

## Resolving The COVID-19 Induced Migrant Crisis<sup>1</sup>

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The nationwide lockdown in India from 21 March 2020 has disproportionately impacted nearly 40 million daily waging, internal migrants<sup>i</sup>. Loss of livelihood was the direct impact of the lockdown, indirectly impacting their food, health and life security. With minimal or no savings, most of them were unable to pay rent, buy food, and buy medical supplies for the ill and the elderly.

Internal migrants here refer to people moving within India, from their own region to another, in search of employment or through marriage. A large part of the population comes from underdeveloped villages and are daily wagers working in low or semi-skilled jobs. Given their low-income levels, most migrants live in slums and have bare minimum facilities for decent living (see pic). The long duration of the lockdown has pushed them towards near



### WHY HAS THE CRISIS HAPPENED?

The lockdown created several socio-eco-psychological circumstances for the poor migrants. These circumstances got compounded due to the long duration of the lockdown.

- *Loss of income:* Lockdown imposed a shutdown of all industries and establishments, leaving the daily wagers with no income as the work had stopped<sup>ii</sup>. They had no savings either, as all extra earnings are almost always ploughed back into the village for use in the family land, or for the survival of the family left behind.
- *Future income uncertainty:* The COVID-19 induced economic crisis<sup>iii</sup> is one of the worst economic slowdowns to confront the world. Several companies have already announced job cuts, salary cuts, and office closures. According to the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE)<sup>iv</sup>, an estimated 122 million people lost their jobs in April alone and three-quarters of these were small traders and daily wage labourers.

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- *Health uncertainty*: Till recently 18% (now 14%)<sup>v</sup> of the people infected with Covid-19 were dying due to infection complications. With no clear cure in sight, the human health vulnerability remains high, including for the migrants<sup>vi</sup>. The fear of death, in a foreign land, can be very frightening. Staying closer to each other, the chances of community spread were high as well.
- *Away from their home*: The long lockdown period was not just physically isolating but socially isolating as well. Being in a region which is not their habitual place and language of residence increased their sense of anxiety<sup>vii</sup>. The fear of death added to this anxiety. Furthermore, the anxiety of the family members back home added to the social isolation.
- *Sense of abandonment*: Migrants felt abandoned when the employers asked them to not come for work, local administration did not actively address their fears, and landlords evicted them from their homes due to the inability to pay rent<sup>viii</sup>. As the lockdown days increased the sense of abandonment increased exponentially.

Currently, many of the 40 million daily waging migrants are going home. They are trekking 1000s of kilometers with their families and possessions to reach their villages (habitual place of residence). News of migrants' accidents and deaths are being reported almost regularly. Some have stayed back in the cities, hoping to take the trains and buses run by the government intermittently, at random schedules, and with tedious requirements and procedures. Images of stranded migrants and their long arduous journeys back home have become an inseparable part of the COVID-19 pandemic in India.

## THE NEXT MIGRANT CRISIS

Currently, nearly 30 million people have returned to their villages with no immediate plans to return to the cities<sup>ix</sup>. "The fear of death, that is now deeply embedded in the response to this virus, will keep workers from returning to urban centres — which are the epicentres of the disease. It will take a brave worker to follow the lure of the city against the fear of death and abandonment, not to mention the loss of dignity". <sup>x</sup> Consequently, the villages are swamped with the working-age population, without any immediate work at hand. *Joblessness in villages will soon raise its ugly head towards another bigger economic and health crisis.*

The next migrant crisis has to be tackled right now, namely, the Covid-19 related health threats and the ensuing rural economic crisis

### **How do we respond to the ensuing Next migrant crisis?**

The recovery process requires a multi-pronged approach designed for equity and effectiveness. Two fronts will have to be tackled at the same time, namely, the Covid-19 related health threats and the ensuing rural economic crisis. The central government, along with the state

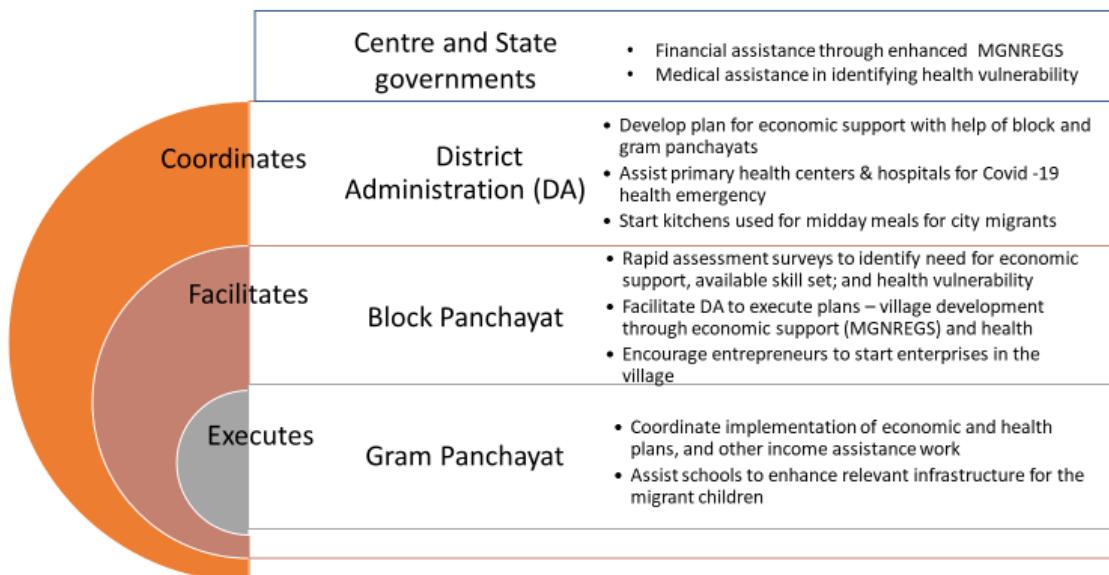
governments, can provide the finances for the economic support. The district administration along with the panchayats will have to plan, coordinate, and execute.

*The Central and State Governments:*

- Galvanize the Rural Employment Scheme on a war footing. Most Indian villages still need significant developmental support, lacking in basic amenities like clean water, sanitation, and industrial growth. *This is the right time for the centre and state authorities to develop rural assets and industry*, along with solving the economic crisis using the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS).

While the government has initiated the direct transfer of funds<sup>xi</sup>, the initiative stands sustainable in the medium or long run. The PM CARES corpus has crossed 10,000 crores already<sup>xii</sup> and can be used for the MGNREGS. Furthermore, the cap of 100 days needs to be removed and an extension beyond 100 days is required.

- Development and issue of the *rural sector and occupation-related specific work guidelines* remain an urgent requirement as well, to avoid the spread of the virus.



*Figure 1: The crisis response*

- *Open the kitchens used for mid-day meals.* The migrants who have stayed back in the cities face a food security crisis<sup>xiii</sup>. NGOs like Akshaya Patra Foundation<sup>xiv</sup> run food kitchens in cities and towns for the government under the mid-day meal scheme. These kitchens can be opened to provide 2 meals a day to the migrants who

have stayed back. State governments should authorize the district administration to open these kitchens for the migrants who have stayed back.

- Identifying health vulnerability for COVID-19. Testing the incoming people for health protection: If a widespread swab COVID-19 test is not possible, the centre and state can explore the *possibility of antibody tests for the migrants*. The antibody test identifies whether a migrant has antibodies to fight the coronavirus and can be used to categorize health vulnerability for further action.

#### *The District Administration:*

The district administration (DA) should be the main body to coordinate and plan the crisis management activities (health and economics) in their district, for migrants remaining in the city, and recently come back to the villages. The administration needs to provide the necessary financial, technical, and other assistance to the panchayats to enable them to discharge their functions.

- Economic plan with block and gram panchayat support. DAs should work together with the block and gram panchayats to identify the economic vulnerability (financial situation) and diversity (skill, and experience) of the situation, categorize the vulnerabilities and prioritize the essentials. Fresh development plans and proposals for infrastructure development should be planned and accelerated approvals circumventing bureaucratic hurdles should be sought.
- Public health plan for villages. Assistance to the primacy health centers and the hospitals in the villages needs to be given in their preparedness for COVID 19 emergencies. Furthermore, executing a communication plan on the virus-related cautions and measures, can be executed through pamphlets and newspaper articles.
- Effective usage of teleconsultation platforms and increasing their penetration in rural areas is the need of the hour. Doctors in private practices not involved in Covid19 treatments can diagnose/treat (rural) patients through authorised government channels. Existing platforms like eHospitals@NIC <https://ehospital.nic.in/ehospitalss/> and Online Registration Systems (ORS) <https://ors.gov.in/index.html> can be useful in these cases. This solution will limit the crisis of treatment seekers other than Covid19 e.g. pregnant women, kidney dialysis patients, health care for new-borns, or mental health consultations of migrant workers, etc.

#### *The Block Panchayats*

- Rapid assessment surveys: The block panchayats need to conduct rapid assessment surveys of the incoming migrants in each village to identify the nature and extent of economic impact; status and the skills of the incoming people, and to understand their psychological state including their fears, apprehensions, and anxieties. Further, an assessment survey of Primary Health Centres and hospitals in villages needs to be conducted as well, for their

preparedness for COVID-19 emergency. The trade unions and volunteers from various political parties can assist in this.

- Plan MGNREGS through new projects and proposals for infrastructure development. The development for the block should keep the survey results in mind, and coordinate with the gram panchayats for its execution.
- Encourage entrepreneurs in the migrant group to start small-scale businesses or industries like handicraft, agriculture produce processing mills, dairy farms, etc. Coordinate with the SHGs, JLGs, and rural development banks for joint partnerships in the same.
- Start sanitation drives against the epidemic through awareness and family welfare campaigns.

#### *Village panchayats*

Each village has its own elected panchayat.

- The panchayats can coordinate the implementation of the economic and health measures and enhance the effectiveness of these measures by ensuring systematic village development (construction of water resources, roads, drainage, school buildings, and common resources). The timeliness of the delivery will be their responsibility.
- Step up the school infrastructure for the incoming migrants' children.

#### *Others:*

- Trade unions can play a key role in the designing and implementation of the support to returning migrants. Their assistance can be sought for the assessment surveys and for enforcing the implementing in an orderly and systematic way.
- Communication about COVID-19 cautions and measures, and psychological support messages from the DA and the unions can go a long way in dealing with the fears and apprehensions of the returning migrants.

Unless some systematic measures get taken to deal with the returning migrants, we are looking at THE NEXT MIGRANT CRISIS, that is, the extreme socio-economic vulnerability that will hit the villages of India.

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