

19 Mar, 2020



To,  
Narendra Modi  
Hon'ble Prime Minister of India

**Open Letter to the Prime Minister  
Demand for Urgent Steps for Mitigation of Impact of Covid-19 on the  
Poor and Vulnerable**

Dear Sir,

As the whole world grapples with the global pandemic of Covid-19, the Indian government too has been taking a number of steps to prevent the spread of the virus such as shutting down of schools and colleges, cinema halls and malls, restricting movement at the borders, encouraging hand washing and social distancing and so on. The main strategy being promoted is shutting down as many public places as possible and asking people to maintain social distancing. Working from home, for instance, is a measure that many offices and companies have introduced in response. While these steps are taken, we must also realise that most people in our country cannot afford to stay away from work and/or do not have the luxury of living conditions which allow 'social distancing'. It is the livelihoods of these people that would be further affected as more and more work from home and/or reduce their economic activity.

The pandemic therefore can lead to severe economic distress for the poor and those in the informal sector, especially given that it has come at the back of a slowdown in economic growth and increasing unemployment. India already faces a huge burden of malnutrition, and many suffer from infections such as tuberculosis whom the public health system has not been able to reach yet.

In this context, we believe that the response to the Covid-19, should in fact be seen as an opportunity to also make some fundamental changes to develop and enhance the capacity of the health system. District hospitals need to be equipped to test and have ICU facilities to respond to people needing higher levels of care. Primary health centres and frontline workers also need to be empowered to be able to respond to the demand. There are reports that the isolation wards meant to stop further transmissions of the disease are currently operating under poor circumstances. Necessary precautions for suspect cases, clean beddings and washrooms, adequate sanitisers and soaps, masks and gloves, proper meals, and a sensitive staff is an utmost requirement. It is extremely crucial to take accountability of this moment to also revive people's faith in our public healthcare.

It is necessary to note that in these abysmal times, Spain has decided to nationalise all of Spain's private health providers and their facilities into public control as the spread of COVID-19 continues to grip the country by including fourth-year medical students and coordinating with companies capable of producing medical equipment. Additionally, in the US, President Donald Trump and Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin proposed mailing out checks of up to \$1,000 to American adults. Such an economic-aid package was overwhelmingly passed by the House of Representatives on Saturday. These international precedents are useful to consider in framing a national approach to the crisis that we are facing at the moment.

In addition to these, we believe that we also need to ramp up our food and social security schemes to support people during these tough times.

It **must** be ensured that there is wage compensation for all those who are missing work because of the pandemic. Formal jobs must ensure that paid sick leave is made available. Further, institutions where people leave such as university hostels, working peoples' hostels and so on cannot be forcefully shut down. For those who remain in these institutions, the regular facilities of food etc must continue. This is especially important where travel restrictions are also in place and not everyone might be in a position to go back home or have a home to go back to.

In relation to food and social security, we demand that the following be initiated immediately:

1. Enhance the PDS entitlements by increasing the allocations of foodgrains by 50%, and also including pulses and cooking oil. Through the PDS, soap should also be distributed given the importance of handwashing always, and even more so in the present context.
2. Relax the requirements for priority/antyodaya cards. In the spirit of the orders given by the Supreme Court in the context of drought, there should be a system where everyone who needs/demands rations are able to access these.
3. Make arrangements to ensure that everyone is able to access their PDS rations through multiple means such as arranging for people to take turns to come and collect their rations so as to not crowd the shops, facilitate home delivery and so on. Adequate safeguards have to be put in place to ensure that the homeless, especially children, are not excluded from PDS in these times. It is these people who shall face the most fatal consequences of the need to home quarantine.
4. Many states have closed down schools and anganwadi centres. Arrangements must be made to home-deliver the nutrition/meals to all the target groups including young children, pregnant and lactating mothers. Take home rations in the form of eggs, pulses, oil and other items can be provided. The Supreme Court has also taken suo moto cognisance of this issue and on 18<sup>th</sup> March issued an order stating that "it is necessary that all the states should come out with a uniform policy so as to ensure that while preventing the spread of Covid-19, the schemes for providing nutritious food to the children and nursing and lactating mothers are not adversely affected."
5. Older people are worst affected by the coronavirus. The old age pensions must be enhanced (it is very low in any case) and arrangements made for them to reach people on time. Similarly, the other social security pensions such as widow and disability pensions must be enhanced.
6. As some states have already done, stop the use of biometric devices/PoS machines for the delivery of access to all welfare schemes as this could be a way through which infection can spread.
7. The urban and rural informal workers will need greater support because their livelihoods are likely to be hit the hardest. Each urban unorganized-sector worker and MGNREGA should be given at least Rupees Three Thousand cash transfer per month for the period of the crisis. We welcome the UP Government's decision to ensure the livelihood of daily wage earners in the government by transferring money using the real time gross settlement (RTGS) system directly into their accounts, and strongly recommend proactive measures by the states to register the unregistered among the urban informal workers.
8. Cooked food needs to be made available to a much larger section of people including destitute, homeless and migrants through multiple mechanisms.
9. The government must make available handwashing facilities (with adequate water and soap) in various places in urban areas – outside dhabas, food shops, metro stations and so on. A mapping must also be done to ensure that there is water supply (with additional facilities put in place if needed) in areas which do not have regular piped water facilities.
10. While the Kerala Government has recently promised to address the shortage of masks by

utilising prison labour, we must be cautious of the living conditions in Indian prisons. With smaller food rations and poorer infrastructure, prison cells have witnessed roti riots in the past and this is an imminent probability in these times. The government must equip the prisons with adequate food rations and ensure that there is a scope for proper wage compensations for innovative prison labour mechanisms like the one launched by the Kerala government.

As the government puts in measures to deal with this pandemic, we hope that the above suggestions are also kept in mind. In the Indian context where health and nutrition services are woefully inadequate, employment is mostly precarious and there are many living with hunger such a crisis we must think of the last person first. It is the most marginalised who are also most often outside the existing social security safety nets. All our efforts need to be made to ensure that the above measures reach them. And, we must also think of how the response can be such that it sets in motion efforts towards creating a more equitable and sustainable healthcare and social security system.

Aysha, Gangaram Paikra, Kavita Srivastava and Dipa Sinha  
On behalf of Steering Committee, Right to Food Campaign