31 March 2020

To

1. The Honorable Prime Minister of India
2. Honorable Chief Ministers of all States

Urgent: Additional Proposals for the Short-term Relief of Vulnerable Workers and Populations Deeply impacted by Strategies to Contain the Spread of the Corona Pandemic

Dear Sir/Madam,

As the corona pandemic and measures to contain it, unfold, we are witnessing a humanitarian and economic crisis of unprecedented proportions. The Central government has announced a Rs. 1.7 trillion package aimed at alleviation of the impact of the lockdown on the poor (PMGKY) over the next three months. It is also heartening that a number of states have announced additional measures and relief packages varying in nature and scale. While welcoming these measures, we are of the view that given the magnitude of the crisis that the country is facing, these measures will have to be scaled up with immediate and unconditional financial and other support from the national government. Therefore we appeal to the Government of India and all the State Governments to initiate urgent additional measures that are required to address critical gaps in the short-term relief measures announced so far for the impacted population. These are listed below:

1. Immediate minimum measures by governments to provide for food and subsistence requirements

   Cash and kind assistance, and food for the homeless and most distressed, are urgently required by the poor in the informal economy who have lost jobs and incomes. We propose the following as minimum measures:

   a. **Cash Income Support**: The stoppage of employment and incomes for those in the informal economy urgently necessitates cash income support. The Centre’s announcement of transferring Rs. 500 per month to each JDY woman account holder is not sufficient. The Centre and States together should try and ensure a minimum transfer over the next three months of at least Rs 6000 per month with a major part borne by the Central Government. All households who do not have a tax payer or a formal worker should be eligible to receive the cash transfer through bank accounts. Assuming that about 20 crore households will require such assistance, the total quantum of assistance will be about Rs 3,60,000 crores over three months.

   b. **Rations**: The Central government has declared 5 kg free rations plus 1 kg free pulses as supplementary monthly ration. Many state governments have announced free basic or enhanced rations. There is a growing consensus among central/state governments that PDS rations be increased to a minimum of ten kg per person per month and should also include other essentials – including pulses, oil, soaps, gur/sugar. We request all state governments to ensure that an at least 10 kg free ration per person per month, along with other necessary items, is available for all eligible households.
c. The Central government has already issued an advisory that all employees should be retained in public/private establishments and paid wages on time. As model employers, all central and state government establishments, statutory and public sector organisations should immediately issue compliance orders. Government of India should announce a scheme of wage compensation to support wage bills of unorganized sector and MSME enterprises during the lockdown so that workers are not laid off which is quite imminent. Certain component of fixed cost of unorganized and MSME sector should also borne by the central government so that their business can survive in the post lockdown situation.

d. Some states have already announced increases in old age pensions and ex gratia transfers to workers, including construction workers. Immediate payments can play an important role in alleviating distress and its consequences. The Uttar Pradesh Government has already transferred INR 611 crores to over 27.15 lakh MGNREGA workers. The Telangana government has made ex gratia payments and food transfers to migrant workers. We welcome these steps as a good beginning. States should advertise the mechanism they are following to put their announcement into practice. The Central government has also issued a direction to all states to make ex gratia transfers to all construction workers registered under the Boards. This should be done immediately and all states should make immediate payments to the registered construction workers through the Construction Workers’ Welfare Fund. All other Central Welfare Funds should be utilized to provide immediate assistance to other workers such as Bidi workers and similar sources should be utilized for other categories of unemployed workers.

e. In a time of an epochal crisis such as the present one, special effort has to be made to provide assistance and supplies on a non-discriminatory basis, by both public and private entities. Workers as a class should be treated with dignity and respect. States should endeavor to cover all those who for some reason have been wrongly excluded. Special efforts and drives should be carried out to include scheduled castes and tribes, persons of third gender, religious minorities, migrants etc. Not all poor households, particularly migrants, have functional bank accounts, and proper mechanisms need to be evolved on how cash assistance be designed for them. Similarly, special efforts should be put in place to identify and provide rations to landless households/individuals who do not have ration cards or whose ration cards have been deleted mistakenly and to identify and include persons who have been left out of the NSAP list. Governments should direct officials to ensure that not one needy person or household remains outside the social protection net being created to cope with the calamitous conditions.

2. Urgent steps to deal with stranded populations

a. The sudden lockdown has created a serious humanitarian and public health crisis involving vulnerable migrant workers and their families. Out of a total of forty to
fifty million wage employed seasonal or circular migrants in the informal economy, a large proportion – especially those in construction, manufacturing or transport/travel industries – are currently without employment and want to head back to their villages, with their accompanying family members, even under great odds. Already lakhs of workers and their families, and also students, have been on the roads, prepared to travel long distances and many have headed back in the last few days. These numbers could mount several times if the lockdown extends.

b. The Central government has directed that there should be no movement of migrants and that district and state boundaries be sealed. In our view, this will exacerbate the humanitarian crisis and, if not properly handled, may result in crowding and consequential serious public health issues.

c. We believe that migrants could be encouraged to stay back but not coerced. The facilities and space at the disposal of the Centre and the States should be utilized such that there is no crowding for such migrants, and food and other subsistence facilities such as water and sanitation should be made available. State Governments should immediately summon all facilities, public and private, for sheltering the migrant workers as well as to quarantine and create new treatment facilities. These could include all academic and public institutions such as schools and colleges, hotels, hostels, marriage halls, indoor stadia, guest houses, and similar facilities.

d. Many state governments such as Delhi, Kerala, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, and Bihar have opened large numbers of shelters and ramped up community feeding programmes for migrant and homeless populations. We request all states should step in with similar measures. Government of India should announce that it will defray the cost of sheltering and feeding migrant workers and their families as a matter of national responsibility given their contribution to the national economy.

e. The NDMA should immediately and urgently oversee a coordinated arrangement, with the assistance of the NDRF or other agencies, for transporting migrant workers who are already on the road by special trains, buses, and other transport to their home states. They will be better off and safer in their home environments than if they are kept back in crowded and congested places, separated from their families and communities.

f. State governments have been directed to keep all migrant workers who have moved under quarantine for 14 days in public shelters. In our view, migrant returnees can be screened using the protocols followed at airports, and those detected to have infection or at high risk may be quarantined, while others can be safely transported back home for self-isolation or isolation at, or near, homes under community support and supervision, which is a more humane and effective solution. Source states should issue clear advisories on the safety and health of the returnees and the host populations and involve the PRIs and local bodies. All those who have completed the isolation period should be provided assistance and helped to integrate with their families and host communities.

g. Dedicated multi-lingual help lines for migrants should be set up immediately in all states and committees should be set up with the participation of organisations having experience of working with migrant workers.
h. The Prime Minister’s Relief Fund and the Special Disaster Relief Fund created by the Prime Minister should be used for providing assistance to the migrants and for facilitating their stay, transport, and safe relocation to their homes, as the case may be.

3. **Measures to ensure safe harvesting and post-harvesting activities in rural areas**

We are already in the middle of the Rabi harvesting season when standing crops have to be harvested, processed, and sold. Some states have already issued notification declaring harvesting and post-harvesting activities, including mandi operations, as essential services. The Government of India has also issued a second addendum to the lockdown guidelines exempting essential farming related operations, including movement of machinery. Clear notifications should be issued by all states, which should include safety guidelines. Procurement at MSP and storage by the FCI and State agencies should be enhanced to prevent a famine like condition from evolving.

4. **Support of civil society and voluntary workers be enlisted in identifying vulnerabilities and assisting with the deliverables**

In all natural disasters in the past, civil society has played an important and prominent role in relief and rehabilitation. As in any natural disaster, the government’s capacity and preparedness to face the outcomes of the pandemic has to be augmented by that of civil society. The Government of India has set up a portal for the enlistment of individuals and organisations. This is also already happening in many states. States such as Kerala and Jharkhand have enlisted the support of large numbers of volunteers at the local level. All state governments should set up committees at the Village Panchayat, Block, District and State levels. They should start on-line portals, and organisations and individual volunteers could indicate the nature of the resources that they could muster, areas of work, support required etc. Panchayat leaders and officials and sub-district health staff, who will be the key in the local management of resources and control of the pandemic, should be educated and trained at the very earliest.

5. **Ensuring the safety, security, and welfare of the front-line workers, who are at risk**

At present, the Central and state governments have to equip the frontline health workers and the hospitals, which should remain the top most priority for all governments, but frontline workers also include others engaged in essential services on behalf of governments (such as sanitation workers), or private firms (delivery workers, workers in chemist shops etc.) who also are at greater risk and under hardship. States should announce specific measures for the safety, job security, and welfare of all such workers and private employers should also follow up.

6. **Release of prisoners**

Some states such as Delhi and Maharashtra have already announced the release of prisoners from overcrowded jails addressing public health concerns and releasing
precious resources for other purposes. State should release under-trial persons and political persons, or those in jails for minor issues. This will immediately decongest prisons and release precious resources for other expenditure.

7. Revised NDMA Guidelines on the Lockdown suitable for India’s Context

The NDMA Guidelines have been revised from time to time through addendums. They should be comprehensively revised to allow people to produce, deliver, as well health related measures necessary under the present circumstances. Guidelines and explanatory videos, instead of being oriented towards middle-class India, should be cognizant of the nature of Indian urban and rural society, levels of homelessness, overcrowding, illiteracy etc. and large scale educational campaigns should be carried out and concerns addressed by experts on behalf of government through press conferences on a daily basis. Police are themselves frontline workers performing their duties under difficult circumstances but clear instructions should be issued to police in the light of these detailed guidelines not to harass distressed citizens who are either trying to produce, provide and distribute, or access, essential goods and services.

8. Larger Support from the GoI is the Need of the Hour

Government of India as a sovereign institution alone has the fiscal capacity to raise significant financial resources. It should do so immediately by a three to four fold increase of the current relief package. It should also play a clearer and stronger role interstate coordination and mobilization of non-fiscal resources. Such coordination could have led to a better handling of the humanitarian crisis of workers stranded workers in cities and destination states.

We request you to urgently consider the above proposals and to take the necessary decisions at your level.

(These proposals have been initiated by the Indian Society of Labour Economics which is a professional body with over 1500 life members. The proposals have been endorsed by the undersigned who include economists, social scientists, grassroots workers’ organisations and activists, and former civil servants)

The list of the signatories to this letter is enclosed herewith.
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283. Sujata Patel, National Fellow, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla
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289. Sunayana Swain, Assistant Professor, TISS Hyderabad
290. Sundar Burra, Former Civil Servant
291. Sunder Thomas, Former Civil Servant
292. Sunil Mishra, Fellow, Institute for Human Development, Delhi
293. Suresh Agarwal, Former Professor, Delhi University
294. Suresh K Goel, Former Civil Servant
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302. Tanuka Endow, Professor, IHD, Delhi
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304. Tapan Kumar Bose, New Delhi
305. Tara Brahme, Azim Premji University, Bangalore
306. Tarini Gautam, Azim Premji University, Bangalore
307. Tayeena Tabiya, Azim Premji University, Bangalore
308. Tulika Tripathi, Assistant Professor, Central University of Gujarat, Gandhinagar
309. U.Vindhya, Professor of Psychology, TISS, Hyderabad
310. Ulka Mahajan, Sarvahara Jan Andolan
311. Uma Rani, International Labour Organisation, Geneva
312. Umakant, Ph.D, New Delhi
313. Utsa Patnaik, Former Professor, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi
314. V. Selvam, Regional Director, ISS Regional Centre Puducherry
315. Vachaspathi Shukla, Faculty, Sardar Patel Institute, Ahmedabad
316. Vasudha Pande, Lady Shri Ram College, University of Delhi
317. Vandana Swami, Faculty, Azim Premji University, Bangalore
318. Venkatesh Athreya, former Professor, Chennai
319. Vibhuti Patel, Former Professor, SNDT University, Mumbai
320. Vidhya Soundararajan, Assistant Professor, IIM, Bangalore
321. Vidyasagar Giri, General Secretary, AITUC
322. Vijaybaskar, Associate Professor, MIDS, Chennai
323. Vijoy Prakash, IAS(Retd), Chairman, Bihar Vidyapith, Patna
324. Vikas Maniar, Azim Premji University
325. Vikash Prakash, Azim Premji University
326. Vinay Gidwani, Professor, University of Minnesota, USA
327. Vinay Kumar Jha, Institution: Independent Researcher, Madhubani
328. Vinoj Abraham, CDS, Thiruvananthapuram
329. Vishwathika Sitaram, Azim Premji University, Bangalore
330. Vrijesh Upadhay, BMS
331. Yamini Vidya Srikanth, Azim Premji University, Bangalore
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