

Beware of a lopsided lockdown



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The poor seem to count for very little in the Central government's curfew plan

"I am willing to go hungry if there is no other way to stop this virus, but how will I explain that to my children?" We heard these poignant words two days ago from Nemi Devi of Dumbi village in Latehar district, Jharkhand. Her son and husband, both migrant workers, are stranded far away. In village after village, many other women expressed similar worries. And that was even before the Prime Minister announced a drastic 21-day lockdown, from Wednesday.

The enormity of the coronavirus crisis is gradually dawning on India. For you and me, it is still in the future. But for many informal-sector workers and their families, the crisis is already in full swing: there is no work, and resources are running out. Things are all set to get worse as the privileged hoard with abandon and food prices go north.

Hopefully, the Central government's decision to impose a 21-day lockdown will prove right in due course. But the lockdown (a virtual curfew) is crying out for relief measures, including income support for poor families. As it happens, most of them already receive a limited form of income support: food rations under the Public Distribution System (PDS). Under the National Food Security Act, two-thirds of Indian families (75% and 50% in rural and urban areas, respectively) are covered. In most States, including the poorest, the PDS works — not perfectly, but well enough to protect the bulk of the population from hunger.

Use excess food stock

The PDS is the country's most important asset in this situation. It is essential to keep it going, even to expand it, in terms of both coverage and entitlements. Fortunately, India has gigantic excess food stocks. In fact, it has carried excess food stocks (more than twice the buffer-stock norms) for almost 20 years, and this is the time to use them. Nothing prevents the Central government from, say, doubling

PDS rations for three or even six months as an emergency measure. That will not make up for most people's loss of income, but it will ensure that there is food in the house at least.

Some bold steps are required to make food distribution effective. For instance, biometric authentication (fingerprint scanning) is best removed at this time — it is a source of exclusion as well as a health hazard. Distribution needs to be staggered and tightly supervised, to avoid crowds and cheating at the ration shop. Dealers who are caught cheating must be swiftly punished. All this is well within the realm of possibility; the main thing is to release the stocks without delay.

Having said this, the PDS is not enough. For one thing, many poor people are still excluded from it. Large-scale cash transfers are also required, starting with advance payment of social security pensions and a big increase in pension amounts (the Central government's contribution has stagnated at a measly ₹200 per month since 2006). Here, one possible hurdle is the payment system. Many pensioners collect their pension from "business correspondents" (BCs) — a kind of human automated teller machine (ATM), who dispenses money on behalf of the bank. The problem is, unlike ATMs, most BCs use biometric authentication rather than smart cards. And mass biometric authentication could accelerate the transmission of the novel coronavirus.

Payment arrangements

Ideally, biometric authentication should be abandoned for now. Even if it is not, many BCs may vanish for fear of infection (most of them are poorly-paid employees of poorly-regulated private entities). Under both scenarios, something has to be done to ensure safe crowd management at the bank. New payment arrangements are also possible. For instance, social security pensions could be paid in cash at the panchayat bhavan on a given day of the month, obviating the need for everyone to go to the bank: this has been done in Odisha for years, with good results. Cash could also be disbursed, with due safeguards, through anganwadis or self-help groups. Cash transfers need not be limited to social security pensions. Revamping the PDS and social security pensions would go a long way, but a significant proportion of vulnerable families are likely to fall through the cracks. Further, food rations may prevent hunger but people have many other basic needs; they will need money to cope with this spell of unemployment.

There are several possible ways of extending the reach of cash transfers beyond pensions. For instance, money could be sent to the accounts of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act job-card holders, or Pradhan Mantri KisanSamman Nidhi (PM-KISAN) beneficiaries, or PDS cardholders. How these lists are best used and combined is a context-specific question, perhaps best handled at the State level (my sense is that in many States, the MGNREGA job-cards list is the best starting point).

These are just some examples of possible emergency measures. Many other valuable suggestions have been made, relating for instance to midday meals, community kitchens and relief camps for stranded migrant workers. The first step is to make relief measures an integral part of the lockdown plan. Failing that, it may do more harm than good. For one thing, a hungry and enfeebled population is unlikely to fight the virus effectively. A constructive lockdown should empower people to fight back together, not treat them like sheep.

Finally, Centre-State cooperation is essential. Many State governments have already initiated valuable social-security measures, but they are far from adequate. The Central government, for its part, has been struck with inexplicable paralysis on this. Adequate relief measures require big money (lakhs of crores of rupees) from the Central government. Implementation, however, should be led by the States. They all have their own circumstances and methods. The Central government is unlikely to do better on their behalf. If it foots the bill, that will be a good start.

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