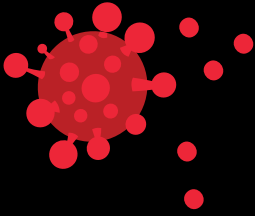
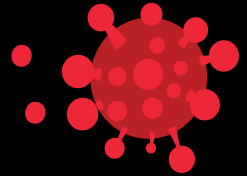


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ISOLATE DON'T ABANDON

Helping **VULNERABLE**
COMMUNITIES cope
with the **COVID-19** crisis



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First Published April, 2020

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ISOLATE, DON'T ABANDON

Helping **VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES** cope
with the COVID-19 crisis



he impacts of the health and socio-economic crises brought on by Covid-19 are being felt deeply by marginalised communities. They are especially pronounced for communities such as nomadic and de-notified tribes, Musahars, Vantangiyas, Yenadis, Koragas, Sahariyas and other particularly vulnerable tribal groups who often remain excluded from protective mechanisms and welfare policies of the state.

There is an urgent need to intervene and ensure their protection and well-being at this difficult time. There is also a need to design longer term interventions to build the capacities and resilience of these communities, as the deprivations of their day to day lives and the disruptions of emergency situations reinforce each other to further deprive and disenfranchise them.

ActionAid Association has developed a set of recommendations in the context of Uttar Pradesh, and we feel that similar packages need to be formulated across India, keeping in mind specific contexts in a particular State or region. A special package for particularly vulnerable communities should include the following:

1. Immediate interventions

2. Long-term interventions.

1

Immediate Interventions

- » There is a need to ensure that community members have access to verified, reliable information and news in local languages. Government must work with civil society organisations and activists who work with these communities for awareness-generation and sharing about precautionary measures, symptoms, helplines and about rights and entitlements available for them.
- » One of the most pressing needs is ensuring food availability. Government must expand the public distribution system (PDS) to anyone who needs or demands ration.
- » Government must also set up community kitchens to provide cooked food to migrant workers. In addition, community kitchens must be set up close to the hamlets where marginalised communities stay, as caste discrimination and other limitations often discourages community members from travelling long distances.
- » As containment measures are becoming more stringent, Government needs to ensure door-to-door delivery of rations and cooked food. The relief package should also include soap, hand sanitizers, face masks, and essential medicines. There should be a daily update at the district level to ensure that all families from the afore-mentioned marginalised communities are covered.
- » The district administration must also ensure that there is water availability through tankers or other sources in the informal settlements, slum clusters or hamlets where these families stay.
- » In the absence of any form of work, Government also needs to provide monetary support to households as subsistence support. Therefore, all families from Musahar, Sahariya, Vanganiya, and nomadic and de-notified communities must be provided cash assistance of ₹10,680 or the monthly wage, whichever is higher.

- » As many family members who had migrated are coming back to their communities, the village should set up a monitoring group comprising of the panchayat officials, local journalists and workers of civil society organisations and block administration officials. The group should be given a directive to not turn anyone away, and instead direct them to quarantine facility for 14 days and thereafter continue monitoring their symptoms.
- » For the purpose of quarantine, the district officials must ensure a designated building for every village, with proper sanitation facilities.
- » The facilities at district hospitals and primary healthcare centres need to be upgraded urgently. This includes setting up of isolation wards, providing personal protective equipment, ensuring availability of all essential medicines, and trained healthcare workers.
- » Government must ensure direct procurement of food grains through the office of the block development officer. Several agricultural families, including agricultural labourers, are facing the prospect of losing their wages as they are unable to access mandis at this time.
- » Government must also include non-timber forest produce in their procurement mechanisms to help boost the incomes of scheduled tribes and other traditional forest dwellers. Forest officials should be directed to allow people from these communities to access and collect forest produce.
- » Several agriculture dependent families take loans before the harvesting season which are paid off after they sell their produce. Government must waive off institutional loans for all farmers and agricultural labour. Since many such families borrow through informal mechanisms such as moneylenders, neighbours and other family members, Government must also set up a mechanism to help them restructure their loans and provide monetary support to help them pay the loans off.
- » In time of acute distress, the number of cases of domestic violence, child abuse, child marriage, and trafficking usually rise. Government must direct district nodal officers toward greater vigilance through networks of police, integrated child protection services, workers of civil society organisations, aanganwadis and community members.

2

Long-term interventions

Nomadic and de-notified tribes

- » The most vexing issue with nomadic tribes (NT) and de-notified tribes (DNT), collectively called NTDNT communities, is that of undercounting. Government must undertake a systematic enumeration process. It should also constitute a committee or advisory group to revise NTDNT lists and include castes/communities which may have been left out.
- » Government must establish a nomadic tribes and semi-nomadic tribes (NT-SNT) commission and a welfare board at the State and Union level, with adequate funding to implement schemes on education, healthcare, and housing designed to suit the livelihood and cultural needs of the community.
- » Government should also conduct special drives to provide NTDNT communities with Voter Identity Cards, BPL Cards, Ration Cards and MGNREGA Job cards.
- » Government must urgently open primary schools in the areas predominantly inhabited by NTDNT communities. Also, wherever possible, children should be given admission in local schools without the need to furnish documentary evidence of permanent residence. Government should also set up mobile schools for providing access to education to children from these communities. State Governments should also provide access to children from the community to residential tribal schools.
- » In order to provide these communities with sustainable and appropriate livelihoods, governments must ensure that pastures, grazing lands, and water bodies be restored to their original character as provided in the revenue records of villages and towns. Community members should be employed in the restoration and conservation processes under MNREGA.

- » Government must also allocate at least one acre of cultivable land on nominal lease basis with assured irrigation to nomadic families of not more than five persons in case they want to practice agriculture. The pattas may be allotted to SHGs of Nomadic Tribes in a pooled manner for those who want to engage themselves in agricultural or primary food production activities, on a non-transferable basis so that the group together can create sustainable assets on the land, on a scientific basis, with proper training.
- » A large number of members of de-notified and nomadic tribes are small artisans and make a variety of handicrafts using a variety of materials including clay, plaster of paris, glass, stone, marble and bamboo. In today's time, these artisans are in decline and face severe challenges in the areas of procurement of raw material, marketing and credit, etc. Government must prioritize the mapping and inclusion of these traditional arts and crafts in its skill-building, entrepreneurship, and credit related schemes.
- » Government must repeal discriminatory laws such as the Habitual Offenders Act and Anti-Vagrancy (Beggary) Laws which overwhelmingly continue to target and criminalize members of marginalized communities, including NTDNTs.

Musahars

- » Many families from the Musahar community continue to be deprived of their entitlements such as food rations as they are not included in the PDS lists or due to caste discrimination at the ration shops. Government must ensure inclusion of these families in the PDS and continue with door to door delivery of their entitlements.
- » The initiative of recruiting Vikas Mitras has shown promising results in Bihar. Government must similarly recruit Vikas Mitras from within the Musahar community to spread awareness about government programmes, help potential beneficiaries to obtain and submit application forms, photos and certificates, assisting them with opening bank accounts and other such processes to help them access rights and entitlements.

- » Similarly, Government must hire Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA) and aanganwadi workers from the community to ensure that the nutritional and other basic needs of children and pregnant and lactating mothers are met.
- » The literacy rate amongst members of the Musahar community is amongst the lowest in the country. Government must ensure primary schools in the hamlets where they are settled in large numbers, with teachers from the community if possible.
- » The deprivation of the community is tied inextricably to their landlessness. Therefore, Government must ensure land distribution to landless Musahars through ceiling surplus land or under Forest Rights Act or other possible mechanisms. This includes both homestead and agricultural land, of ten decimals and one acre in size respectively.
- » Community members must be incentivized to undertake collective farming through the setting up of local seed banks and tool banks and availability of low-interest loans to Self-help Groups (SHGs).
- » Government should also prioritise the inclusion of Musahars in the MNREGA scheme. There should be a monitoring and review mechanism at the block level to ensure that work is provided to Musahar households.
- » Government needs to focus on the housing conditions of the community. Their existing settlements on government and/or fallow and unoccupied land must be regularized. In case eviction from Government land is considered necessary, they should be rehabilitated together in an alternative location. They should also be prioritized in rural housing schemes.

Sahariyas

- » Sahariya tribals often fare the lowest in health and education indicators in the country. With respect to health services, Governments should ensure primary health care centres close to villages dominantly settled by Sahariyas. They must also provide mobile dispensaries to visit these settlements and render necessary medical assistance.
- » ASHA workers and aanganwadis should be appointed from the community so that community members can utilize health services/schemes effectively.

- » With respect to education, Government should ensure primary schools near Sahariya villages. Government should also set up remedial learning centres for children from the community with the help of civil society organizations.
- » Government should also ensure free education to students from the community up to 12th standard. State governments should also ensure tribal residential schools at the block level.
- » The existing settlements of Sahariya families on Government and/or fallow and unoccupied land must be regularized. In case eviction from government land is considered necessary, they should be rehabilitated together in an alternative location before eviction is resorted to.
- » The Sahariyas are primarily forest dependent. Their rights over forest lands must be recognised under the forest rights act. As per the recent submission to the SC, Government of Uttar Pradesh has a rejection rate of more 80%, of which 64% claims are of Scheduled Tribes (STs) and over 91% claims are of other traditional forest dwellers. Government should urgently review these rejected claims.
- » Community member must be included in schemes for monetizing minor forest produce similar to the Mechanism for Marketing of Minor Forest Produce (MFP) through Minimum Support Price (MSP) and Development of Value Chain for MFP scheme implemented by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs.

Vantangiyas

- » Government has recently taken a decision to recognise Vantangiya-dominant villages as revenue villages. This is a welcome step and must be fast-tracked.
- » Government must ensure that village level governance and development mechanisms are now effectively established in Vantangiya villages.
- » This includes setting up of primary schools, anganwadi centres, ration shops, and primary health care centres.
- » Government must also prioritise housing for the community, including upgrade of their existing settlements with the addition of toilets, provision of water etc.

- » Government should also ensure that community members are allowed to access nontimber forest produce and are included in schemes for monetising forest produce through SHGs.

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