

21 Days and Counting:

COVID-19 Lockdown, Migrant Workers, and
the Inadequacy of Welfare Measures in India

Stranded Workers Action Network



This is entirely a collective effort. In case you would like to participate, contribute or if you have specific queries you can reach out to :

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On the 25th of March the Prime Minister (PM), Mr. Narendra Modi, announced a nationwide lockdown to stem the spread of the novel Coronavirus, COVID-19. The decision, while imminent, was unplanned and unilaterally made without any consultation with the state governments. This has consequently caught millions of migrant workers and the bureaucracy off-guard, leaving them no time to plan for such an emergency. While millions of migrants successfully reached their home states, only to be quarantined in camps, many remain stranded far from home, with no money or food. We are therefore confronting a lethal combination of crises: health, hunger, sanitation, and trauma, both physical and psychological.

On the 14th of April, the lockdown was extended by another three weeks to the 3rd of May. In his address to the nation, the PM barely acknowledged the unprecedented hardship caused by the brutal lockdown so far and treated India's 400 million migrants, of which 0.6 million¹ are in relief shelters and 2.2 million have been provided food, as if they were a miniscule minority—“*kisi ko khaane ki pareshaani, kisi ko aane jaane ki pareshani, koi ghar parivaar se door hai*” (Some are finding it difficult to eat, some are finding it difficult to move around, some are finding it difficult to be away from their families). In fact, the figures of 0.6 and 2.2 million, based on the status report filed by the government in the Supreme Court, are just another indication of gross underprovisioning for migrants during the lockdown. Migrant workers have lived and worked in the blind spots of our societal imagination. Scenes of their discontent and resistance against the lockdown and the sudden extension came to the fore recently in Surat and Mumbai as thousands gathered on the street. All they want is to be extricated from the continued trauma and helplessness and be able to go home; the most basic of human needs.

As we show in this report, the first three weeks of the lockdown have been utterly distressing for stranded workers and goes far beyond mere “*pareshaani*” as the PM put it. Despite the immense hardships that millions of stranded workers continue to endure, there was still no announcement on economic relief measures for them. Unless a combination of universal rations and money transfers, are implemented in letter and spirit, India is staring at alarming levels of destitution and despair.

Since the lockdown, some of us associated with campaigns on the Right to Food and the Right to Work have been constantly receiving distress calls from stranded migrant workers for food and cash from various parts of India.

We are calling ourselves **SWAN: Stranded Workers Action Network** and have been working since the 27th of March. What has stood out in the work so far is the initiative and urgency with which various civil society groups, individuals and a few officials have responded.

NOTE : All data is upto 13th April

About SWAN

The initiative started as a handful of volunteers catering to distress calls from stranded workers from groups in Jharkhand and those affiliated with Samaj Parivartan Shakti Sangathan (SPSS), an organisation that works on accessing government programmes in Muzaffarpur, Bihar. Soon, the number of distress calls increased and began pouring in from various other sources. As the number of calls increased, we set up a system to verify each call, and to provide assistance by primarily linking stranded workers with local organisations that we are in contact with, for rations/food and to arrange for government facilities to reach the workers. However, in some situations, arranging food has taken time or has not even been possible.

As numerous worker testimonies have indicated, cash-in-hand is critical for buying basic essentials like medicines, and groceries in case of non-availability of rations, for phone recharge, and bearing transportation cost to return, among others. To this end, SWAN volunteers have solicited appeals for financial contributions from friends and set up a system by pairing the donor directly with the worker for the money transfer. SWAN also established a method to systematically assess the needs of the stranded, along with protocols for follow-up actions. The data gathered, while not uniform in response rates, has yielded a disturbing overview.

SWAN has now grown to 73 volunteers who have interacted with 640 groups of stranded workers adding up to a total of 11,159. Depending on language skills and need, volunteers have been divided into groups. At present, there are five zonal volunteer groups, which assess the needs of stranded workers and do follow-up actions in their allotted zones. A separate team handles money transfers by pairing donors with workers while yet another team of volunteers prepares a directory of local organisations and government agencies to contact in each zone.

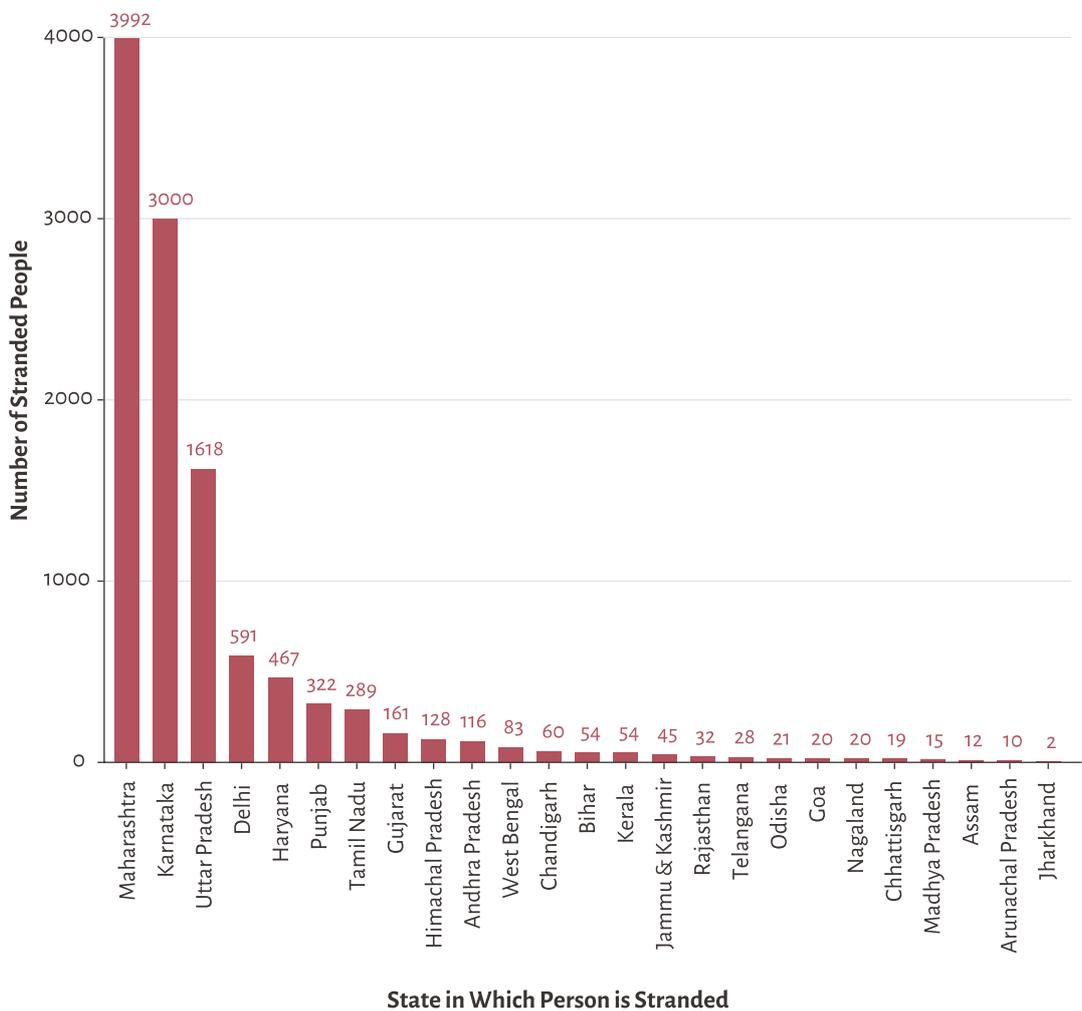
It is crucial to mention that the objective of this endeavour has not been to undertake a research project, but to provide immediate relief. It is about active intervention when it is most needed. In the process, we started documenting information more systematically, and this report is an outcome of the action initiatives of the entire team of volunteers. As a result, the statistics reported here are based on differing response rates. We have been careful to indicate this separately for each data point reported. However, we hope that such an exercise can be used constructively by policy makers so that stranded migrants get some relief and justice.

Here are some caveats of the effort and the reported numbers: First, although more than 11,000 workers have reached out, despite persistent and relentless efforts of SWAN volunteers, ration supplies could not reach all those stranded. This has been the hardest in Mumbai. Given the scale of the crisis and the paucity of resources, small amounts of money are being transferred only to those stranded groups with less than ten people. Second, we are in a rapidly evolving situation within a short window of 21 days. Ground realities are constantly shifting and the local administration and organisations are able to increase coverage with each passing day. We present some data that look at change in the third week of lockdown. An upward trend in hunger and the volume of calls indicate that distress is likely to increase. Third, most of our calls are from states that receive migrant labourers such as Maharashtra, Delhi, Karnataka, while there are fewer calls from Bihar, West Bengal, and Jharkhand—the origin states of most migrants. Uttar Pradesh, for example, has a mix because it includes regions like Noida.

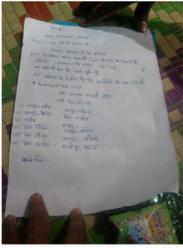
Coverage

Figure 1 gives the distribution of where the workers are stranded. In our sample, the majority of workers are stranded in Maharashtra (39,923), followed by Karnataka (3000) and then Uttar Pradesh (1618). In Uttar Pradesh, almost all the calls have been received from Kanpur area with a few calls from Noida and Ghaziabad regions. Through our small initiative, based on assessment of needs, we have disbursed around ₹3.87 lakhs in the form of micro transfers (approximately ₹205 per person) to groups of migrants. So far 203 people have made financial contributions in this endeavour. There are several people who have re-approached us for more money since they have not been able to access government supplies and have exhausted all their resources. The responses of local administration in the states are starkly different as we will detail later.

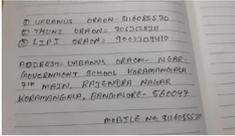
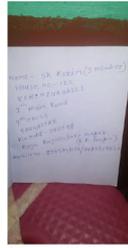
Figure 1:
States where
workers are
stranded



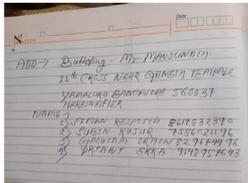
Notes of distress received by SWAN volunteers



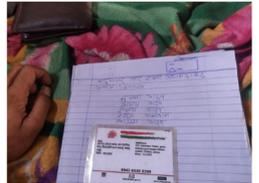
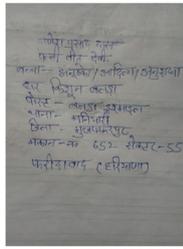
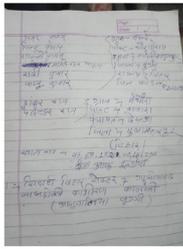
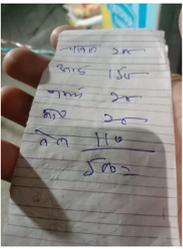
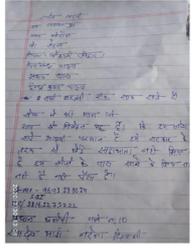
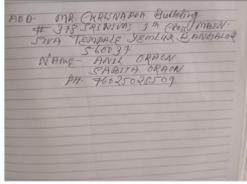
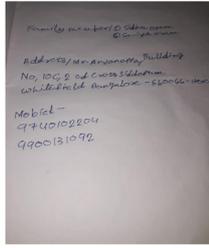
मुख्यमंत्री सहित कोष, बिहार से आयदा प्रबंधन विभाग, बिहार पटना के माध्यम से मुख्यमंत्री विशेष सहायता अन्तर्गत बिहार से बाहर फर्स लोगो को सहायता राशि रु 1000/- दी जाएगी।आपके द्वारा बिहार कोरोना सहायता मोबाइल ऐप aapda.bih.nic.in पर रजिस्ट्रेशन सफल रहा है,आपदा प्रबंधन विभाग बिहार पटना।



आपकी भुगतान की प्रतियां अंडर प्रोसेस है।कृपया प्रतीक्षा करें।



मास 30 अक्टूबर 2020
 मैं अनिता देवी। राष्ट्रीय नसंघ वैशाली की रहने वाली हूँ। अभी हरियाणा गुरुग्राम सेक्टर 37 अंजना कॉलोनी गली नंबर 2 में रहती हूँ। मेरे पति फुलन सहनी हैं। मेरे पांच बच्चे हैं। 17वरी कुमारी 12 रानी कुमारी 3 रानी कुमारी 4 शर कुमारी 5 शोभा कुमारी मेरे पास खाने के पैसे नहीं हैं। मेरी आसरे विन्ती है आप मेरी मदद करें (आवाज), may Anita Devi एकडउड नंबर है बैंक अफ इंडिया 625210110000473. IFC BKID 0006252/ मोबाइल नंबर 17870093589



Migrant Worker Profiles

- Out of **11,159 workers** we spoke with, **1,643 are women and children**.
- Roughly **79 percent of them are daily wage factory/construction workers**, **8 percent are non-group based daily wage earners** like drivers, domestic help etc. and **8 percent are self-employed** like vendors, zari workers etc. (This is out of 3900 stranded workers for whom we have this data.)
- The **average daily wages in our sample are ₹402**. The **median daily wages are ₹400**.
- About **28 percent of those who have reached out to us are originally from Jharkhand**, about a **quarter are from Bihar** and about **13 percent are from Uttar Pradesh**.
- A small percentage of those stranded had just **recently migrated to a different state for work**, and had barely started work when the lockdown was announced.

‘Food and Cash’ not ‘Food or Cash’

The lockdown announcement and official discourse including the statement of Chief Ministers like Shivraj Singh Chouhan², have pitted lives against livelihoods and health against wealth forcing us to pick a side. However, bringing together the expertise of medical professionals, scientists and economists, makes it clear that while containment and testing efforts, and investment in public health systems need to be urgently ramped up, the social and economic costs of the lockdown cannot be ignored. The livelihoods crisis is already estimated to impact at least 12 crore people³.

Since the lockdown was announced, over 350 government orders detailing relief measures have been issued by the central and state governments⁴. Several state governments have announced some relief measures for migrant workers such as shelters and provision of cooked meals at feeding centres. However these are temporary measures that are not sustainable for a period as long as 21 days (and now longer). Even the central government’s announcement of aid to construction workers from the cess collected by labour welfare boards means nothing to the millions of stranded migrants who are not registered. The Ministry of Home Affairs’ directive of payment of wages without deduction and no demand for rent is also a positive announcement but there is only partial compliance as we detail in this report. Only some state governments have recognised the acute distress of these migrants and have started extending relief measures (beyond shelters) for migrants such as provision of free rations to non-ration-card holders (Delhi) and ₹1000 cash transfers to stranded migrants (Bihar).

Despite some meaningful state orders, the workers' testimonies at the time they reached out to SWAN volunteers present a sombre picture. Among the states we have received most requests from, the administrative response has so far been most prompt in Karnataka and has been the most patchy in Maharashtra. In particular, the Principal Secretary, Ministry of Rural Development and Panchayat Raj, Karnataka, has responded humanely and promptly to every "SOS" request that SWAN volunteers have sent her.

50% of workers had rations left for less than 1 day.⁵

- **72 percent** of the people said that their **rations will finish in 2 days**.
- The situation seems particularly dire in Maharashtra. **71 percent of people in Maharashtra (out of 291 groups who were asked) said that they have rations only for 1 day** while **89 percent in Maharashtra said that within 2 days all their rations will finish**. While no small number, still, in comparison, in **Karnataka, 36 percent (out of 1212 who were asked this question) reported that they have rations only for 1 day**.
- Owing to lack of any cash in hand and uncertainty of food availability for the next meal, many have been eating frugally.
- A group of 240 workers in Bengaluru told us :
"We are eating only one meal a day to conserve the quantum of grain we have".
- There were several cases where people have been on the brink of starvation. For example, Sujit Kumar, a worker from Bihar stranded in Bhatinda, Punjab had **not eaten in 4 days** when our volunteer spoke with him on 3rd April.

96% had not received rations from the government and 70% had not received any cooked food.⁶

- This is the worst in Uttar Pradesh where **none of the workers had received any rations** from the government (out of 1611 who were asked this).
- On access to cooked food there is considerable state level variation. While in **Karnataka 80 percent have not been able to access cooked food**, in Punjab only 32 percent did not have access to cooked food.
- The figures from **Delhi and Haryana, states which provided the most number of cooked meals in the country⁷**, are also encouraging. Close to **60 percent of the workers we have received calls from said that they had been able to access cooked meals**. Nevertheless, difficulties in access to these meals persist. Suresh who is from Muzaffarpur, Bihar, is a construction worker in Delhi had been able to access cooked food at a government feeding centre on a few occasions but said, *"The lines are long and food runs out by the time it is our turn"*. Dil Mohammed who works as a driver said he went to a feeding centre and stood in line for 4 hours for his two children but at the end was only given four bananas because the centre had run out of food. The burning down of three shelters in Delhi housing migrants over meals on 11th April⁸ is just an indication of what is to come when anxieties around survival are not adequately addressed.

- Sajid Ansari who works in Mumbai said,
“We do get cooked food on some days from community kitchens. But the children are falling sick eating it. We want money to buy rations to cook food.”
- Nearly **nobody we spoke with in Maharashtra had received rations** from the government
- Bhagyalakshmi from Tamil Nadu, a widow with three children stranded in Bengaluru said,
“I am unable to access the Indira Canteen as it is extremely crowded.”
- While shelters, local organisations including gurudwaras, temples and masjids are providing cooked meals, these are temporary arrangements that **cannot be treated as a substitute** for rations and cash.

78% of people have less than ₹300 left with them.⁹

- The **average daily wage prior to lockdown was ₹402** (median daily wage was ₹400), and about **70 percent of them are left with less than ₹200** (less than half their daily wages) for the remaining lockdown period.
- Around **98 percent¹⁰ have not received any cash relief from the government**. A few workers received ₹1000 from the Bihar government. Three women have received ₹500 for the month of April in their Jan Dhan Yojana account.
- Yasmeen, a 10th standard student in Noida said,
“We have four babies in the house for whom we need milk; we have been feeding them sugar water these days.”
- Sheikh Asadullah, a migrant worker from West Bengal in Krishnagiri district of Tamil Nadu said,
“The local grocery store is giving us basic groceries on loan but we have to repay him. We don't have any money left to go back home once the lockdown is lifted.”
- In a particularly egregious case, a seasonal migrant worker, Tilak Mahato, had an account with Union Bank, Ludhiana branch. Since he was in dire need we transferred ₹800 as relief and nearly all of it was deducted as general charges recovery since he had lower than minimum balance. Based on a tweet by a volunteer, these charges were reversed but given the automated nature of this and the scale of the crisis, it is impossible to resolve on a case by case basis.

Figure 2:
₹754 deducted
from bank
account

Date	विवरण Particulars	आयडी SOL ID	चेक नं. CHQ. ID	निकाली गयी राशि DEBIT	जमा की गयी राशि CREDIT
08-04-2020	General Charges Recovery			15.39	
08-04-2020	General Charges Recovery			15.39	
08-04-2020	General Charges Recovery			15.39	
08-04-2020	General Charges Recovery			15.39	
08-04-2020	General Charges Recovery			118.00	
08-04-2020	General Charges Recovery			118.00	
08-04-2020	General Charges Recovery			118.00	
08-04-2020	General Charges Recovery			118.00	
08-04-2020	General Charges Recovery			118.00	
08-04-2020	General Charges Recovery			118.00	

89% have not been paid by their employers at all during the lockdown.¹¹

- To prevent the migration of the distressed due to the lockdown, the Ministry of Home Affairs issued an order on 29th March seeking that **employers should pay the workers full wages and home owners should not charge rent from stranded workers.**
- About **9 percent have been partially paid.**
- Some who have been given ration by the employers have been told that the **money for the rations will be deducted.** Some workers have also been threatened not to complain.
- Rambali Ram, and another family (eight members in total) were working for HINDALCO plant in Singrauli in Madhya Pradesh. While they have been given 5 kg of wheat by a local organisation, they have no cash for grinding the wheat to make it into flour or to buy essentials like salt and oil.
- Mintu Kumar with three other workers were paid ₹1000 by their employer/builder. They were walking back from Odisha to their village in Bihar and were stopped at the border by the police. The **police refused to help** and asked them to contact their own state, Bihar, for assistance. They did not have access to rations and their cash reserves were depleting.
- Salim Sheikh, is a small time contractor in Solapur, Maharashtra. While he managed to arrange for grains for 50 of his workers, he reached out to say that he had not been able to pay the labour wages. He said that due to the lockdown, his business has taken a severe hit and he is unable to pay the wages of 50 people. In desperation, he sent an email to Azim Premji seeking emergency cash relief.

44% of the calls received were “SOS” with no money or rations left or had skipped previous meal.¹²

- Kamlesh Kumar, a migrant worker from Uttar Pradesh stranded in Ludhiana, Punjab said, *“Even if we get rations, we need at least ₹500 for gas.”*
- SWAN volunteers had arranged for **dry rations to reach a group of 14 migrant workers** from Jharkhand stuck in Mangaluru through a local organisation. Three days later, there was an SOS call: Isahak Mundu, one of the group members, seeking money because they had **run out of gas to cook.**
- Afsana Khatoon from Muzaffarpur, Bihar, stranded in Hyderabad, said, *“I have a one year old daughter and a mentally depressed husband. I need to buy medicines for them but I don’t have any cash.”*
- Alluding to the indignity meted out to the migrant workers, a particularly distressed person from Jharkhand working as a migrant labourer in Mumbai said *“Modi ki nazron mein hum keedein hi hain na, waisi maut marenge.”* (“We are after all insects in the eyes of Modi so we will have to die that kind of death.”)

- Jitendra Sahoo drives a vehicle in Odisha and has been stranded along the route. He has no choice but to sleep in the vehicle. He doesn't have cooking arrangements and is unable to reach the vehicle owner's place. He has no access to rations or a kitchen and has no money left.
- Sidiq, his wife and two others are zari workers from Howrah district, West Bengal, and are stranded in Coimbatore. They have reached out twice. The feeding centre is 25 minutes away, and the police are harsh on them when they go there. They have run out of money. So, they feel that if they get some cash, they can buy groceries and cook.

Rate of Hunger and Distress Exceeding the Rate of Relief

Figure 3 attempts to illustrate the provision of food security after the lockdown began. The red line shows that the percentage of people who have not received rations from the government has decreased from around 99 percent on 8th April to about 96 percent on 13th April. In other words, 2 weeks into the lockdown, only 1 percent of the stranded workers had received rations from the government and 3 weeks into the lockdown, only 4 percent of them had received rations from the government. For cooked food we asked if they got cooked from any source, i.e., either government or some local organisation. So, the percentage of people who have not received cooked food from the government is likely to be more than what is reported here.

The yellow line in Figure 3 shows that the percentage of people who did not get cooked food from the government or some local civil society organisation has decreased from 80 percent to about 70 percent from the end of second week post lockdown to the end of third week post lockdown.

Figure 3: Percentage of people who have not received rations from the government or cooked food from any source

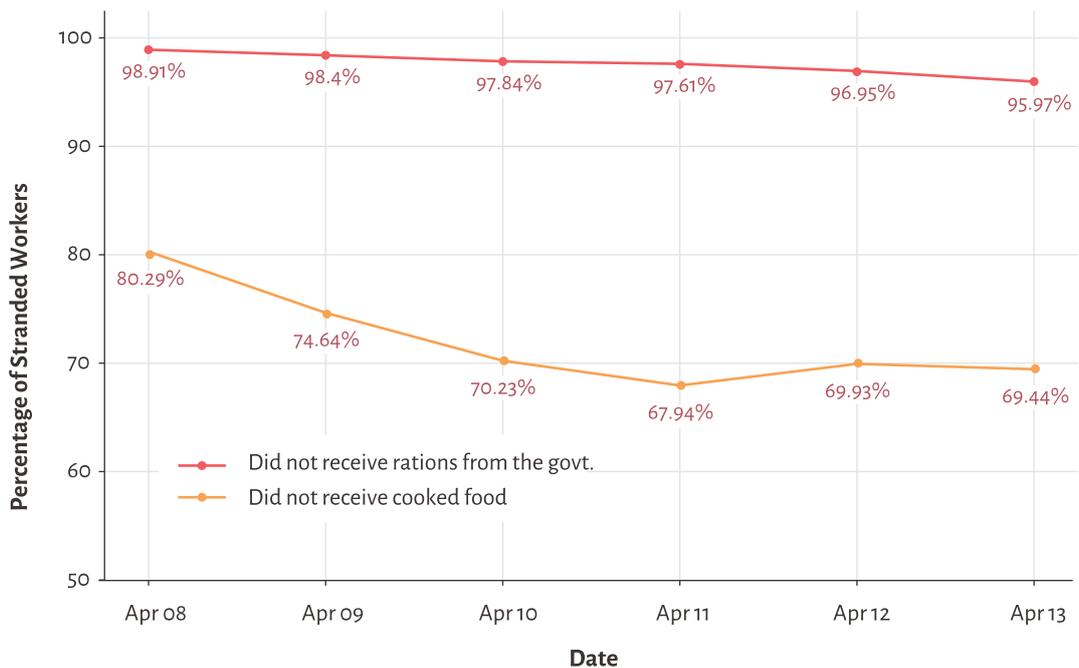


Figure 4: Percentage of people who have less than 1 day of rations remaining and those who have made an SOS call with no food or money between 8th April and 13th April

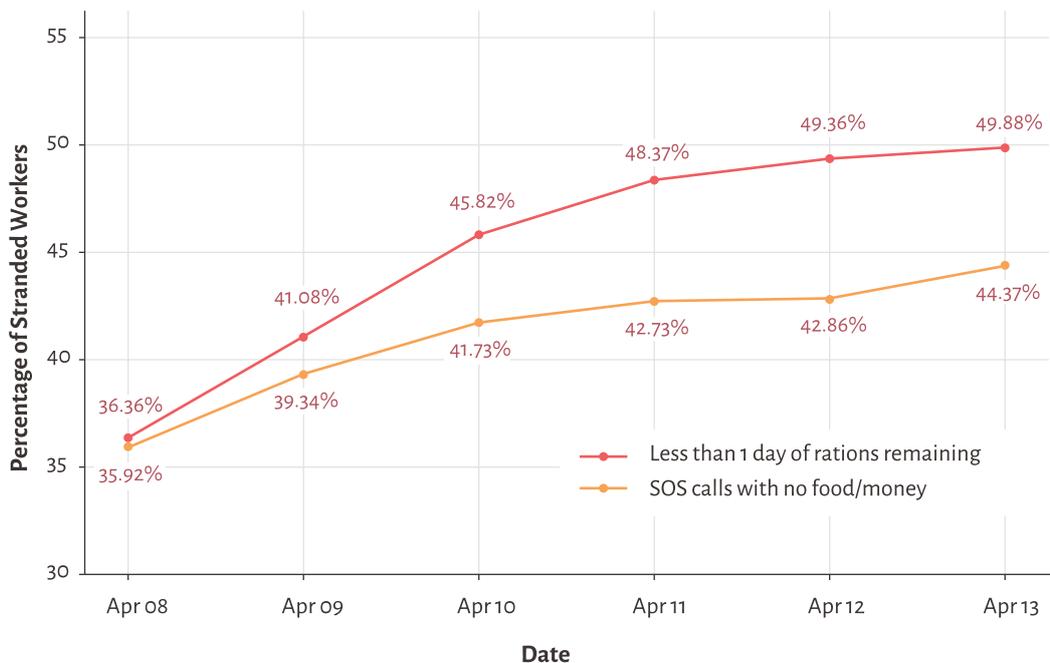


Figure 4 presents another perspective on the growing severity of the crisis. The red line in Figure 4 shows that the percentage of people having less than 1 day of rations has steadily increased from 36 percent at the end of the second week of lockdown to about 50 percent at the end of the third week of lockdown. The yellow line in Figure 4 shows that the percentage of people who have reached out to us as an “SOS” call with no rations or cash has also increased steadily from 36 percent to 44 percent from the end of the second week post lockdown to the end of third week post lockdown. These are cumulative figures. The numbers are alarming both in absolute and in relative terms. Half of all those who have reached us would not be able to eat the next day without immediate intervention.

There is a 14 percentage point increase in the proportion of people saying that they have just 1 day of rations left in the third week of lockdown. However, there is only a 3 percentage point increase in the proportion of people getting government ration supplies in the same period. What these effectively mean is that people are becoming hungrier almost 5 times faster than the rate at which the government ration supplies are reaching the needy. We have been asking labourers whether they have received cooked food either from the government or from any local organisation. Even the combined effort has not matched the increasing rate of hunger.

With 78 million tonnes of grains in Food Corporation of India warehouses, it's a now or never situation. Governments have had 2 weeks to ensure a robust ration supply network, doorstep delivery etc, to reduce hunger. However, as Figures 3 and 4 indicate, very few have benefited even in the third week of lockdown. The result is also variable across states.





Figure 5:
Percentage of
people who
have not been
paid during
lockdown

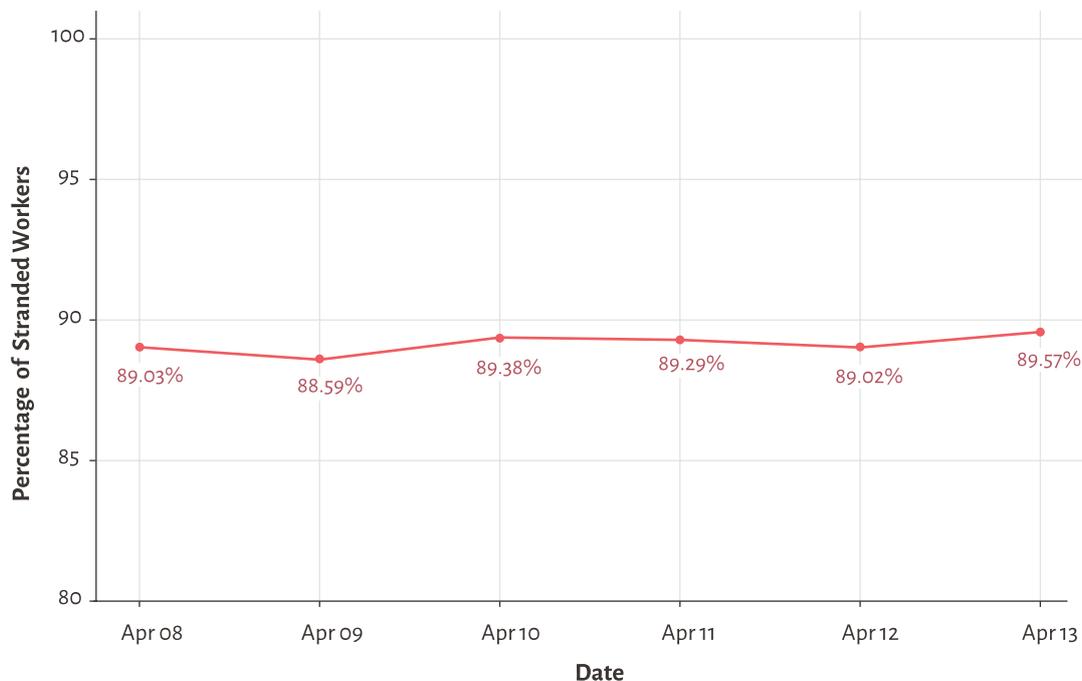


Figure 5 shows that the percentage of people who have not been paid by their employers during lockdown has been the same (roughly 89 percent) throughout the third week of lockdown. Even after 10 days of the Ministry of Home Affairs' directive that employers must pay their employees during lockdown, workers have not received their wages.

Figure 4 and Figure 5 demonstrate increasing distress and precarity as the lockdown period continues and the situation is likely to worsen in the next 3 weeks as the lockdown has been extended.

There is a statutory obligation to record migrant labour in many legislations that is binding on the central and state governments such as the National Disaster Management Act (2005), the Interstate Migrant Worker Act (1979), and the Street Vendors Act (2014), among others. Further there are other wage laws which mandate that workers are entitled to the payment of full and timely wages, to displacement allowance, a home journey allowance including payment of wages during the journey. It is the government's responsibility to ensure compliance of these laws for a safe and secure working environment for migrant workers.

The majority of stranded workers were not able to recall the name of the main builder or company they have been working for. They have no social network to tap into in their place of work. Their only link to the city or town where they are working is through their contractor. They were only able to name their contractor, not even the name of the registered company of the contractor. In most cases, contractors have switched off their phones leaving workers to fend for themselves.

What the lockdown has revealed is the absence of administrative oversight on the contract labour and lack of accountability of both the employers and the governments. When 89 percent of the stranded workers have not been paid during the lockdown period by their employers, the directive of the Ministry of Home Affairs asking employers to pay their workers stands nullified. Had the governments maintained information more accurately on where workers are employed, how many of them are employed, by whom etc, then the hunger crisis could have been averted to a great extent. Delivery of rations could have happened more effectively and the story revealed in Figures 3 and 4 would not have been as bad. Some critical questions to this end are: Who is being held accountable for this lapse? Who will pay for the extreme precarity that such workers have been pushed to?

Upendra Rushi from Bihar stranded in Surat, Gujarat, with around 40 others said, “Our employer still compels us to work saying, if you don’t work you won’t get food. Food is offered only once.”

In response to a Public Interest Litigation (Writ petition (civil) Diary no 10801/2020) to this end by Harsh Mander and Anjali Bharadwaj vs Union of India, the Chief Justice of India (CJI) recently remarked “If they are being provided meals, then why do they need money for meals?”

74 percent of migrant workers we spoke with have less than half their daily wages remaining to survive for the rest of the lockdown period. With ₹200 in hand, they not only have to get rations in places where rations or cooked food are not available, but have to also fend for essentials such as soap, oil, cooking gas, sanitary pads, medicines, phone recharge and transportation cost to return home post lockdown. The precariousness of stranded workers has been further exacerbated because most of them are worried that they have to pay rent for their accommodation at a time when they have no income. Room rents are in the range of ₹2000-3000.

Sanjay Sahni from Bihar who works in Tiruppur in a textile company where he is paid weekly wages said, “I need money desperately as I have to pay rent or I will be evicted. I also need money for medicines.”

In light of this, the honourable CJI’s remark appears to be completely out of touch with the lived reality of these migrants and overlooks the gravity of the crisis. Further, soon after the start of the relief work, SWAN volunteers realised that for both local organisations and the government machinery, it is administratively easier to cater to the needs of groups with a sizable number of members. Smaller groups of say 8 to 9 workers per group, tend to be more spread out and administratively harder to reach. So they are lower on priority, and as a result are more prone to be

excluded from government support or civil society support. Cash in hand for such smaller groups is therefore a lifeline using which they can buy basic essentials for sustenance. Indeed, majority of the groups we have dealt with have less than 10 members. For instance, the wife of Vivekanada Sharma, a worker from Jharkhand in Bengaluru, had not eaten for 2 days so she couldn't feed her 3 month old daughter when our volunteer spoke with him. An instant cash transfer to them made it possible for the infant to be fed.

There have been at least 195 documented lockdown related deaths¹³ (compared to 331 COVID-19 related deaths) which include suicides, death during the journey that migrant workers made to their home states and hunger, alcohol withdrawal and police brutality. It is no longer a trade-off between lives and livelihoods but between lives and lives. With neither food nor cash, migrant workers have been pushed to the brink of starvation, alarming levels of vulnerability and extreme indignity.

Changing Nature of Distress

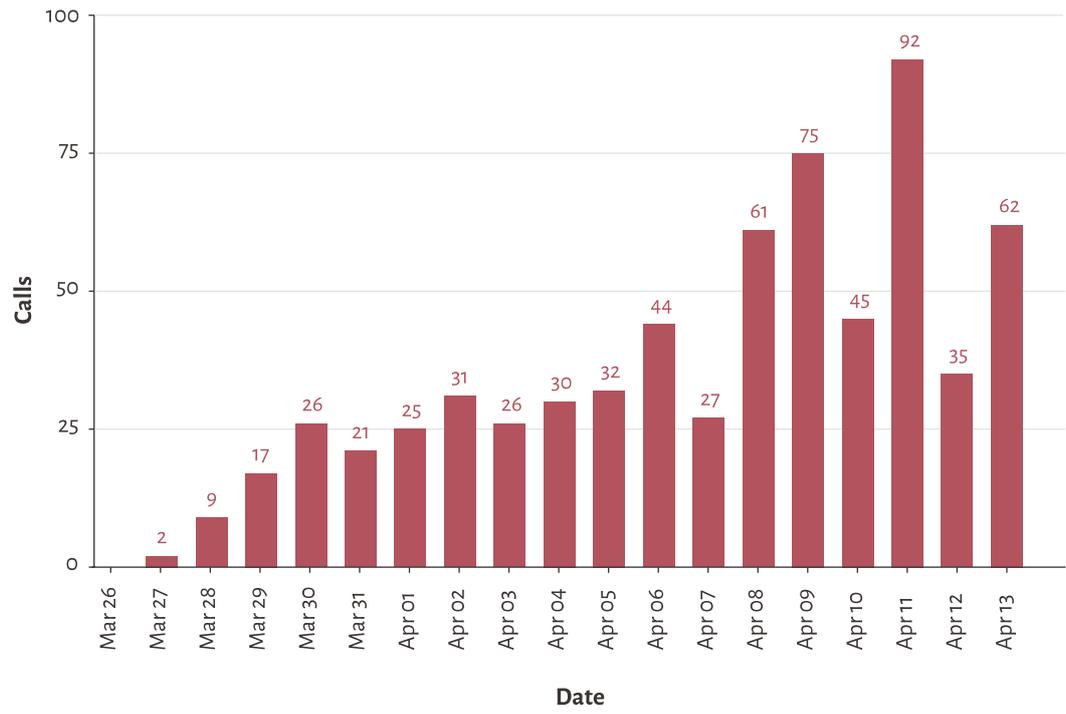
With each passing day of the lockdown period, the number of distress calls have increased (Figure 6). Each call corresponds to a group of stranded workers. While this may be partly due to the message spreading through word of mouth and a better response system in place, the numbers indicate that migrant worker distress did not subside even as relief measures were announced by the centre and states. From 21 calls on March 31st, the numbers have tripled to 62 on 13th April.

These numbers are a fraction of the 10,000 plus calls received on numerous government helpline numbers. The numbers are also a fraction of several other volunteer groups across the country dealing with various aspects of the migrant workers' crisis. More recently, we have started getting calls from stranded students and relatively better off workers like Zomato delivery men. While they are comparatively less vulnerable than migrant workers, their calls after 10 days into the lockdown indicates that more people are being pulled into the zone of vulnerability.

Moreover, the nature of distress of a group of workers, usually male, is quite different from families that are stranded. For example, Amana lives with her son, daughter-in-law and grandson in Mumbai. Her son is suffering from TB and she is the only earning member of the household. She works as a sanitation worker in a hospital. While they have ration supplies for 2-3 days, they have no money left as she hasn't been to work in March.

In summary, among those we spoke with, there is much agony, hunger, trauma -- physical and psychological -- and a desperation to return home.

Figure 6:
Number of
calls by date



The View from Some States

Uttar Pradesh

- Around **1618 migrant workers**, including **53 women and children**, have reached out to us. The average daily wages of ₹291 are lower than some of the other states we have got calls from.
- **64 percent of workers had not received any cooked food** from the government.
- In addition to setting up shelter homes for migrants that arrived from other states, the Uttar Pradesh government announced a **₹1000 cash transfer for daily wage workers** such as street vendors and those without an established place of work.
- Despite the Uttar Pradesh government's cash transfer order, **not a single person in our sample had received any money** from the government.
- On average, **people are left with ₹56**, and **87 percent have less than ₹200** remaining.
- **Every single person said that their rations will be finished in 2 days.** For example, Mohammad from Ghaziabad filled out so many forms, and yet received no rations.

Mumbai and Maharashtra

- **3992 workers**
- Less than **1 percent of groups we have spoken with in Maharashtra have received any rations** from the government. **42 percent had been able to access some cooked meals** either from a local organisation or from the government. Almost **80 percent of those who reached out are construction workers** and a staggering **90 percent said that they will be out of rations within 2 days.**
- In most cases in Maharashtra and particularly the Mumbai region we have faced great difficulty. We have made **repeated calls to the government helplines**, reached out on twitter to Mantralaya Room but ultimately **no ration has been delivered.** Nobody in the Mumbai Metropolitan Region among our groups has received any help from the government whatsoever.
- **Restricted Access and Police Action:** However, organisations and groups that have taken **initiatives to deliver dry ration or cooked meals have been sent away by the police** in the Malad area. Workers in Malad and Kandivali are afraid to go out to food distribution centres as the police have beaten up one person in their neighbourhood. In Dharavi, workers have informed us that the **police hit and disperse people who are out to use public toilets.** Workers are forced to use these toilets in the wee hours of the night to avoid encountering the police. (They pay about ₹2-4 to use the toilets.) To prevent crowds, the police sometimes disperse the people who are waiting to buy ration and close the ration shops. One of the workers in Dharavi who wanted to withdraw money to buy rations waited till the next day to go to the ATM in the evening for fear of police violence. The state government announced a reduction in the cost of a 'Shiv Bhojan Thali' for all, but owing to restricted access and lack of cash, **most migrant workers are unable to use this facility.**

- **Limited Capacity:** In places like Antop-Hill, we have been in touch with more than 300 migrant workers. They have been scrambling for cooked food and multiple reports of children falling sick due to eating the packed food. **They have also repeatedly called the helplines in vain.** There are around 600 migrants stranded in Talaja-Panvel region as well with women and little children as young as a few weeks old. Organisations working in those areas do not have the capacity to cater to such large numbers. The government has to step in quickly.

“Kaam bandh- paisa bandh”, said Shyam Pandit from Jharkahnd stranded in Mumbai as his employer had offered him and others nothing.

Haryana and Delhi

- **1058 workers** including **233 women and children** have reached out to us. More than two-thirds are construction workers, 12 percent do non-group based work such as drivers, domestic help etc with average daily wages of ₹345.
- The Delhi government relief response has been creditable. The state government has announced a fairly extensive cover including **issuing ration coupons to those who do not have ration cards.** In comparison to other states, **one of three people in Delhi and Haryana have received cooked food** from the government or a local organisation. However, more than **82 percent said that they have rations only for 2 days.**
- The Delhi government also announced **₹5000 cash transfers for auto drivers and registered construction workers** but this will have little bearing for migrant workers.
- Workers in some parts of Delhi (near Rajokri Flyover, Shani Bazaar, Mangal Bazaar and Panchayat Ghar), **have been subject to repeated police brutality.** This has made it extremely difficult for them to withdraw money or even get ration, forcing them to sustain themselves by borrowing food or money.
- On 25th March the Haryana government announced that **daily wage workers registered on the district level portal will be given ₹1000 per week.** None of the workers that called us from Haryana were aware of this cash transfer let alone had received it.
- The Haryana government, like others has also directed industries, factories, shops and other commercial establishments **not to terminate contracts and pay full wages especially to casual/contractual workers.** However, **84 percent of those who reached out to us have not been paid** during the lockdown period and 76 percent of them have less than ₹300 to survive for the rest of the lockdown period.
- It has been observed that in both the states (especially Gurugram, Haryana), NGOs, local organisations and volunteers' groups have extended their help in terms of delivery of cooked food, dry rations and relief kits.
- Workers have been apprehensive about visiting food facilities and relief centres fearing the spread of coronavirus due to the presence of a large crowd and congestion.

Amod from Bihar working in Delhi said, “My family has three children and one of the adults is diabetic and a heart patient. I don’t have money to buy rations or medicines.”

Punjab

- **322 workers** of whom **66 were women and children**.
- The Punjab government announced distribution of **10 kg of flour, 2 kg of pulses and 2 kg of sugar, door-to-door for daily wage labourers**. Punjab has not announced any financial assistance for workers who are not registered with labour welfare boards.
- In a particularly severe case, workers outside Ludhiana had to face **police brutality** and felt they were **discriminated against in the distribution of food and ration by locals**.
- In rural areas, we were told of a village being sealed after **driving out migrant workers**. These workers are now stranded in pump rooms, with no proper shelter or even access to public facilities like ration shops, hospitals and ATMs. This leaves them in a precarious position, making help even harder to reach with the ambiguity of the location they are stranded in and denial of permission for transport by the organisations that try to aid in delivering supplies.
- Receiving help from the government, as well as civil society, has been difficult according to the workers we spoke to. **Ration shops run out of ration by the time the poor can even access it**, not only because of a general disorganisation but also some corruption in distribution across large cities.
- In Ludhiana, we spoke to the Sub-Divisional Magistrate (SDM) through personal contacts, who, after a lot of back and forth, **provided ration for 63 people of a total of 83**. In another area, responding urgently to the SDM’s request, an officer from the District Collector’s office delivered ration but selectively and not to everyone on the list he was provided. Despite multiple assurances from the administration, rations did not reach these workers. Eventually, the authorities were unreachable.

Indu Devi from Bihar working in Ludhiana, Punjab, paid once in 2 weeks said, “I tried to access food being distributed but was sent away saying there wasn’t any more. Some days my three small children and I eat in a gurudwara. I have no money left.”

Karnataka

- **3000 workers** that includes **986 women and children**. The group sizes of the stranded are smaller in Karnataka compared to the other states.
- The Karnataka High court ordered the **provisions of food packets to daily wage workers** affected by the lockdown. We have **not been able to access orders** issued by the state government outlining further steps including financial assistance. However, **93 percent had not received any ration supplies and 80 percent had not received cooked food** at the time the workers reached out to the SWAN volunteers.
- On a positive note, the Principal Secretary, Rural Development and Panchayat Raj, has **responded with urgency to requests for rations** to be delivered in different parts of the state.
- On two particular occasions, the response from the administration has been noteworthy. More than 50 workers from West Bengal were stranded in an open field in Huliya town in Uttara Kannada district. The Tehsildar was contacted and supplies reached the stranded workers within hours. On another occasion, 40 workers, working for a steel plant of Jindal were stranded in Bellary and the administration responded with ration supplies within hours of reaching out to the Principal Secretary, Rural Development and Panchayati Raj, Karnataka.
- Civil society, NGOs and individuals have really stepped up by contributing funds, rations and cooked food. This was complemented by efforts of well meaning officers whenever we have reached out
- Difficulty in getting rations to certain areas within the greater Bengaluru metropolitan area, especially the peri-urban. In one case, a group of migrant workers from Tamil Nadu were eating at the Indira Canteens between April 4th and April 8th but owing to strict policing in the area, they were unable to venture out. A volunteer called the 'war helpline' in the Laggare area for supplies of ration kit, but the volunteer was asked by the government helpline person to give money to the stranded workers.
- Number of SOS calls received per day have **steadily increased**.

Basavaraj a daily wage labour from Karnataka said, "I was chased away by police when I went to buy rations with whatever little money was left...I have rations only for one meal. If I was alone I could have managed but there are also women and children in our group and it is difficult to get anything for them."

Himachal Pradesh

- Only a **few calls received** from stranded workers in Himachal Pradesh. In most cases, needs for ration and food were **met by local organisations**.
- Local organisations also played a proactive role in connecting to the district administration. However, **requirements are quite urgent and government responses are not prompt enough**.

Bihar

- The Bihar government was quick to set up an **app based system to disburse ₹1000 to stranded migrant workers** outside the state. Close to **9 lakh have registered on the app and money transfers have begun** but many are still reporting that money has not been deposited in their accounts despite receiving SMSs confirming the transaction has been completed.
- The state government is **yet to start disbursal of entitlements under the PDS system** creating a crisis for even those who have been able to make it back to their native villages. We received a call from one migrant, Anil Choudhary who somehow managed to return to Muzaffarpur, in Bihar, on the 8th of April but found the situation in the village just as dire. He has two children, and one of them who is 2 years old was suffering from “shortness of breath” which the doctors have diagnosed as pneumonia. The family had not eaten for 2 days and no PDS ration had been distributed yet. While the case has been raised with the district administration it points to a deepening crisis not just in our cities but in migrants’ home villages too.

Mohammed Javed and 40 others from Jharkhand, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, employed by a contractor to work in a project of the Jindal group said, “The contractor had provided food for 1 week but it’s all over now and he has not given any food or money. We have only had biscuits for 3 days now.”

Social Solidarity during the Lockdown-Induced Crisis

- Civil society organisations, catering and delivery services in many places and several individuals have really stepped up by contributing funds, rations and cooked food.
- In a few cases in Delhi/Gurgaon and parts of Tamil Nadu, it has been noted that the landlords have provided their tenants, mostly migrant workers and daily wage labourers, with food and ration, in addition to relaxing the payment date for the rent.
- In some places in Tamil Nadu, local grocery store owners have given ration supplies on loan to migrant workers from West Bengal.
- The worst affected, the migrant workers themselves, have shown great generosity. Workers themselves with rations to last them a day or two more have been generous to say, *“Unko zyaada zaroorat hain humse, unko deejiyega. Hamare paas jitna ration hain aur do din chal jayega.”* (“They are more in need of rations than us. We can still survive for 2 days.”)



Recommendations

The recommendations we propose here are a basket of measures for migrants of different categories. First, those who have returned home. Second, those who were trying to reach home but were stopped and sent to relief shelters. Third, those who were trying to reach home, were stopped but were not able to reach a shelter and are sleeping on roads and in public spaces. These workers are in the most distressing situation. Fourth, those who have been living under miserable conditions in the cities where they work. For example those living at construction sites or in their own accommodation but now with no access to essentials because of no income.

Food Security

- 1. Double the PDS ration for 3 months** (April, May, June) and provide it **free in advance through doorstep delivery** along with **cooking oil, pulses, salt, masala, sanitary pads and soap to be distributed in advance** to all. There is an urgent need at this moment to **universalise access** to food grains, pulses, cooking oil and soap, and provide it to everyone desirous of obtaining these, irrespective of whether they have a ration card or not, because a lot of the very poor including the homeless and circular migrants in cities have no cards. This would be in keeping with the spirit of the directions of the Supreme Court issued in 2016 to mitigate starvation (judgment related to drought affected areas dated May 16, 2016 in Writ Petition (C) No. 857 of 2015, Swaraj Abhiyan – (II) versus Union of India & Ors.). In order to identify those not covered by cards, district officials should take the support of local civil society organisations, trade unions, local elected representatives such as ward members and others. **This should be done immediately.** Self declaration by families and persons in need should be sufficient and no additional documentation requirements should be imposed. The grain requirement for this can be easily provided by the Government of India using current Food Corporation of India stock, and state governments should top up with pulses, masalas and oil.
- 2. Home delivery of rations and other basic necessities including medicines, as well as cooked food packets by volunteers who could be paid minimum wages** for the period (as is happening in Kerala.) The Kerala example is worthy of emulation because it is trying to deliver food to the homes of the aged, disabled and sick, and those in quarantine, through local bodies and volunteers.
- 3. Government should ensure a minimum of two cooked meals at conveniently located sites** at a minimum density of **70 feeding centres open 12 hours a day** (to include Aanganwadis, government schools, government colleges, army areas and community halls) per 1 lakh people. A 1 km road next to each feeding centre needs to be cordoned off, and an indelible white line marked at 10 metre intervals for the stretch of 1 km. One person to stand at every white line.
- 4. Supply of clean drinking water and free water tanks in all colonies** (notified and non-notified) which do not have piped water supply, to allow people to regularly wash hands.

Wages and Income Support

5. Emergency cash relief of **₹7,000 per month for 2 months** to be given as cash (without biometric authentication) to each poor household/migrant worker.
6. **Minimum wages for 25 days per month to be released into Jan Dhan accounts** of all urban residents for the period of the lockdown and 2 months following the end of the lockdown. State governments should collaborate and ensure that cash relief reaches the stranded in case people do not have Jan Dhan accounts.
7. Using **school and other currently empty locations to house migrants**, homeless and displaced people during lockdown (which is now extended by at least three more weeks).
8. The state government must **pay the full wages of all workers in the informal sector**, at the minimum wage notified for the area, for the entire period of the lockdown, and 3 months after as the economy recovers. This must be paid as far as possible at the doorstep of all adult workers who are not in the formal sector.
9. Ensure **immediate clearance of all pending liabilities of wages and materials** under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). **Pay all registered MGNREGA workers** (job-card holders) their full daily wages throughout the lockdown period, even though they are not allowed to work at the worksites due to the lockdown. The Ministry of Labour's orders stating that all workers **should be deemed to be "at work"** during this period and be paid accordingly must apply to MGNREGA workers as well.
10. The state government must ensure that every primary employer strictly adheres to **paying the wages to their contractors and to the workers**.
11. This livelihood support must include **all segments of the population**, including those both in stigmatised professions like **sex work and begging**, and in **unseen unpaid work such as domestic work**.

Social Security

12. Ensure **advance payment of double pension for 6 months** released in cash to be delivered to each pensioner immediately at her doorstep.
13. Provide **full entitlements unconditionally**, in advance, for all the eligible mothers under Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana and Janani Suraksha Yojana.

Shelters and Housing

14. **No closure of hostels, relief camps, and shelters.** Provisioning of large spaces such as stadiums, army cantonment areas with adequate facilities for temporary stay for migrant workers, daily wage earners, and others requiring shelter.
15. There should be **no eviction of tenants by landlords** as already mandated by the Home Ministry. Under no circumstances should any private or public institution forcefully vacate people living therein for 2 months beyond the lockdown. Instead they should support and facilitate their stay.
16. For children without adult caregivers, such as street children, **voluntary spaces in public colleges, army areas, and stadiums need to be created.** In case a child is unwilling, they should **not be forced and instead they should be paid a daily allowance** of half the state's minimum wages. The State Commission for Protection of Child Right should monitor implementation of the above.

Transport Facilities

17. The state government where migrants are currently located must **make arrangements for stranded workers to reach home safely over the next three weeks.** This can be ensured through the state and central governments jointly setting up **dedicated sanitised rails and buses.** Thermal tests can be conducted at each migrant worker shelter, and those with no symptoms be allowed to travel.

Endnotes

¹ Figures are based on Census 2011 figures and those cited in Alakh Alok Srivastava vs Union of India, WP No. 468/2020, Record of Proceedings of SC

² <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/mp-cm-shivraj-singh-hints-at-extending-lockdown-says-lives-of-people-more-important/videoshow/75033100.cms>

³ <https://theprint.in/opinion/india-lost-more-jobs-due-to-coronavirus-lockdown-than-us-did-during-depression/397693/>

⁴ For a compilation of central and state government relief orders go to: <https://covid-india.in/>

⁵ Out of 2957 workers for which there is data on this.

⁶ Out of 9403 and 2487 workers respectively who were asked this.

⁷ <https://www.msn.com/en-in/news/newsindia/during-lockdown-haryana-delhi-gave-most-meals-kerala-sheltered-3-lakh-says-govt/ar-BB12le44?li=AAgges1>

⁸ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/delhi/3-shelters-housing-150-people-gutted-cops-point-at-food-row/articleshow/75102461.cms>

⁹ Out of 2758 workers who answered this.

¹⁰ Out of 3160 workers who answered this.

¹¹ Out of 2918 workers

¹² Out of 7573 workers

¹³ <https://theprint.in/opinion/more-than-300-indians-have-died-of-the-coronavirus-and-nearly-200-of-the-lockdown/400714/> The full database can be found here: <https://thejeshgn.com/projects/covid19-india/non-virus-deaths/>



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