

IMPACT OF LOCKDOWN TO THE LOW WAGE EARNERS IN INDIA

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IMPACT OF LOCKDOWN TO THE LOW WAGE EARNERS IN INDIA Is the government has done justice by shutting the whole India to the low wage earners? Indian authorities need to urgently adopt measures to protect the country's poorest and most vulnerable people if COVID-19 containment and relief measures prove inadequate, Human Rights Watch said today. On March 24, 2020, the government announced a three-week nationwide lockdown to contain the spread of coronavirus in the country.

The lockdown has already disproportionately hurt marginalized communities due to loss of livelihood and lack of food, shelter, health, and other basic needs. The government does have a responsibility to protect the health and well-being of the population, but some of these steps have left tens of thousands of out-of-work migrant workers stranded, with rail and bus services shut down. The blanket closing of state borders have caused disruption in the supply of essential goods, leading to inflation and fear of shortages. Thousands of homeless people are in need of protection. Police actions to punish those violating orders have reportedly resulted in abuses against people in need.

"The Indian government is facing an extraordinary challenge to protect over a billion densely packed people, but ramped-up efforts to prevent the spread of the coronavirus in India need to include rights protections," said Meenakshi Ganguly, South Asia director at Human Rights Watch. "Authorities should recognize that malnourishment and untreated illness will exacerbate problems and should ensure that the most marginalized don't bear an unfair burden from lack of essential supplies."

Half of India's 1.3 billion people are food insecure which means they lack access to sufficient safe and nutritious food. Around 60% of the poorest people from India's scheduled tribes and scheduled castes, are also anaemic. This means that a total lockdown, while it may help stop the spread of coronavirus, is likely to have a significant impact on food and nutrition. And while the initial reporting on the lockdown has been on cities and urban centres, where cases have been reported, little is known about the rural context.

With more than 80 percent of India's workforce employed in the informal sector, and one-third working as casual laborers, it is crucial that the authorities make use of maximum available resources to ensure the delivery of services.

Women on the frontline

While women form an integral part of the agricultural sector across South Asia, and often make up a majority of the agricultural workforce, they are often compelled to work for low or no wages and in poor conditions to meet their families' basic needs. While their contributions are seen as central to the food and nutrition security of households and communities, the work they do is rarely recognised by those in charge.

Burden for migrant workers

In rural areas in the poorer states of northern and eastern India, most men migrate from around August to May after the monsoon planting season to earn a living in factories, construction sites and other businesses. They tend to head for the more developed states of southern and western India, including Kerala and Maharashtra, the two states worst affected by the pandemic so far. Apart from contributing to household food security, they try to save money to invest in their family farms. For those men stuck in cities and unable to return home, there is a risk to their own food and health security. Ration cards are registered in their permanent rural residences and are usually in women's names. Out of work and without an income, in the absence of these ration cards, humanitarian social assistance is their only hope. The government should take urgent steps to get stranded migrant workers to safety. State governments across the country should immediately set up shelters and community kitchens for those most at need, taking measures to ensure physical distancing. The government has announced relief measures. On March 26, the Finance Minister announced a welfare package of Rs 1.7 lakh crore (US\$22.5 billion) to provide free food and cash transfers to the poor and vulnerable populations, and health insurance for healthcare workers, among other things. The government should ensure that those at heightened risk, including sanitation workers (safai karamcharis), community health staff (ASHA workers), early childhood caregivers (anganwadi workers), and people such as midday meal workers – often poorly paid public service officials – who are at the front lines during this crisis, are provided protective equipment, medical benefits, and timely wages.

This is too small to cope with the onslaught of the virus.

How much a comprehensive package would cost?

A package to compensate all losses, including business losses, should amount to at least Rs 5 to 6 lakh crore, if not more.

How will the government find funds for this package?

- Funds accrued as a result of oil price crash: The windfall gains that have accrued to it as a result of the crash in crude oil prices could come in handy.
- Divert all the subsidies and development funds: The government could divert all subsidies and some development funds to fund this package and ask the country's corporate leaders to help with funds.

- Issue clarion call for voluntary donation: The prime minister could even issue a clarion call to those with a fixed income (say above Rs 50,000/month) to voluntarily donate at least 10 per cent of their salaries to fund the battle against the virus.

Focus on supply lines of food and ways to achieve it

The government must do to ensure that people don't go hungry and the measures it must take to make sure people don't crowd a few outlets, increasing the chances of the virus spreading. The government has announced that the beneficiaries of the public distribution system can avail three months' ration at one go.

- The challenge of delivery: The challenge is to ensure that fair price shops deliver the provisions in an orderly manner and their supply lines remain intact.
- Home delivery option: Home (street) delivery of these provisions, to avoid crowding, is a good option.
- Roping in civil society: This is also an occasion to rope in civil society. NGOs, resident welfare associations, religious organisations and paramilitary forces can be engaged for orderly and safe distribution of food — both pre-cooked and fresh.
- NGOs with experience in food preparation and distribution, such as Akshaya Patra, could guide local authorities.
- People involved in this endeavour should be provided with safety gears.
- The challenge of supplying perishables: These perishables-like fruits, vegetables and milk- must be sold in a packaged form in mobile vans. The weekly markets need to be temporarily suspended lest they spread the virus.
- Vegetable vendors can work with civil society organisations as well as e-commerce players to do this job in a safe manner.
- Retail distribution lines: Retail distribution lines need to be seamlessly linked to wholesale supply lines.
- Buffer stocks: The government godowns are overflowing with wheat and rice — about 77 million metric tonnes (MMT) on March 1, against a buffer stock norm of 21.4 MMT on April 1.

How to manage rabi season procurement?

Procurement operations for rabi crops are around the corner.

- Training and safety measures: The FCI and other procuring agencies need to be trained about safety measures and supplied safety gear.

- Providing incentives to farmers for staggered selling: Farmers could be given Rs 50/quintal per month as an incentive to stagger bringing their produce to the market – say after May 10.

They will also need to be screened, given training and equipped with safety gear.
Conclusion

The government should pay pending wages for all work under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act and expand its scope to those now forced out of work. Rural laborers will not be able to work because of the lockdown and should be given wages during the crisis. Farming communities are facing losses during harvest season and the government needs to step up procurement to protect agricultural income and save the produce.

While these may be small measures, such innovations in state social protection need to be further strengthened to help women look after their families in rural areas, and to bear the new challenges posed by potentially infected men and institutional lockdown. Quick and effective delivery of support measures is now of utmost importance. The longer-term effects of the coronavirus pandemic in India could otherwise be even more severe and worsen food and nutrition insecurity for the poorest and most vulnerable.

“The authorities in India should take all necessary steps to ensure that everyone has access to food and medical care, and that the poor and marginalized are not mistreated or stigmatized,” Ganguly said. “The Indian government’s responsibility to protect its people from the outbreak should not come at the cost of human rights violations.”

-by Swati Gupta



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