

Right to Food Campaign, Jharkhand

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COVID-19 crisis calls for urgent overhaul of social security and public health in Jharkhand

As the coronavirus (COVID-19) spreads, a double crisis looms over Jharkhand: a health crisis and an economic crisis. Already, unemployed migrant workers are returning *en masse* from different states, including some (e.g. Maharashtra) with many coronavirus cases. Food vendors are losing business, and more occupations are likely to be hit as economic activity slows down. As more and more people are confined to their homes, life is likely to become increasingly difficult for many.

In this situation, the Jharkhand government must take swift measures not only to stop the spread of the virus but also to support poor people in their hour of need. Since time is of the essence, the first step is to make good use of existing schemes to protect people from hunger and destitution. The Right to Food Campaign (Jharkhand) calls for the following, by way of immediate steps:

Social security pensions

- Advance payment of (at least) three months' pension should be made immediately, to help widows and the elderly who the most vulnerable in this crisis.
- The government should also increase the coverage of social security pensions, by fast-tracking all pending applications.

Mid-day meals in schools and anganwadis

- Schools and anganwadis are closed, but the government should ensure that they continue to provide cooked meals and/or take-home rations to children as well as pregnant and nursing women. Home delivery of dry rations (rice, pulses and boiled eggs) can be considered. Alternatively, schools and *anganwadis* can continue to function (with due safeguards) as distribution centres for cooked meals and/or dry rations.
- The provision of eggs in schools and *anganwadis* should be urgently scaled up (ideally, five times a week for both children and pregnant/nursing women). Eggs are nutritious, safe and affordable – in fact, very cheap right now because of the slump in the poultry industry.

Public Distribution System

- PDS rations should be enhanced (say doubled) on a temporary basis, until the crisis is over.

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- The coverage of the PDS should be expanded, by fast-tracking all pending applications for ration cards as well as for addition of missing names in existing ration cards.
- The decision to suspend biometric authentication in the PDS is helpful. But instead of switching all electronic Point-of-Sale (ePoS) machines to offline mode, the government is imposing the OTP system. This system is unreliable (e.g. due to poor connectivity) and prone to abuse. Instead of the OTP system, the government should immediately switch all ePoS machines to offline mode.
- Emergency action must be taken against corrupt dealers and functionaries – some of them may take advantage of the confusion to siphon off people's rations.

NREGA and employment-support

- The NREGA wage in Jharkhand should be immediately raised from the current Rs 171 to the state minimum wage for agricultural labour (Rs 275), at the very least.
- The state government should pro-actively pay the unemployment allowance (one fourth of the NREGA wage for the first 30 days, one half thereafter) to all SC/ST job-card holders, for the duration of the crisis.
- The government should consider providing a weekly income support to all workers of the state – migrants or informal-sector workers.

Some of these measures (e.g. expansion of PDS) will be easier to take with the support of the central government, but the state government should take the initiative. Some states, notably Kerala, have already taken extensive measures of this sort.

In addition to these measures, the state government should ensure the presence of adequate numbers of trained doctors, ANMs and nurses as well as supplies of all types of medicines in all primary and community health centres. The state government should also ensure that no one is harassed by the police in search of COVID-19 suspects. Policing by people should also be discouraged. The poor and marginalised are bound to bear the brunt of these actions.

Beyond these immediate measures, the government should move at faster pace towards a comprehensive social security system, including universalization of all social security schemes (PDS, NREGA, pensions, school meals, ICDS, maternity benefits and health care) with enhanced benefits. Failing that, poverty and hunger will continue to haunt Jharkhand, and strike with force whenever a similar crisis occurs.

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On behalf of the campaign