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**TOWARDS A
PEOPLE FOCUSED
COVID-19 RESPONSE**

**Stopping spread of infection,
ensuring protection and
reducing impact of lockdown**



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he outbreak of COVID-19 has brought the entire country to a halt and in strong lockdown for the next few weeks. These and other swift measures taken by the Government of India to close national borders and enforce social isolation in order to contain the spread of the coronavirus are appreciable and in the best interests of all Indians. While we must ensure that these measures are implemented with due respect for civil rights and liberties, thus guarding against the use of indiscriminate force, we must also turn our full attention to protecting and sustaining people of our country.

It is apparent that these measures will adversely affect a vast majority of people, and most particularly those who work in the informal sector as daily wage earners, contract workers, domestic workers, agricultural workers, street vendors and so on. Their capacity to earn and thus sustain their households and ensure the well-being of their families is inextricably linked to their mobility to obtain work, which invariably is dependent upon venturing out of the house. Physical and social distancing is mostly at the cost of their livelihoods, and we know that they do not have the surpluses to fall back on beyond a couple of days. The impact on vulnerable groups such as single women, who are engaged in similar occupations, and sex workers, homeless people, beggars and rag pickers is already turning out to be manifold.

A bold, people-focused response oriented towards both the informal and formal sector is the need of the hour. Wage protection, food security and social security are imperatives to ensure that people are able to survive this immensely difficult period, and that we are then able to gradually recover upon the containment of the pandemic.

The Prime Minister Garib Kalyan Yojana, the Rs 1.7 lakh crore welfare package for low-income households and people living in poverty announced by the

Finance Minister on 26th March 2020, is a much-needed step. However, much more needs to be done to curtail the economic devastation and social breakdown we may witness over the coming weeks, even as we prepare our healthcare systems to cope with the scale of the crisis.

The disruptive impact of the containment measures is already visible. The swift closure of offices, factories, malls, shops and construction sites has led to the massive displacement of many workers, especially migrant workers. Due to the closure of railways and interstate buses, there are several cases of migrant workers being stranded, at the bus stands, railway platforms and other locations, with no work and no means of going home. Further, there is stigmatisation of migrant workers who had already returned to their native places, as they are being targeted by anxious locals. The containment in homes increases risk of women to domestic violence, continued reports of violence is evident from One Stop Crisis Centres supported by ActionAid Association, especially Gauravi in Bhopal.

There is need for an all-out response on the crisis on all fronts – social, economic and physical. While we look to the Government and Administration to play a leading role, we see the need for civil society organisations and society as a whole to work together to face this crisis.

The Union and State Governments are rightly treating lockdowns and social distancing as essential steps in controlling the spread of the virus. But these measures are not enough to control or fight the disease and they are not conducive or tenable in democratic countries. Therefore, Governments need to undertake extensive initiatives such as investing more into the healthcare system, informing and organising the community to respond with the support of civil society, and ensuring transparency and accountability in all efforts. In a society as unequal as ours we must work together, to ensure an equitable response, and ensure a broad bottom-up public effort.

The economic response task force announced by the Prime Minister in his televised address to the nation on March 19, 2020 is extremely timely. But this pandemic has widespread repercussions for our economy, healthcare system, and society at large. Therefore, we need a multi-stakeholder task

force which represents various sections of the population to calibrate efforts and ensure a comprehensive response. This includes representatives of State Governments, economists, industrialists, scientists, public health experts, trade unionists, representatives of people working in the informal sector, women rights activists, and child development experts among others. The modalities of operation of the task force should be shared with the public, with provisions for regular updates and press conferences.

Based on ActionAid Association's deep and continued engagement with informal workers in a little less than 160 districts across India, and across both rural and urban contexts we had prepared and submitted recommendations to the Covid-19 Economic Task Force. Several of the recommendations had already been initiated by State Governments in some form or another and were also to be seen in the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana. However, the measures announced, and the steps taken so far are not adequate in both nature and scope, and implementation could vary greatly as per State capacity. In the event of a pandemic, it is essential for both Union and State Governments to work together. Therefore, there is urgent need that the Union Government must immediately announce further steps backed by adequate funding. The recommendations that follow draw from the list of recommendations submitted earlier, with a widened focus to draw civil society and community into the battle against Covid-19 infection.

As many of the areas where action is required are under the domain of State Governments, including healthcare and food and nutrition, the Union Government must ensure support for greater spending at the State level including by increasing the cap on State Disaster Relief Funds and by releasing pending GST and other dues. In cases where State Governments have announced income support or other forms of livelihood support which may not be adequate, the Union Government must commit additional funding to boost such support. A moratorium on action against debt defaults or delays in loan repayments have been announced by the Reserve bank of India. The task force must closely work with both Union and State Governments to ensure an effective and holistic response, stop the spread of the Covid-19 infection and save people's lives and livelihoods.

ActionAid Association believes that a people-focused response to the Covid-19 infection should cover the following aspects:

- 1. Community Awareness and Response**
- 2. Ensuring Access to Healthcare**
- 3 . Providing Food and Nutrition**
- 4. Securing Against Impact on Income and Livelihoods**
- 5. Ensuring Social Security.**

1

Community Awareness and Response

1. The response to Covid-19 needs to be embedded in processes of social solidarity, where people support each other and show respect and kindness to one another. Special concern needs to be shown by all communities to affected people, to healthcare staff and other individuals who are providing vital services. People should stop and discourage others from any form of shaming and targeting people or creating scapegoats.
2. There are already a number of instances being reported of discrimination against people from North-East India encouraged by the use of terms such as China Virus. Reports have come of shaming of people who have been quarantined or asked to be in self-isolation, including staff of airlines involved in the rescue of Indian nationals who had been stranded in other affected countries, and even healthcare providers. Such discrimination is inhumane and dangerous and has no scientific basis. Such behaviour should be completely unacceptable across all communities. We look to the Government to issue warnings and advisories against such behaviour, and to take action as per existing laws in all cases of harassment. As a society we need to ensure that such behaviour is not tolerated in any community or group.
3. We should remain guard against misinformation about the disease, especially on how it is spread and how long a person is likely to be infected. Misinformation can be very damaging to public health and to the efforts in controlling the disease. All of us must track messages with false information and advise senders against it. We look to the Government to track misinformation and put out advisories and videos directly countering these falsities.
4. We must use television, radio, community radio, SMS, phone calls, helplines, posters, WhatsApp, TikTok and other innovative mediums to

reach out to people and increase awareness about the transmission of coronavirus and protective measures. These mediums must be used by Governments for periodic announcements about people's entitlements, identification of symptoms, availability of testing centres, treatment centres etc.

5. We must train community members as last mile awareness providers under MNREGA, along with existing networks of sanitation workers, aanganwadis and ASHA workers.
6. The Government should initiate a Covid-19 tracker app and provide trained community workers with smartphones or tablets preloaded with the app to track suspected or infected people, monitor their symptoms, connect their families remotely with health workers, contact designated hospitals and treatment centres in case of emergencies etc.
7. We must also engage religious leaders, panchayat leaders and other community leaders to raise awareness and ensure outreach amongst community members both in terms of community monitoring and counselling.
8. We should map particularly vulnerable communities such as particularly vulnerable tribal groups (PVTGs), whose access to healthcare is usually extremely poor, and reach out to them in local languages and through NGOs and activists who work with such communities.
9. The community level response needs to be strengthened on the administrative front as well. For example, for every disaster response, a special officer is appointed to coordinate the relief and rehabilitation measures. In a similar manner, a senior level officer needs to be appointed at the block level to effectively converge with nodal departments and render services in a coordinated manner at least for a period of 3 months.
10. Further, efforts should be coordinated by the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) at the village level in conjunction with trained community workers and healthcare providers. An apex coordination team could be set up at the district level with inter-departmental representation and NGO representatives.

11. The Government must also officially acknowledge NGO workers and activists who are deployed in relief work and give them IDs so that they may continue to support Government efforts in the community. Civic and social organisations, trade unions and others will be key in organising the ground level awareness and protection during this pandemic.
12. It is known that compulsory and home stay situations/quarantines for extended periods are directly proportional to violence against women, children and most marginalised in our families and communities, including LGBTQI people as well as migrants and foreigners. A strong education campaign against violence to strengthen neighbourhood response, and provision of help lines will help address this situation.
13. There have been instances of harassment of essential service providers in the past few days since the lockdown has been in effect, including by the police. Since the country could be in a long period of lockdown, curtailments, or social distancing, the Government needs to ensure that swift action is taken against officials who are responsible for such harassment or intimidation. All Government agencies must work together to ensure that people are enabled to sustain the lockdown and are not brutalised or penalised illegitimately.
14. The task force must consult with concerned Government departments and develop sector specific guidelines for essential services. For example, directions on how workers employed in essential industries can protect themselves better and along with the responsibilities of their employers.

2

Ensuring Access to Healthcare

1. The Government needs to take urgent steps to ramp up the health infrastructure in the country to ensure that the healthcare system does not collapse and that healthcare workers are protected.
2. Therefore, the Government must expand the capacity of existing hospitals. The staff at district hospitals and primary health centres must be trained for early detection, outbreak investigation, counselling, basic tests, and referral. They must also be trained to provide treatment in easily treatable cases of Covid-19.
3. The facilities at district hospitals and primary healthcare centres need to be upgraded urgently as well. This includes setting up of isolation wards, providing personal protective equipment, ensuring availability of all essential medicines, including medicines which are proving promising in treating patients with coronavirus, and providing testing kits.
4. The Government needs to expand testing, especially as cases of community transmission seem to be coming to light. At the same time, there is promising news of affordable indigenous testing kits being developed. Even with existing capacity, the Government needs to ensure that poor and vulnerable people are able to get tested if suspected of having coronavirus. The cost of testing must be borne by the Government, whether done in Government hospitals or private laboratories.
5. There is an urgent need to expand hospitalisation facilities as hospitals in India are already stressed in terms of number of availability of beds and other facilities. Therefore, the Government needs to convert existing buildings such as abandoned or disused public buildings or industrial plants into hospitals. The Government must urgently involve private corporates and businesses in offering their facilities for these

purposes. Industrial units must also be repurposed for producing medical equipment such as ventilators and respirators etc.

6. The Government must also map existing facilities at private hospitals and direct them to increase capacity immediately. For the period of the next three–six months, part/whole of private hospitals could be made public/nationalised as an emergency step as one integrated national health system.
7. Similarly, there is also an immense shortage of space where suspected or infected people can safely quarantine themselves. People with low incomes living in slums in overcrowded situations or homeless people cannot be expected to self-isolate if they are sick. Therefore, the Government must convert buildings such as hotels, stadiums, schools or other public buildings into isolation wards as per the Ministry of Home Affairs guidelines.
8. At the Shelter/Special Home level, Governments need to ensure: -
 - a. Frequent cleaning and disinfection of regularly touched objects and surfaces such as door handles and tables
 - b. Scanning of staff temperatures when they come on shift to ensure that no-one is working while unwell and ensuring that staff is undertaking all necessary protection measures such as social distancing amongst themselves
 - c. Emergency measures such as passing out store bought or homemade hand sanitizers along with stocking up on other emergency supplies such as soap, tissues, trash baskets, and disposable masks
 - d. Providing all employees and residents with sanitizers
 - e. Displaying health messages and materials developed by credible public health sources in the shelters in the local language and having periodic announcements within the shelter
 - f. Maintaining up-to-date contact information for everyone in the chain of communication- identify platforms, such as a hotline, nearest testing centre where treatment is available, dedicated Covid-19 hospitals if any, contact of Chief medical officer etc. and keep it handy with staff members

- g. Training staff in identifying symptoms of Covid-19
 - h. In case someone displays symptoms, they should be immediately isolated from those who are not sick and given a clean disposable facemask to wear while staying at the shelter. Wherever possible, efforts should be made to quarantine the person close by and avoid travel which can risk further infection
 - i. Hence, if possible, identify space within the shelter that can be used to accommodate clients with mild respiratory symptoms and separate them from others- this can be done by creating a makeshift isolation area by surrounding one or two beds with curtains
 - j. In general sleeping areas (for those who are not experiencing respiratory symptoms), ensure that beds/mats are at least 6 feet apart, but if this is not possible due to space crunch, make sure that all residents sleep head-to-toe
 - k. Provide access to tissues and plastic bags for the proper disposal of used tissues
 - l. Ensure cooked meals are provided in all homeless shelters and are available to all who need and want them, in addition to residents of the shelter.
9. The steps recommended for maintenance of homeless shelters/ special homes/homes must also be adopted at other Government-run institutions including prisons, one stop centres, and juvenile homes.
10. In rural areas, community centres and schools could be used for emergency purposes as isolation and treatment centres.
11. The Government must urgently order the import and domestic production of Personal Protective Equipment (PPEs) and procure all raw materials required in a transparent manner. It must ensure that all frontline medical staff including ASHA workers, who have been enlisted by many State Governments to track Covid-19 patients and provide them with basic care, and sanitation workers are provided with protective gear.

12. The Government must ensure mass provision of water, soap and hand sanitizers at handwashing booths in public places such as bus stops, at dhabas, near drinking water taps, at the entrances of public parks, and next to public toilets.
13. The Government must also ensure unconstrained mass provision of water, soap, hand sanitizers and ablution facilities in all informal settlements and slum areas, together with information on safety. Water bills (where applicable) for slum areas must be made free for the next 3 months.

3

Providing Food and Nutrition

1. The Government must immediately release two months' worth of ration to all beneficiaries under the National Food Security Act. The amount of ration must also be enhanced by an additional 50 percent of the monthly quota.
2. The recently announced increase in rations under PDS is a welcome step. However, coverage also needs to be immediately enhanced. In line with Supreme Court orders in context of drought situations, the rations must be available not only to card holders, but to anyone who needs or demands ration. Further, the use of biometric authentication must be immediately halted and other preventive measures such as door-to-door delivery of rations be put in place.
3. The Government must also facilitate the immediate release of two months' worth of ration to people who have BPL, APL and Antyodaya cards, MGNREGA cards, and Jan Dhan accounts, and also to other informal workers registered with the labour department, trade unions, workers' formations, and NGOs.
4. The Government must ensure provision of cooked meals through worker's canteens, State run subsidised canteens or homeless shelters for daily wage workers, homeless people, elderly women and men living alone, children in need of care and protection, and other marginalised populations. It must also provide cooked meals in refugee camps and refugee settlements, who usually do not have identification to avail of ration schemes. While many State Governments are already doing so through homeless shelters and/

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or State-run Government canteens, the Union Government should boost these efforts by making meals available in safe conditions in places such as stadiums and unused/disused public buildings.

5. The Government must ensure provision of either cooked Mid-Day Meals (MDM) or food rations to all students at home.
6. As Aanganwadis have been shut down by many State Governments, door-to-door delivery of ingredients and groceries as per nutrition requirements of children, and pregnant and lactating mothers must be ensured.
7. The Government should ensure that pastoralist and other nomadic communities have access to food through dry ration supply or canteens where cooked meal provisions will be made.
8. The Government should also set systems in place for the direct procurement of food grains from farmers as well as increasing the number of items procured, as normal supply chains could very likely be disrupted due to the lockdown in the coming weeks. In several States, there is already news of mandis being shut down and of farmers being unable to access markets. The Government needs to take urgent measures to expand its procurement to include fruits and vegetables in such areas and ensure fair prices (at least equal to MSP) to the farmers.
9. The Government must also boost trade in non- timber forest products (NTFP) using both barter system and cash transaction. Since markets are closed, people have limited avenues to procure food items. The Government should ensure NTFP storage and procurement arrangements at the village level in schools or other public buildings.
10. Despite being termed as essential service, several grocery and retail shops have been shut over the past few days. This is both because panic buying has left many shops empty and because supply lines from wholesalers to retail shops have been disrupted due to restrictions on transport. The Government needs to intervene and ensure that groceries and other essential supplies are available at controlled prices before a forced situation of scarcity is created.

4

Securing Against Impact on Income and Livelihoods

1. The Government has rightly prioritised direct cash transfers in the welfare package for people working in the informal sector. But the amounts mentioned so far fall quite short of what is required. The relief amount for the next three months at least, should be Rs 10,680 or the monthly minimum wage, whichever is higher, applicable from March itself.¹
2. The Government needs to work in conjunction with trade unions, informal workers' collectives and NGOs to ensure that all informal workers associated or registered with the Government or with trade unions etc. receive the relief amount of Rs 10680/- or the monthly minimum wage, whichever is higher, for the next three months, applicable from March itself.
3. There are many workers who are not registered with the labour department or trade unions and workers' collectives etc. Therefore, the Government should transfer an amount of Rs 10,680 or the monthly minimum wage, whichever is higher, to all BPL, APL, and Antyodaya card holders, Jan Dhan account holders, and beneficiaries of the PM KISAN yojana for the next three months. The package has talked about frontloading a payment of Rs 2000 to beneficiaries under PM Kisan Yojana, but this amount needs to be increased. Similarly, the commitment made so far of Rs 500 to women account holders of Jan Dhan Yojana is too low and needs to be increased.
4. For people who may not have bank accounts or addresses and other details, including homeless people and daily wage labourers,

1. Though there is huge discrepancy and debate, given the current floor wage of Rs 178/ day, we are calculating the relief amount for two earners (a man and a woman in each household) @5340 per person per month. We have built in for 30-day month to ensure a buffer for medicines and other essential commodities.

- the Government needs to regularly reach out to them with relief packages. This should include the relief amount of Rs 10,680/- in cash or in the form of ration, medicines, soaps and sanitizers.
5. Also, it is important that apart from utilisation of existing welfare funds such as the Building and other Construction Fund and the District Mineral Fund, the Government create a separate workers' relief fund to finance this welfare package in an effective and transparent manner. The existing welfare funds should not be diverted but should be utilised to supplement the workers' relief fund.
 6. There is a complete moratorium/ban on retrenchments for the next six months. The Government needs to issue an urgent notice to all employers in small, medium, and large enterprises and service provisioning ones to retain their staff and continue paying them, including casual and contractual workers. In case workers need to work from home or avail of sick leave, there would be no deductions in their wages. All employers must also ensure adequate protective gear for their workers including masks, hand sanitizers, gloves etc. However, several establishments, especially MSMEs would be unable to do so in the absence of support. The Government should urgently announce a payroll support mechanism.
 7. All Government offices and agencies must ensure the same as mentioned above in point 6, especially with respect to ASHA workers, aanganwadis, auxiliary nurse midwives (ANMs) and safai karamcharis.
 8. Platform workers who may be engaged as drivers, delivery persons, beauticians, plumbers, painters, security guards etc. are extremely vulnerable as they are not recognised as employees and are thus not entitled to monthly wages, social security, and health benefits. The Government needs to issue a notice to platform owners to ensure financial assistance equal to the average monthly earnings of their service providers plus fifty percent of the average earnings for the next three months. The platform owners must also provide all protective gears to their registered service providers.
 9. The Government must also send a directive to Resident Welfare Associations and Residential Cooperative Societies to ensure that domestic workers, clothing pressers, drivers, security guards,

sanitation workers, gardeners, and other informal workers are retained and paid their monthly salaries in full, even if they are unable to come for work. The societies and welfare associations also need to provide for protective gear of their workers.

10. The increase in daily wages to MNREGA workers has been long pending. The Government must now ensure that all MNREGA workers receive their dues and the increased wages. The centre must release funds to State Governments to clear the backlog. An “Unemployment Allowance” equal to monthly wages needs to be paid where work has not been given in March and for as long as needed until work can be restarted. The Government has stated that work may continue wherever possible with proper protections. It should ensure the continuation of availability of work under MNREGA and remove the cap of 100 days. Workers should be included in the efforts against COVID-19 through creating adequate infrastructure in rural areas such as upgrading primary health centres and district hospitals, running community kitchens and providing door to door delivery of food to households with quarantined members or households with vulnerable people, ensuring availability of soap, hand sanitisers, and water at the household level to maintain hygiene levels, distributing masks and other protective items, and leading community awareness initiatives, collecting test samples from households so that corona suspect people do not have to visit hospitals etc.
11. The Government must also introduce an urban employment guarantee programme and daily wage workers must be engaged to provide public works in urban areas. These may include ensuring availability of water, soaps, and hand sanitizers in informal settlements, running community kitchens and providing door-to-door delivery of food to households with quarantined members or households with vulnerable people, distributing masks and other protective gear, collecting test samples from households so that corona suspect people do not have to visit hospitals until necessary, collecting food material from wholesalers and providing to retail stores etc.
12. The Government has announced that collateral free loans available to women-led SHGs would be enhanced up to Rs 20 lakhs under the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM). However, several SHGs

have been negatively impacted due to a sudden disruption in their supply chains or because they are not included in essential services. The Government needs to ensure that these SHGs are immediately 'repurposed' for the production of essential commodities such as protective equipment such as soaps, hand sanitizers, masks, gowns, and other such material which the country is already facing a shortage of and would be required in large numbers in the coming days.

13. The Government must also announce financial relief measures such as a 90-day grace period for filing income tax, GST and provident funds and a moratorium on repaying personal bank loans and restructuring of EMLs, as has been recommended by several bodies such as Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) and Retailers Association of India (RAI).
14. The moratorium loans announced by RBI should be strictly implemented ensuring no recovery is made of loans and all other payments by farmers, agricultural labour, and low-income households. The loans must be waived off or at least restructured to delayed payment with no interest.
15. All utility bills from slum dwellers, informal settlements and affected clusters should be waived for a period of two months to begin with and to be reviewed by the task force.

5

Ensuring Social Security

1. The Government needs to release pensions in advance of three months under all Union and State schemes.
2. The Government has announced an increase in the pension amount to widows, persons with disability, senior citizens, but this amount is inadequate. They must receive a minimum of Rs 5,340 per month or an amount equal to half the monthly minimum wage, whichever is higher.
3. The social security net should be expanded to include all categories of single women belonging to BPL families, including widows, divorced women, separated women, unmarried women (above the age of 35 years), sex workers and women survivors of violence. They must be provided a pension amount of Rs 5,340 per month or an amount equal to half the monthly minimum wage, whichever is higher.
4. SC/ST students receiving scholarships should be provided scholarship amount in advance of three months.
5. To ensure that people are not rendered homeless, the Government should announce a complete moratorium on evictions and mortgage payments. All demolition exercises need to be halted as well.
6. The compensation packages for disaster affected households in some States are yet to reach people. In this scenario, the compensation packages for house damage, livelihood loss and so on must be transferred into people's accounts on priority. Moreover, disaster affected people need an additional cash support of Rs 3000 and extra allocation of food grains under PDS.
7. Contract workers such as Aanganwadis, ASHA workers, ANMs, and safai karamcharis are at the forefront of Government efforts in communities but do not have any social security. The Government

needs to include them in the insurance scheme announced for health workers as part of the welfare package.

8. State Governments should ensure continuation of services at homeless shelters/ widow homes/ children/street children/old age/ women's homes etc. and undertake setting up of homeless shelters (in compliance of the Supreme Court directive in mission mode).
9. The Government should also ensure that university or college administration continues to provide food and other essential services in hostels to students who have been unable to go back to their homes.
10. Due to the swiftness of the containment measures, several migrant workers have been unable to return home and their worksites have been shut. It is necessary for the Government to provide safe and dignified shelter through workers' hostels or in public buildings repurposed to this end. The workers must be provided with cooked meals, water, sanitation facilities etc.

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