

COVID-19 CAUSES UNPRECEDENTED MIGRANT CRISIS IN INDIA

Assessing the impact of lockdown measures on migrant workers during the first wave of Covid-19

The second wave of Covid-19 is sweeping across India at an immense speed. India recorded the highest number of single-day Covid-19 cases in the world (354,531), surpassing Brazil and the USA (as of 25 April 2021). The Indian government was caught unaware by this sudden surge in new Covid-19 cases, after early stringent lockdown measures had succeed in delaying the first wave of infections. While infection rates during the first wave were considerably lower, the containment measures had a major negative impact especially on millions of migrant workers who suffered the most during this period of lockdown. Many saw their incomes drop significantly and struggled to access sufficient quality food. To support vulnerable populations, the central government put in place a series of packages, but most of these barely reached migrant workers. Existing social safety measures urgently need to be revised to mitigate negative effects of the much more serious second wave.

Spread and economic impact of Covid-19 in India

As a result of lockdown measures implemented early on in the Covid-19 pandemic, the Indian government was able to delay the peak of the first wave of infections until mid-September 2020. Infection rates had declined to less than 9,000 new cases by early February 2021, but began surging again dramatically in March. India's second wave of Covid-19 is much stronger and more intense than the first one. The rate of daily Covid-19 cases is now three times that of the highest daily cases recorded during the first wave. The emergence of a double mutant in Maharashtra and lowering of guards against Covid-19 by the public and the government led to this frightening spike of new cases, almost like a tsunami, so much so that the health system is coming to the brink of collapse.

The economic consequences of Covid-19 and related containment measures in India have been severe. Due to the pandemic-induced lockdown during the first wave, the Indian economy contracted 24 percent in April-June 2020. The worst affected sectors were

Research method

The study assessed the impact of the pandemic on migrant workers using a telephonic survey of around 2917 migrants across six states: Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal. The survey was conducted in three phases (30 June-15 August 2020, 7 November-30 December 2020 and the last week of February 2021) to capture the varying degrees of vulnerabilities among the migrants prior to, during, and after the lockdown. The survey was implemented in collaboration with the Inferential Survey Statistics and Research Foundation (ISSRF).

construction, trade and hotel and other services, and manufacturing. As a result, the unemployment rate surged to 24 percent in April 2020. Only the agricultural sector recorded a positive growth rate of 3.4 percent during April-September 2020.

Impact of Covid-19 containment measures on migrant workers

The unprecedented migrant crisis is one of the major catastrophes that emerged during the pandemic. The sudden imposition of the lockdown in March 2020 had a severe impact on the employment and consequently the earnings and savings of migrant workers. With no proper employment opportunities in their home villages, their household income fell by 85 percent during June-August 2020. The government was caught unaware as it did not have accurate information on the number of migrants who needed support.

With the revival of economic activities post-lockdown, 64 percent of migrants had returned to the destination areas by February 2021, while 36 percent were still in their home villages. Although the migrants' household income has increased after they had returned to their places of work, it was still 8 percent lower compared to the pre-lockdown level. Among the migrants who remained in their villages, household income was 82 percent lower than prior to the lockdown.

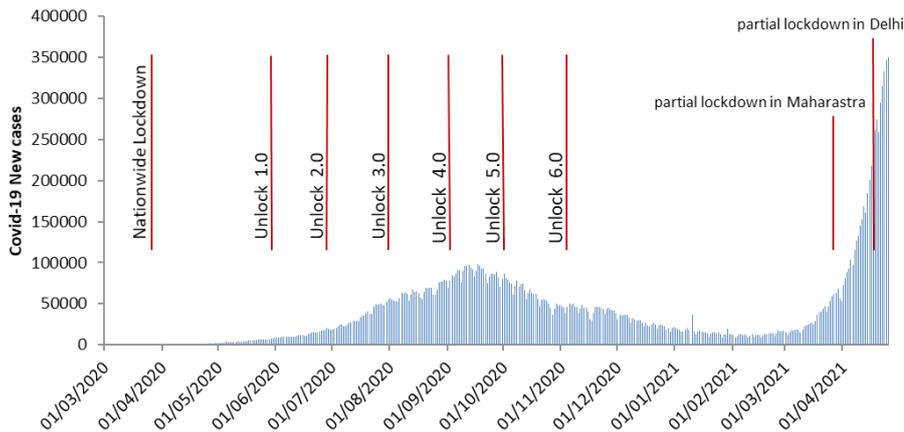


Figure 1: Covid-19 cases in India

Source: WHO, <https://covid19.who.int> (up to 25 April 2021)

Effectiveness of social security to assist migrant workers

To revive the economy and support vulnerable populations, the central government put in place a series of packages. These included an additional quantity of subsidised food-grains under the Public Distribution System (PDS), cash transfers through Jan Dhan Yojana, free gas supply under the Ujjwala scheme, ex-gratia to widow/senior citizen as well as income transfer to farmers under PM-Kisan. The central government also launched Garib Kalyan Rozgar Yojana (GKRY) to generate employment opportunity in rural areas in six states with a high concentration of reverse migrants.

The majority of migrants (85 percent) had access to subsidised cereals under PDS, but only 12 percent received pulses during November-December 2020. Moreover, only 8 percent of migrants in their native place were engaged in Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) or any other public works programme. The demand-driven skill training under GKRY reached only 1.4 percent of migrants at their native place. Many workers reported a fall in the quality of food consumed during the lockdown and post-lockdown compared to the pre-lockdown level. With no access to relief measures and entitlements, a quick recovery of migrant workers seems grim.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To mitigate negative impacts of the second wave of Covid-19, the following measures should be taken:

- Establish a database of migrant workers, which should be updated regularly (at least once every five years)
- Quickly implement the 'One nation, one ration card' to provide PDS entitlements (cash or grain in kind) at the destination
- Broaden the scale of permissible work under MGNREGA to absorb the wide range of skilled and unskilled migrants
- Conduct skill mapping of the migrants at Gram Panchayat or block levels to provide employment on demand basis under GKRY
- Create a local platform at the Gram Panchayat level to register and connect these workers with employers to enable them to work closer to home
- Implement a 21st century New Deal by investing in a massive reconstruction programme in India's eastern states to build infrastructure, agricultural markets and rural housing.
- Establish a universal social protection system to provide vulnerable migrant workers with a cushion against insecurity

This Policy Brief is based on the study:

Gulati, A., Jose, S. & B.B. Singh. 2021. COVID-19: Emergence, spread and its impact on the Indian economy and migrant workers, ZEF Working Paper 207.

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