

The consequences of PHL are multidimensional: they compromise nutritional availability, contribute to rural poverty, waste precious natural resources such as water and land, and increase greenhouse gas emissions from decomposing organic waste. Reducing PHL is therefore central to enhancing food security, promoting sustainable agriculture, and stabilizing rural livelihoods. To address these challenges effectively, there is a growing consensus on the need for integrated strategies—ranging from improved storage and cold-chain infrastructure to farmer training, value addition, and supportive policy frameworks.

The study seeks to systematically explore the core causes of PHL and evaluate sustainable, scalable strategies that can significantly reduce losses and improve efficiencies in agricultural value chains. By grounding its analysis in current data and actionable practices, the study aims to inform policymakers, stakeholders, and practitioners on pathways to strengthen agricultural resilience and profitability.

Objectives

- To examine the major causes and extent of post-harvest losses in agricultural produce using recent data.
- To analyse existing post-harvest management practices and identify key challenges in reducing losses.
- To suggest sustainable and cost-effective strategies for minimizing post-harvest losses and improving farmer income.

Methodology

The present study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design to examine strategies for minimizing post-harvest losses in agricultural produce. The study is primarily based on secondary data, collected from credible sources such as reports of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), World Bank, Government of India, research journals, and recent publications related to post-harvest management. Relevant data were analysed to identify the major causes of post-harvest losses and evaluate existing storage, handling, and transportation practices. Qualitative analysis was employed to assess sustainable solutions and best practices. Comparative review methods were used to highlight effective strategies, and conclusions were drawn to suggest practical and policy-oriented measures for reducing post-harvest losses.

Magnitude of Post-Harvest Losses

Available estimates indicate that a considerable proportion of agricultural produce is lost after harvest. At the global level, nearly 13–14 percent of food produced is lost before reaching the retail stage, reflecting inefficiencies in post-harvest systems. In developing countries, the scale of losses is higher due to limited access to modern storage, transportation, and processing facilities. In India, where agriculture supports a large rural population, post-harvest losses pose a serious challenge to food security and farmer income.

Horticultural crops such as fruits and vegetables experience the highest losses, ranging from 15 to 40 percent, mainly due to their perishable nature and sensitivity to temperature, humidity, and mechanical damage. Cereals and pulses show comparatively lower losses, generally between 5 and 10 percent, but the absolute quantity lost is substantial because of large production volumes. Losses in oilseeds, milk, fish, and meat products further contribute to the overall problem, highlighting the need for commodity-specific interventions.

Major Causes of Post-Harvest Losses

Post-harvest losses result from a combination of technical, infrastructural, and socio-economic factors. At the farm level, improper harvesting practices, harvesting at incorrect maturity stages, and mechanical damage during handling lead to immediate losses. The absence of sorting and grading increases spoilage and reduces product quality.

Inadequate storage facilities are a major contributor to losses. Farmers often rely on traditional storage structures that offer limited protection against pests, moisture, and microbial infestation. For perishable commodities, the lack of cold storage and refrigerated transport leads to rapid deterioration, especially under tropical climatic conditions. Transportation losses are further intensified by poor road connectivity, multiple handling points, and use of non-standard packaging. Additionally, limited awareness and training among farmers regarding scientific post-harvest management practices significantly increase losses. Financial constraints, lack of credit facilities, and weak market linkages force farmers to sell produce immediately after harvest, resulting in distress sales and hidden economic losses.

Implications of Post-Harvest Losses

The high magnitude of post-harvest losses has serious economic, nutritional, and environmental consequences. Losses reduce the availability of food, increase price volatility, and lower farm incomes. They also represent a waste of valuable natural resources such as land, water, energy, and labour used in agricultural production. From a sustainability perspective, minimizing post-harvest losses is essential to enhance food system efficiency and reduce environmental stress.

The analysis demonstrates that post-harvest losses remain a critical weakness in agricultural value chains, particularly for perishable commodities. These losses are driven by poor infrastructure, limited technological adoption, inadequate awareness, and socio-economic constraints. Understanding the extent and causes of post-harvest losses provides a strong foundation for identifying effective strategies to reduce losses and improve overall agricultural sustainability.

Present Post-Harvest Management Practices

In many developing regions, traditional post-harvest practices continue to dominate agricultural systems. These include sun drying of cereals and pulses, storage in gunny bags, earthen bins, or bamboo structures, and transportation in open or loosely packed conditions. Such methods are cost-effective and locally accessible but provide minimal protection against moisture, pests, and microbial infestation.

Modern post-harvest practices include scientific drying, grading and sorting, improved packaging, warehouse storage, and cold storage facilities. For fruits and vegetables, practices such as pre-cooling, pack houses, refrigerated transport, and controlled storage environments help extend shelf life. In the dairy and fisheries sector, chilling centers and ice-based preservation methods are commonly used. However, the reach of these improved practices is largely confined to organized supply chains and larger producers.

Challenges in Effective Implementation

Despite the availability of post-harvest technologies, several challenges limit their adoption. One major constraint is the insufficient availability of storage and cold-chain infrastructure, particularly in rural areas. Financial barriers such as high initial investment costs and limited access to institutional credit prevent small farmers from adopting improved technologies. Lack of technical knowledge and training further reduces the effective use of available facilities.

Transportation-related challenges, including poor road connectivity and multiple handling points, lead to physical damage and spoilage of produce. Additionally, fragmented markets and weak farmer-buyer linkages result in delays and distress sales. Climatic factors such as high temperature and humidity intensify spoilage, especially for perishable commodities.

Climate and Environmental Sustainability

- **Impact of Rising Temperatures:** Rising temperatures accelerate physiological deterioration of produce. FAO estimates suggest that every 1°C increase in temperature can raise post-harvest losses of perishables by 3–5% if cooling systems are absent.

- **Effect of High Humidity:** High humidity promotes fungal growth in grains and horticultural produce. Studies show that poor humidity control increases storage losses by 7–12%, particularly in oilseeds and pulses.
- **Climate-Induced Disruptions:** Extreme weather events disrupt storage and transportation. Floods and heatwaves have been found to increase post-harvest losses by 10–15% in affected regions due to delayed logistics and infrastructure damage.
- **Climate-Resilient Infrastructure:** Climate-resilient storage facilities, such as insulated warehouses and temperature-controlled logistics, reduce weather-related losses by 15–20%, especially in tropical regions.
- **Renewable Energy Solutions:** Solar-powered cold storage units provide reliable cooling in off-grid areas. Evidence suggests these systems reduce losses by 18–25% while lowering energy costs by 30–40% compared to diesel-based systems.
- **Resource Conservation:** Reducing post-harvest losses conserves significant natural resources. FAO estimates indicate that minimizing losses by 25% can save nearly one-fourth of water and energy used in agricultural production.
- **Reduction of Greenhouse Gases:** Food waste contributes nearly 8–10% of global greenhouse gas emissions. Reducing post-harvest losses directly lowers methane emissions from decomposing organic waste.
- **Eco-Friendly Packaging:** Use of reusable and biodegradable packaging reduces mechanical damage and environmental impact. Studies report a 5–10% reduction in transit losses with improved packaging materials.
- **Support to Climate-Smart Agriculture:** Sustainable post-harvest practices strengthen resilience to climate variability. Integrated climate-smart approaches have been shown to reduce loss variability by 15–20% across seasons.
- **Alignment with Sustainability Goals:** Reducing post-harvest losses supports SDG 12.3, which targets halving food loss and waste by 2030. Achieving this target could improve global food availability by up to 15% without increasing production.

Table 1: Adoption of Post-Harvest Practices and Associated Loss Levels

Commodity Group	Common Practice Used	Estimated Adoption (%)	Average Post-Harvest Loss (%)
Cereals	Sun drying & bag storage	70	6 – 8
Pulses	Traditional drying & bins	65	7 – 10
Oilseeds	Open drying & storage	60	8 – 15
Fruits	Manual handling & local transport	55	15 – 40
Vegetables	Bulk transport, no cooling	50	20 – 35
Milk	Chilling at collection centers	75	5 – 7
Fish & meat	Ice storage	68	10 – 20

Source: FAO and ICAR reports on post-harvest losses and post-harvest management practices

The above table 1 shows that post-harvest loss levels are closely linked to the type and adoption of post-harvest practices. Cereals and pulses, with relatively higher adoption of traditional storage methods (65–70%), experience lower losses of 6–10%. Oilseeds, with moderate adoption (60%), face higher losses of 8–15% due to drying and storage issues.

In contrast, fruits and vegetables have the lowest adoption of improved practices (50–55%) and the highest losses, ranging from 15–40% and 20–35%, mainly due to lack of cooling and poor handling. Milk, supported by higher adoption of chilling facilities (75%), records lower losses of 5–7%, while fish and meat show moderate losses (10–20%) due to incomplete cold-chain coverage. Overall, the table highlights that greater adoption of scientific post-harvest practices significantly reduces losses, especially for perishable commodities.

Technological Interventions for Loss Reduction

One of the most effective strategies for minimizing post-harvest losses is the adoption of appropriate post-harvest technologies suited to local conditions. For cereals and pulses, improved drying methods, use of moisture meters, and hermetic storage technologies such as metal bins and airtight

bags have shown the potential to reduce storage losses by 30–50 percent compared to traditional methods. These technologies prevent insect infestation and fungal growth without heavy reliance on chemical fumigants.

For perishable commodities such as fruits and vegetables, cold-chain–based interventions play a critical role. The introduction of low-cost pre-cooling units, solar-powered cold storage, and refrigerated transport has been found to reduce losses by 20–25 percent in horticultural supply chains. Value addition techniques such as drying, pulping, minimal processing, and fermentation further extend shelf life and create additional income opportunities for farmers. Importantly, the use of renewable energy-based technologies enhances sustainability while reducing operating costs.

Role of Digital Technologies

- **Decision-Support Systems:** Digital decision-support systems use weather data, market trends, and storage analytics to guide post-harvest decisions. Studies indicate that data-driven harvest and storage planning can reduce post-harvest losses by 8–12%, particularly in cereals and horticultural crops, by optimizing harvest timing and storage duration.
- **Mobile Advisory Services:** Mobile-based agricultural advisories provide real-time alerts on weather, pest risks, and post-harvest handling. Evidence shows that farmers using mobile advisories experience 10–15% lower post-harvest losses, especially due to timely harvesting and improved drying practices.
- **Market Information Platforms:** Digital market platforms offering real-time price information help farmers avoid distress sales. Research suggests that access to market intelligence can improve price realization by 10–20% and indirectly reduce losses caused by prolonged storage and delayed sales.
- **Smart Storage Monitoring:** IoT-based sensors monitor temperature and humidity in warehouses and cold storages. Studies report that smart monitoring systems reduce spoilage and quality deterioration by 15–25%, particularly in fruits, vegetables, and dairy products.
- **Digital Inventory Management:** Digital inventory tracking systems help manage stock rotation and reduce over-storage. Evidence from organized storage systems shows that digital inventory control can cut storage-related losses by 8–10%.
- **E-Marketing and Online Trade:** E-marketing platforms reduce the number of intermediaries and shorten supply chains. Data indicate that direct digital market linkages reduce transit time by 20–30%, leading to lower handling damage and reduced spoilage.
- **Traceability Systems:** Digital traceability systems improve accountability in post-harvest handling and transportation. Such systems have been shown to reduce quality rejection rates by 5–8% by ensuring better compliance with storage and handling standards.
- **Digital Financial Transactions:** Digital payment systems enable faster settlement of transactions, improving farmer liquidity. Studies suggest that quicker payments reduce forced immediate sales and post-harvest losses by 5–7%, particularly among smallholders.
- **Data Analytics for Planning:** Data analytics helps identify loss-prone stages in supply chains. Policy-level analytics have helped reduce post-harvest losses by 10–15% through targeted infrastructure and training interventions.
- **Supply Chain Coordination:** Digital integration improves coordination among farmers, transporters, processors, and retailers. Better coordination has been associated with 12–18% reduction in cumulative post-harvest losses, especially in perishable commodity chains.

Capacity Building and Farmer-Level Strategies

Technological solutions alone are insufficient unless supported by capacity building and behavioural change at the farmer level. Training farmers on scientific harvesting, grading, sorting, and packaging practices has been shown to reduce mechanical damage and spoilage significantly. Studies indicate that simple interventions such as harvesting at proper maturity stages and using plastic crates instead of gunny bags can reduce transit losses by 5–10 percent.

Formation and strengthening of Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs) also contribute to loss reduction by enabling collective storage, bulk transportation, and better market negotiation. Through aggregation, farmers can access storage and processing facilities that are otherwise unaffordable

individually. Improved access to market information and digital platforms helps farmers plan harvests and sales, thereby minimizing distress sales and storage-related losses.

Policy, Infrastructure, and Market-Based Strategies

At the institutional level, policy support and infrastructure development are crucial for sustainable reduction of post-harvest losses. Investment in rural storage infrastructure, pack houses, cold storage units, and efficient transport networks directly impacts loss reduction. Data suggest that regions with better storage and cold-chain coverage experience 15–20 percent lower post-harvest losses compared to poorly serviced regions.

Supportive policies such as capital subsidies, credit facilities, and public–private partnerships encourage adoption of post-harvest technologies. Market reforms, including improved linkages between farmers and processors or retailers, reduce delays and handling losses. Promotion of local-level processing units not only reduces wastage but also generates rural employment and enhances value realization.

Table 2: Sustainable Strategies and Their Impact on Post-Harvest Loss Reduction

Strategy Adopted	Estimated Cost Level	Potential Loss Reduction (%)
Hermetic storage for grains	Low	30 – 50
Improved drying techniques	Low	15 – 25
Plastic crates for transport	Low	5 – 10
Cold storage for horticulture	Medium	20 – 30
Solar-powered cold units	Medium	18 – 25
Value addition & processing	Medium	25 – 40
Farmer training & capacity building	Low	10 – 15
FPO-based aggregation	Low to Medium	10 – 20

Source: FAO, World Bank, NABARD, and Ministry of Food Processing Industries reports

The above table 2 illustrates that several sustainable strategies can significantly reduce post-harvest losses at low to medium cost, making them suitable for small and marginal farmers. Hermetic storage for grains is the most effective low-cost option, reducing losses by 30–50% by preventing pest and moisture damage. Improved drying techniques also offer substantial benefits, lowering losses by 15–25% through better moisture control.

Simple interventions like using plastic crates for transportation can reduce mechanical damage and cut losses by 5–10%. For perishable produce, cold storage and solar-powered cold units—though medium in cost—can reduce losses by 18–30% by slowing spoilage. Value addition and processing further minimize wastage by 25–40% by extending shelf life. Additionally, farmer training and FPO-based aggregation are cost-effective institutional strategies, reducing losses by 10–20% through improved practices and collective action. Overall, the table highlights that affordable, sustainable interventions can substantially minimize post-harvest losses when supported by policy and institutional mechanisms.

Results and Discussion

The results of the study indicate that post-harvest losses remain significantly high, particularly for perishable agricultural commodities such as fruits, vegetables, milk, fish, and meat. Losses in fruits and vegetables range from 15–40% and 20–35%, respectively, mainly due to inadequate cold storage, poor handling, and delayed market access. In contrast, cereals and pulses show relatively lower losses (5–10%), although the absolute volume of loss remains substantial because of high production levels. The findings from Table 1 clearly establish that higher adoption of scientific post-harvest practices is associated with lower loss levels, especially in commodities supported by storage and chilling facilities.

The analysis further reveals that infrastructure gaps, limited awareness, financial constraints, and weak market linkages are the key factors restricting the effective adoption of improved post-harvest practices. The presence of technology alone is insufficient without farmer training, institutional support, and access to credit, highlighting the socio-economic nature of post-harvest losses.

The table 2 demonstrates that substantial loss reduction is achievable through low- and medium-cost interventions. Practices such as hermetic storage, improved drying, and plastic crates show loss reduction potential of 5–50%, while cold storage, solar-powered units, and value addition are

particularly effective for perishable commodities. These findings confirm that affordable and scalable solutions can significantly enhance farmer income and reduce wastage.

The study also highlights the growing importance of digital technologies, which contribute to improved decision-making, efficient storage management, and faster market linkages, leading to loss reduction of 8–25%. From an environmental perspective, minimizing post-harvest losses supports resource conservation and climate sustainability by reducing food waste and associated greenhouse gas emissions.

Overall, the results emphasize that an integrated strategy combining technology, capacity building, digital solutions, and supportive policies is essential for minimizing post-harvest losses and strengthening sustainable agricultural value chains.

Conclusion

The study concludes that post-harvest losses continue to pose a serious challenge to food security, farmer income, and environmental sustainability, particularly in developing economies like India. Evidence from secondary data clearly shows that losses are highest in perishable commodities due to inadequate storage, weak cold-chain infrastructure, poor handling, and limited market access. The findings highlight that greater adoption of scientific post-harvest practices, affordable technologies, and digital tools can significantly reduce losses while improving efficiency and price realization. Low- and medium-cost interventions such as hermetic storage, improved drying, cold storage, value addition, and farmer training have strong potential to minimize wastage. The study emphasizes that an integrated approach combining technology, capacity building, digital integration, and supportive policy measures is essential to strengthen agricultural value chains, enhance sustainability, and achieve long-term food security goals.

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