

Alliance for Right to ECD – Response to the pandemic situation in India due to COVID 19, and its effect on most vulnerable young children, their working mothers, and the large population of informal workers

The COVID 19 has caused extremely difficult and uncertain times for people around the world. But it is hardest for the poorest, most marginal, historically oppressed people. Again among the poor, the women and children are the worst hit due to their invisibility and high incidence of under-nutrition. Hunger still looms large in our country. At a time like this, Alliance for Right to ECD (Alliance), as a resource network for the rights of children under six, especially those, belonging to economically and socially marginalised groups have felt the urge to come together and support government in serving children under six of the country.

The document is aimed at Government at the Central and State levels to strengthen policy decisions and implementation affecting the insurmountable difficulties faced by the poorest people of India. The document is also aimed at supporting Early Childhood Development (ECD) networks to engage with the Governments at different levels.

Further, this document borrows, and builds upon appeals put forward by many other networks and forums such as Working Peoples Charter, Social Security Now, Right to Food Campaign etc., concerned about enabling swift government actions for the underprivileged people of India.

In the context of loss of employment and livelihoods, we welcome the finance minister's announcement of PM Gareeb Kalyan Ann Yojna, a special relief package of Rs. 1.7 lakh crores, to cover the poorest 80 crores population of India, through cash transfer, free food distribution through PDS and other measures for women, farmers, organised and unorganised workers, and most vulnerable widowed women, pensioners and persons with disabilities. Broadly the package includes:¹

- Insurance cover of Rs 50 Lakh per health worker fighting COVID-19 to be provided under Insurance Scheme
- 80 crore poor people will to get 5 kg wheat or rice and 1 kg of preferred pulses for free every month for the next three months
- 20 crore women Jan Dhan account holders to get Rs 500 per month for next three months
- Increase in MNREGA wage to Rs 202 a day from Rs 182 to benefit 13.62 crore families
- An ex-gratia of Rs 1,000 to 3 crore poor senior citizen, poor widows and poor disabled
- Government to front-load Rs 2,000 paid to farmers in first week of April under existing PM Kisan Yojana to benefit 8.7 crore farmers
- Central Government has given orders to State Governments to use Building and Construction Workers Welfare Fund to provide relief to Construction Workers

¹ <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseFramePage.aspx?PRID=1608345> accessed on 27th March 2020

Many state governments have already taken encouraging steps like cash transfer (UP, Kerala), insurance for health workers including ASHAs and other frontline workers, community kitchens to feed hungry people (Delhi), helpdesks in metro cities to extend help to stranded migrant labour from others cities (Bihar, UP, WB).

Despite efforts by government, many economists and activists point to the large numbers of the poorest and most marginalised people who continue to remain outside the ambit of the economic relief package and other measures announced so far. This necessitates urgent attention from civil society, concerned citizen groups and general public to draw government's attention towards urgently supporting the needs of excluded people.

Alliance suggestions for overall social security during this crisis situation:

More than 8 out of 10 people in workforce are employed in informal sector. Their precarious working conditions, lack of job security and social security are repeatedly evidenced. We acknowledge that informal sector employment and urban poverty are deeply connected. In this regard, we reiterate the following demands from central and state governments:

1. **Cash transfer in the form of basic income security** - Immediate cash transfer of state level minimum wages to be transferred to bank accounts of all informal sector workers. The State intends to transfer Rs.500 to women Jan Dhan account holders and Rs 1000 to poor widows, senior citizens and persons with disability, covering three months. We recommend transfer of minimum wages for 25 days per month to be released into Jan Dhan accounts of all urban residents for the period of the lockdown and two months following the end of the lockdown.
2. **Emergency cash relief** - of Rs 7,000 per month for 2 months to be given as cash (without biometric authentication) to each poor household, especially the urban poor migrant workers, who may not have Jan Dhan accounts such as - rickshaw pullers, auto drivers, workers of small sweatshops, domestic workers, street vendors, home-based workers, self-employment workers etc. The money should be paid to individual workers and not to one member of the family.
3. **Support unregistered construction workers** - not counted within the 3.5 crores workers registered in respective state labour welfare boards. They must also benefit from the cash support through the BOCW Cess Act 1996, at the same levels as the registered construction workers. It will be the responsibility of Labour Welfare Boards to coordinate with employers in identifying workers. Cash can be handed to those who do not have bank accounts using the same process as paying wages to the workers without bank accounts. Government should direct real estate industry associations like CREDAI, NAREDA and others to maintain proper records of their unregistered workers and share promptly with labour departments.
4. **Urgently provide temporary shelters** for migrant workers and families - Schools, stadiums, army cantonment areas with adequate facilities, other empty locations must be provided to migrant

workers such as construction workers, daily wage earners and other casual workers, who have no place to stay in the city with work closing down. Do not close hostels, relief camps, and shelters. Ensure supply of clean drinking water and sanitation at these locations to prevent further health hazards. Especially ensure water supply to meet the basic hand washing protocols as per WHO norms.

5. **Provide safe transport** to migrants who are trying to return home, ideally via sanitized buses with safety protocols provided by State administration.
6. **Strictly prevent layoffs** and make provision of paid leaves –Jobs of informal sector workers need to be protected and State needs to strongly prevent layoffs during this period.
7. **Strengthen health services** - District Health centres to be equipped with ICUs, doctors and nurses. Testing facilities to be stepped up in districts. There should be free testing and treatment of all suspected/affected persons, even in private hospitals. The testing and treatment facilities must be greatly expanded. Special attention must be given to children’s prevention and treatment of common ailments during this period, to avoid virus transmission to children due to reduced immunity.
8. **Double the PDS ration** for 3 months (April, May, June) and provide it free in advance through doorstep delivery along with cooking oil, pulses, salt, masala, and soap. Provide it to everyone desirous of obtaining these, irrespective of whether they have a ration card or not, because a lot of the very poor including the homeless and circular migrants in cities have no cards. Abolish Aadhaar linkage and biometric identification at least for this period. Give clear directions for distribution systems to ensure distance and sanitization norms are practiced during public distribution of ration.
9. **Ensure a minimum of 2 cooked meals** at conveniently located sites, through services like Amma Canteen, AamAdmi Canteens, at a minimum density of 70 feeding centres open 12 hours a day, per 1 lakh people. Ramp up kitchen facilities to meet this urgent requirement by using Aanganwadis, government schools, government colleges and community halls.

Suggested measures for care and protection of children under 6, during the pandemic

1. **Implement of Supreme Court order** -Supreme Court has taken suo moto cognizance on the issue of reaching out to families with nutrition and on 18th March issued has an order stating that “it is necessary that all the states should come out with a uniform policy so as to ensure that while preventing the spread of Covid-19, the schemes for providing nutritious food to the children and nursing and lactating mothers are not adversely affected.”
2. **ICDS services on nutrition to reach children at home** - All ICDS services including nutrition services remain suspended during lockdown. Given that malnourished children are more susceptible to infection, we recommend to MWCD/state WCD to ensure nutrition monitoring and referral services to reach to all children under six years, irrespective of whether they are

registered in the scheme or not. Growth monitoring and health intervention to continue, especially for children who are already identified as undernourished. Children should be provided double THR and tracked regularly. Both growth monitoring and Supplementary Nutrition Programme to continue as home-based provisions, universally, irrespective of whether children are registered with ICDS or not. This facility targeted at nutrition of young children and pregnant and lactating mothers must continue, irrespective of PDS provisions and community kitchen facilities. Accordingly, anganwadi workers must also receive training along with ASHA and ANM workers on COVID prevention, detection and community response measures.

3. **Focused reach out to pregnant and lactating women** – As UNICEF website suggests that there is not enough evidence to determine whether the virus is transmitted from a mother to her baby during pregnancy, or the potential impact this may have on the baby. Government to reach out with health services, nutrition support and awareness material so that pregnant women can continue to follow appropriate precautions to protect themselves from exposure to the virus, and seek medical care early, if experiencing symptoms, such as fever, cough or difficulty in breathing. Provide full entitlements unconditionally, in advance, for all the mothers under Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana and Janani Suraksha Yojana.
4. **Providing materials to spread awareness and enable parenting** – Children under six, especially those above one year of age are feeling restless upon being confined to their homes. Thus enabling parents, families with information on how to fight Corona Virus as well as building bonds and parenting can be an important intervention. Stimulation of children under three years of age, is an important area which has lifelong impact on learning. Mobile Creches and other early childhood organisations can extend support to the Government for creating materials in Hindi and other regional languages for families for children under six on stimulation activities, responsive parenting and learning in a play way method. MWCD must urgently train ICDS workforce using technology and easily transferrable materials, on supporting parents to respond to young children's physical and emotional health, safety, nutrition, stimulation and development needs.
5. **Recognise frontline workers are essential workers** – Anganwadi and ASHA workers must be declared as essential workers, and provisions for their safety (including personal protective equipment (PPE), hazard pay) must be supported by the state as per guidelines developed and implemented urgently.