

**Appeal for Emergency Measures to Deal with COVID 19 Crisis**  
**Letter sent to Central and State Governments from concerned citizens**

Dear Sir/Ma'am,

The COVID 19 pandemic continues to be a serious public health issue and will possibly have a devastating impact on the lives and livelihoods of crores of people. As in most cases, those likely to be affected the most would be the informal labour force, agricultural workers, small and marginal farmers, MGNREGA workers, old age pensioners, widows, the differently abled, slum dwellers, the homeless and other such vulnerable communities.

While we are certain that you and your Department are planning and taking cautionary measures to safeguard the vulnerable from risks, we feel compelled to appeal to you as concerned citizens. We have significant experience in working on the implementation aspects of many government programmes and are writing to you with some carefully considered urgent suggestions to be implemented.

Thanks to the strides made over the years in ensuing transparency pertaining to households in several public welfare programmes, we have the necessary infrastructure via programmes such as NFSA, MGNREGA, Pensions, Ujjwala, PM-KISAN to deliver emergency relief to those who need it. But we also need to be aware that a large number of urban informal workers, migrant labourers, construction workers, nomadic communities, and the homeless are unlikely to be listed in any welfare programme. We must attempt to reach out to them using all available resources.

We hope you would seriously consider the measures listed below.

**Immediate Measures**

1. Supply free ration along with cooking oil, pulses, salt, masala, and soap for a period of 3 months (April, May, June) to be distributed in advance to all those covered under NFSA (AAY, PHH and NPHH).
2. Ensure availability of cooked meals twice daily at least till the end of May. Anyone willing to access these should be able to. This can be made available at the kitchens used for mid day meals or as part of peoples' kitchen schemes in different states.
3. Ensure advance payment of 3 months' pensions (April, May, June) to be given to each pension holder under NSAP on the 1st of April.
4. Ensure immediate clearance of all pending liabilities of wages and materials to the tune of Rs. 8396 crores under MGNREGA.
5. Pay all registered MGNREGA workers their full wages during the lockdown period. This should not be an unemployment allowance but instead as wages for the period where they should have been working but are unable to work.
6. Ensure an immediate transfer of the first instalment of the PM-Kisan scheme.
7. Ensure clearance of all pending instalments under the PMAY programme and the SBM programme.
8. In **addition** to each of the above, we propose an **emergency relief package** programme for each poor household. The package is Rs 7,000 per household per month for the months of April and May. The total amount required for this **one time emergency relief** is about Rs 3.75 lakh crores (1.92 percent of the GDP). The method for arriving at it is given in the Annexure.

9. COVID 19 specific requirements such as making of masks and sanitisers can be brought under the admissible works under MGNREGA. This will ensure the functioning of MGNREGA while public works with many workers in close proximity continues to be a health hazard.
10. Automatically enrol all MGNREGA workers as registered workers under the Building and Other Construction Workers (BoCW) Act so that workers can access the social security benefits available to the latter in the form of insurance, scholarships for education of children, pensions etc.

### **Delivery Mechanism**

This immediate relief package should be done as doorstep delivery and handed to people as cash along with the 3 months of ration advance. There can be a box with rations, an envelope with the cash and a pen (to be kept by the household) to sign upon receiving the entire package of rations and cash. This is because:

1. Rural banks tend to get crowded. Since there is a moratorium on going to crowded spaces, we strongly recommend that people, especially in rural areas, be discouraged to go to banks.
2. COVID 19 spreads through touch, so we strongly urge you to issue public campaigns to avoid any biometric based activity, including but not limited to, drawing rations using PoS machines, drawing money using PoS machines of Banking Correspondents and usage of Customer Service Points.
3. States having a robust architecture of Self Help Groups (SHG) can take the help of SHGs in disbursal of cash in the Gram Panchayat. Records pertaining to cash distribution of may be kept in registers and also be publicly disclosed through multiple online and offline channels.
4. The delivery of rations along with the cash corresponding to the emergency relief package, MGNREGA wages, pensions, PM Kisan instalments etc can be done in at least one of two ways. (a) Through a doorstep delivery process where the basket of ration supplies are given and cash is given along with it. (b) Distribution at ration shops with designated times for each part of the village to pick up supplies to make sure that members of more than 10 households do not gather at the shop.

### **Medium to Long Term Measures**

1. Extend duration and scope of MGNREGA:
  - a. Given that a large number of migrant workers have returned to their native villages in light of lockdowns in 80 cities, many more rural residents will need access to work under MGNREGA over the next 9-12 months. MGNREGA will serve as a critical source of social security over the coming financial year. In such extraordinary circumstances, the number of days of work per rural household should not be limited to 100 days per year. The categories of permissible works should also be expanded to include specific personal and collective kinds of work. Supervision and measurement systems would have to be made flexible to suit the particular conditions.
  - b. MGNREGA worksites should be opened in every ward of the Gram Panchayat, and any resident willing to work should be allowed to work without restrictions on the number of days per year or having their names entered on an e-muster roll. Private works which require less labour and less monitoring (like field bunding, recharge structures, goat sheds, poultry sheds, etc.) should be prioritised. Pit digging/staggered trenching should be over wider patches to avoid close proximity of communities while working.
  - c. Expand the scope of MGNREGA works to more horticulture works, forest works and other home-based works.

2. Consider an urban version of MGNREGA: The urban informal economy is likely to be heavily impacted by the extended lockdowns. Even after conditions start returning to normalcy, persistent effects are likely. Further, many migrant workers are trapped in towns and cities due to lockdowns and are unable to return home. Once the immediate relief measures are over and the necessity for distancing reduces, an urban extension of MGNREGA can be considered.

## **Annexure**

Total outlay required for the one time emergency cash relief measure: **Rs 3.75 Lakh crores.**

### **Steps Involved to arrive at this amount**

1. The population of India is roughly 134 crores. Considering a family size of four, this translates to 33.50 crore households.
2. Assuming that the bottom 80 percent of all these require emergency cash relief, we would need to cover  $0.80 \times 33.50 = 26.80$  crore households. NFSA covers about 67 percent of the households which is around 23 crore households. Since not every person has a ration card, we need to account for more households than what NFSA covers.
3. Considering an emergency relief measure of Rs 7,000 per month per household for the months of April and May, this translates to  $Rs\ 14,000 \times 26.80 = Rs\ 3.75$  lakh crores.

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9. Annie Raja, General Secretary, National Federation of Indian Women
10. Anuradha De, Director, CORD, New Delhi
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