

COVID-19 PREVENTION AND CONTROL

Need to work collectively to manage the crisis

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On March 11, WHO declared Novel Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) outbreak as a pandemic and reiterated the call for countries to take immediate actions and scale up response to treat, detect and reduce transmission to save people's lives.

Across the globe, the Covid-19 has destabilized 214 countries or territories and are in some form of lockdown measures. The global casualty is 27,26,848 and deaths amounted 1,91,090 and countries such as USA and European countries have suffered the most.

As of 24 April, a total of 17610 COVID-19 cases, have been reported in 32 states/union territories, according to the Ministry of Health & Family Welfare (MoHFW). These include 4748 who have been cured/discharged, one who has migrated and 718 deaths. Hospital isolation of all confirmed cases, tracing and home quarantine of the contacts is ongoing. On April 14, the Prime Minister announced the extension of the earlier 21-day nationwide lockdown till May 3, while on March 19, the Telangana Government had extended lockdown till May 7.

Impact on children- UN assessment

Global economic downturn and loss of livelihoods aggravate child mortality besides disrupting child protection services in a significant way. UN estimates 42-66 million children could fall into extreme poverty as a result of the crisis this year, adding to the estimated 386 million children already in extreme poverty in 2019. Around 188 countries closed schools at various stages of academic year, affecting more than 1.5 billion children and youth. The loss of livelihoods could result in hundreds of thousands of additional child deaths in 2020, reversing the last 2 to 3 years of progress in reducing infant mortality within a single year.

The risks to child mental health and wellbeing are significant. Around 368.5 million children across 143 countries dependent on school meals for a reliable source of daily nutrition suffer rising malnutrition as they look now for other sources. Sixty per cent of world's children living in full or partial lockdowns or temporary shelters face heightened risk of witnessing or suffering violence and abuse. Children living in unsanitary and crowded conditions such as refugee camps and internally displaced population settlements, are at considerable risk. According to Childline (1098 helpline) 92,000 new cases were reported during the first 11 days of the lockdown period.

Most affected indirectly by Covid-19 and at risk are children. As on date, the number of children who are medically affected by Covid-19 is comparatively low in relation to adults. They are deprived and adversely affected in terms of socio-economic hardship, learning environment, nutrition needs, basic health needs and child protection. The impact varies among social strata of the society. The impact on children of the parents from the organised sector will be comparatively lesser than the children from lower strata and un-organised sector who constitute 92 percent of the total workforce in India.

Impact on core sectors vis-à-vis children

According to Human Rights Watch (27 March 2020), "The lockdown has already disproportionately hurt marginalized communities due to loss of livelihood and lack of food, shelter, health, and other basic needs". Lakhs of migrant workers out of work and no cash are stranded at Rail and Bus Stations and on the borders. Even private hospitals in smaller towns are closed, thereby affecting regular medical services to non-covid ailing population.

Most of the families from unorganised sector in dire straits owing to loss of work and no guarantee of job in future are threatened of increased poverty, inadequate food and poor health. Even one nutritious meal offered in the Anganwadi Centres has stopped or replaced by take-home ration, which means the moderate acute mal-nutrition (MAM) will move to severe acute malnutrition (SAM), which may lead to more health problems among children and increase in infant mortality rate (IMR).

The loss of number of days of learning instructions for children, will not impact so much in India. The lockdown dates were closer to summer holidays in State Board schools, compared to CBSE and ICSE schools. The mid-day meal programme in schools has been an important additional nutrition support to large number of children of rural and urban poor households. Lockdown has seriously affected food security of the children enrolled in state schools.

Covid-19, has increased the awareness towards hand washing among all sections of the society, while it is becoming popular in the recent years in schools as part of School Sanitation and Hygiene Education. Now Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) facilities like water supply, hand wash stations and toilets for schools and communities, schools and all public spaces is a major issue before authorities at all levels from panchayats to Municipal Corporations. With summer season being on, water scarcity could hinder the process of maintaining hand wash stations and ensuring clean and safe hands. Improvements in WASH infrastructure can boost effective management of water at schools, public spaces, health facilities and at homes. Covid-19 preparedness offers an opportunity to responsible authorities to strengthen the WASH system.

Economy is likely to face major shocks with loss of livelihoods for several months for those in unorganised sector, migrant labour and farmers. Most of the farmers, fisherfolk, artisans, weavers, street vendors, migrant workers, daily labourers, petty and small enterprises (self-employed units), will continue to suffer due to loss of livelihoods for 3 to 9 months in 2020, notwithstanding infusion of government funds in the economy for boosting the lost period. Infusing funds will not support the vulnerable population, as these measures aim to strengthen the banks to increase availability of loans to secured business activity. The Government is not giving wages for the lost period to migrant workers and people in unorganised sector, nor waiving of loans to farmers.

Risk governance measures – reassuring to build back better

As India continues to be in lockdown till May 4 or for further period in some states, the farming community, fisher folk, daily wage earners and others will continue to struggle for a longer period and along with them their families. The malnutrition will increase, thereby stunting and wasting will consequently increase; dropout rate will increase in schools with increase in child labour rate, increase in personal loans at higher rate of interests, increase in IMR and MMR,

increase in other health related issues for children and pregnant women, increase in juvenile delinquency or increase of children in conflict with law along with slowdown in access to social protection and social welfare programs. Overall the Governance will be affected and an opportunity to build back better will be a lost opportunity for the States, if the challenge of ensuring immediate remedial measures and preparedness is not addressed.

Preparedness building includes a wide range of areas. For instance, support and regular ANCs under PMMVY to pregnant women is critical, so as to ensure there are no spikes in maternal and infant mortality rates as a result of lack of services during the lockdown. Similarly, the vital immunisation and growth monitoring services might have to go beyond the food distribution through the AWCs. Capacity building is another critical area. The State Training Institutes need to take pro-active step in building new set of knowledge, attitude and skills to address the needs of large stakeholders in rural, urban and tribal belt. Capacity building of the stakeholders, wherever relevant, to learn new skills required to work remotely.

Since the State Governments are torch bearers of development and needs to address most vulnerable groups/ communities, the State can adopt two-pronged strategy – Economic measures and Development measures.

The following economic measures are very critical to support the families in the un-organised sector:

- Waiver of loans to farmers for the loans taken for Rabi Crop (Oct to March) and for petty and marginalised enterprises, whose income supports daily living (roadside vendors).
- Direct cash transfers every month for a period of 3 months (March, April and May).
- Interest free loan from banks (banks are asked not to pay interest on deposits), similar logic to be applied while giving loan for the financial year 2020-2021.
- Loans to small entrepreneurs, artisans, weavers, street vendors etc to promote employment and resilience of informal / unorganised sector in rural and urban areas. Labour intensive enterprises may be given priority.
- Levy Re.1 as cess on all FMCG for a period of 1 year to provide for the loss of income in the un-organised sectors.
- Initiate consultations with large private sector companies and multinationals for participation and collaboration with the government to finance and support technological innovations to address the gaps in distribution and relief efforts to target group.

The development measures, need to synergy with economic measures, wherein the governance measures play a decisive role;

- As the financial year began in April, the plans, programmes and budgets can be re-organised to address the impact of Covid-19 and make appropriate allocations to address the implementation of regular programmes, keeping in view of other state specific natural disasters
- A complete re-orientation to Civil Service and Staff at various levels, to address the needs of the medically affected by Covid-19 and those whose livelihood is impacted by Covid-19.
- Utilization of volunteers to cover the gap in program implementation lost over 2 months and re-occurrence of Covid-19 virus in near future (till we have no new cases to cause concern and or drug and vaccine).

- Build preparedness for all departments/ all officers to work remotely.
- The continuity of awareness on social distancing, hand wash and reducing the number of people in public spaces to be the priority and major challenge for Administration. Awareness to dispel baseless fears and misconceptions to adopt healthy behaviour and cooperation with all stakeholders. Plan for more public transport and better frequency to reduce the number of people in public transports.
- Prepare Covid-19 preparedness plans at all levels with inventory of requirements and resources (human resources, medical equipment, relief operations infrastructure, public spaces for emergency needs, etc)
- Undertake a review of all social protection schemes in the state that includes – public distribution system, disability benefits, widow pensions, old age pensions, financial and in-kind support to pregnant women and children etc.
- Identify vital services in addition to the medical support offered, like food security and income support offered through various line departments to be identified and ensure continuity.
- Monitoring of the registration of new beneficiaries for identified vital services and service delivery to the target group through Gram Panchayats supported by civil society organisations and Inter Agency Groups.

Conclusion

The Union government in consultation with State Government have extended the lockdown period till 4 May 2020, which is a temporary measure for Covid-19 (response and preparedness period), unless a drug and vaccine is made available, which means an element of re-occurrence will happen. That brings to critical aspect of plans to be evolved for recovery measures at all fronts. Hence, few important steps to be undertaken without delay:

- Strengthening the existing social protection schemes and mechanism to ensure the safety net holds good in times of disaster
- Assessment of humanitarian cash transfers and relief measures to ensure shock responsive social protection measures are in place to increase preparedness and reduce vulnerability to disasters
- Continue awareness building for behaviour change among stakeholders
- Engage CSOs/ NGOs as part of the development programs and to reach the last mile and involve them effectively in the process. This supports in sharing of responsibilities.

The message from Covid-19, informs all countries, all leaders (Religious, Political and Economic), the vulnerable, rich and affluent that all of us are dispensable and all kinds of jobs are critical for civilization. The health and medical personnel, sanitation workers, technocrats, engineers, political leaders, religious heads are equal and called to be humble and respect each other's profession and work collectively to manage the crisis and build the future.

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