



India should protect its most vulnerable

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(Mains GS 2: Government policies and interventions for development in various sectors and issues arising out of their design and implementation.)

Context:

- With the single-day spike in COVID-19 cases setting records, India's second wave is feared to be longer and more intense than the first one.
- Many states have announced partial lockdowns and more are likely to follow.
- The fear of a full lockdown has already led some migrant workers to move back from industrial centres and cities to their native villages.

Experience not learned:

- Governments should have learnt from the experiences of last year's lockdown which disrupt every sphere of life.
- Last lockdown disrupted supply chains which led to considerable decline in output growth, increased unemployment, reduced earnings and savings and jeopardised the food and livelihood security of millions of workers in the country.

The worst hit were the migrant workers:

- The migrants, who faced the brunt of the pandemic, have not fully recovered from their last year's experiences.
- In a recent study by ICRIER in collaboration with the Inferential Survey Statistics and Research Foundation (ISSRF), examined the impact of the pandemic on migrant workers using a survey of 2,917 migrants in six states — Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal.
- The study found that the sudden imposition of the lockdown had a severe impact on the earnings and savings of the migrants once they returned to their villages.
- More than a third of the reverse migrants (38.6 per cent) reported having no work after returning to their native place.
- With no proper employment opportunity in their native places, the household incomes of migrants fell by as much as 85 per cent during the first wave.

The remigration:

- With the revival of economic activities post-first lockdown, on average 63.5 per cent of migrants from these six states returned to the destination areas by February 2021, while 36.5 per cent remained at their native places.
- Notably, remigration to the destination post-lockdown was the highest from Bihar (92.5 per cent), followed by Uttar Pradesh and Odisha (65 per cent each).
- In comparison, migrants from West Bengal (40.3 per cent) and Jharkhand (31.2 per cent) were hesitant to return post-lockdown.

Fear of another lockdown:

- The migrant's household income has increased after remigration to their destination places but there is still a contraction of 7.7 per cent in their income relative to the pre-lockdown level.
- Moreover, another lockdown, if imposed, can upset the momentum of this recovery.
- If the migrants decide to return to their native place, their household income could drop by more than 80 per cent, much like what happened after the first lockdown.

Loopholes in relief measure:

- The study by ICRIER in collaboration with the Inferential Survey Statistics and Research Foundation (ISSRF) also finds that while some relief and welfare measures announced by the Centre and state governments did reach the migrants, many other measures bypassed them.
- For example, the survey revealed that almost 74 per cent migrants had access to some form of subsidised cereal (rice or wheat) but only 12 per cent got access to subsidised pulses.
- Moreover, only 7.7 per cent of the migrants reported being engaged under the MGNREGA or any other public work at their native place.
- The demand-driven skill training under the Garib Kalyan Rozgar Yojana (GKRY) did not reach most of these migrants.
- For instance, only 1.4 per cent of the migrants reported getting any skill upgradation or training at the native place in our survey.
- These employment schemes, including GKRY, have either neglected these migrants or they did not want to be engaged in MGNREGA work.
- Notably, many migrant workers reported a fall in the quality of food consumed during the lockdown and post-lockdown compared to the pre-lockdown state.

The policy lessons:

The examination of the first wave of COVID infection offers important policy lessons for managing the ongoing second wave.

Data driven actions:

The need is to digitise all data on migrants to formulate any action plan in case another mass exodus starts.

This needs to be backed by a periodic database on migrant workers for any meaningful policies and action plan based on this data.

Social security net should be strengthened:

- the portability of entitlements and social safety nets needs to be prioritised.
- This could be done with the “One-nation, one-ration card” with an option to receive cash or grain in kind, or by providing health insurance and treatment at any place or through a universal social protection programme for the vulnerable sections.

Widen the MGNREGA:

- The scale of work under the MGNREGA could be broadened to absorb a wide range of skilled and unskilled migrants.
- A local digital platform can be created at the gram panchayat level to register and connect the migrant workers and employers so that they get an opportunity to work closer to their home.
- The skill mapping of the migrants could be conducted through this portal at the gram panchayat or block-level to provide employment on a demand-driven basis under the GKRY.
- The eastern states also need a massive reconstruction programme to build infrastructure, agriculture markets and rural housing and alleviate distress migration in the medium to long run.

Increase vaccination drive and others:

- Amid the rising cases, vaccine production needs to be ramped up to inoculate the most vulnerable population.
- Political and religious leaders flouting all norms of COVID-appropriate behaviour during election rallies and religious congregations should need to act wisely.

Conclusion:

- The moral credibility of our leaders to impose lockdowns should be ensured to inculcate discipline amongst the general public.
- If actions are not taken timely, India may have to pay a heavy price as COVID cases surpassing Brazil and the US in the coming months.