

To,

Dated: 26th June' 2021

Mr. Narendra Modi,

Prime Minister of India

Govt. of India

**Sub: Appeal for implementing 50 days special package for all NREGA workers over and above the 100 days, across the country, given the national disaster caused by the Covid-19 pandemic**

Mr. Modi,

As you are aware that almost all states are under strict lockdown and this has resulted in great economic distress among the rural communities. The Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) has reported an 8% unemployment rate in April as compared to 6.5% in March and that about 7.35 million people have lost employment between March and April end.

The CMIE has also reported that the rural weekly rate of unemployment for the week that ended on 13<sup>th</sup> June, was 12% which is significantly high. With business shut, jobs lost and salaries slashed, many people are pledging their household gold savings to borrow money to meet their essential expenditure as well as emergency medical requirements. According to the latest RBI data, loans against gold have jumped a whopping 82% since March 2020. At the same time, consumer expenditure has slashed for the first time in the last 40 years.

Migrant workers are again facing the maximum brunt of the state-imposed lockdowns. Millions of migrants face a shortage of food & cash and require immediate support. Many migrant workers are returning to their villages distressed and without work and millions are stranded in different parts of the country without money. This is going to result in a serious cash crunch for rural households and increased indebtedness as remittances are either reducing or being stopped completely.

The small and marginal farmers have significant dependence on wages from various rural public and private works which have also either stopped or had drastically reduced. In tribal pockets of the country, this dependence is even more due to low landholding and intergenerational land transfers. The health expenditure has also gone up contributing to further stress for poor households.

In these circumstances, NREGA is a lifeline and a potent option to stave off acute economic crises in rural areas. While last year the government had allocated additional Rs. 40,000 crores to NREGA over and above the budgeted estimate to tackle the situation, this time the budgetary allocation is significantly less than last year's actual expenditure. Workers must get additional income opportunities through the programme to cope with their huge losses. As per the official Management Information System (MIS) for NREGA, as of 14th June, more than 1.07Lakh households have already exhausted their 100 days.

Section 4.2.3 of the NREGA Master Circular 2019-20 has enabled the Ministry Of Rural Development( MoRD) to notify 50 days of additional unskilled manual work, over and above the existing provision of 100 days, for all job card holding households residing in areas hit by drought or any other natural calamity. The Covid-19 pandemic is a severe calamity and has caused massive disruptions in the lives of the poor and each individual is impacted by it. The current situation demands that each NREGA worker can access additional employment for at least 50 days.

Thus, considering the current pandemic situation as a national disaster, we request you to notify additional 50 days of employment for each NREGA worker across the country as a special package with enabling rules and guidelines to allow a wide range of manual work under different categories in NREGA.

We would also like to draw your attention to the fact that NREGA workers are among the most socio-economically vulnerable sections of society and have almost zero social security. Given the rapid spread of coronavirus cases in rural areas, it is important to provide an additional safety net for the workers.

We have also observed that the payments of wages have been quite irregular and untimely. It is unacceptable that payments are being delayed at a time when poor households are struggling to cope with different losses due to the widespread health and economic crisis created by the pandemic.

In these circumstances we demand the following:

1. Notify and implement a special 50 days (per person) package for NREGA over and above the existing entitlement of 100 days per household.
2. Allocate supplementary budget for additional 50 days of employment for 29 crore workers from 15 crore job card holding families. The funds can be ensured from the government's disaster management budget, e.g. National Disaster Relief Funds (NDRF)
3. All members of NREGA job card holding families should be brought under the Employment State Insurance Act.
4. The central government should provide one-time monetary compensation for covid affected NREGA worker's families. The compensation can be paid at the rate of notified NREGA daily wages (for the concerned state) for 30 days.
5. The NREGA wages should be fixed at Rs. 600/day in accordance with the recommendations of the 7th pay commission and payments processes should be simplified to ensure weekly payments to the workers at the worksite itself.

We trust that you would appreciate the need for such a step at this juncture and hope that you would agree to this request.

Regards

Anuradha Talwar

(On Behalf of NREGA Sangharsh Morcha)

Copy to:

1) Narendra Singh Tomar (Minister, Rural Development & Panchayati Raj),

2) Nagendra Nath Sinha (Secretary, Ministry of Rural Development)