

To
Ms Nirmala Sitharaman
Chairperson
Covid-19 Economic Response Task Force
Govt. of India

Dear Madam,

Date: 21-03-2020

Re: Recommendations and demands for protective and preventive measures to provide economic and social support to Informal Workers in India during the COVID-19 pandemic.

We write this on behalf of millions of informal workers living in the most deplorable conditions amidst the outbreak of pandemic COVID-19. While the current focus is understandably on health responses and social distancing, along with self-regulated isolation as much as possible, we are distressed to foresee the upcoming economic and social challenges and drastic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on the informal sector workers such as domestic workers, daily wage workers, construction workers, brick kiln workers, manual scavenging workers, entertainment industry workers (like bar dancers, light men et al.), street vendors, salt and fish workers, auto rickshaw workers, auto goods carrier workers, service industry workers particularly food & hospitality sector, restaurant workers, gig economy workers like delivery boys, app based cab drivers, waste pickers, home based workers, sex workers etc as a result of this social distancing and economic shutdown.

It is worth appreciating a few State governments which are taking some affirmative measures to tackle and responding to the rising situation of the hazardous economy. The Central Government's announcement of creating an "Economic Response Task Force" to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic is a welcome step to address the economic concerns and vulnerabilities of the citizens of India, especially the informal workers in regard to their livelihood and housing. Workers fearing job retrenchment, working without economic and social support,

and worrying about how to feed their families and earn an income, cannot, even if they wanted to, practice social distancing and responsible health practices. These are not choices they can make. Their social and economic conditions do not allow them the privilege of social distancing. Therefore, a comprehensive response to the pandemic is one that is rooted in both physical distancing and infection control, along with increased social protection and economic support to workers.

We, the representatives of trade unions, civil society organisations, labour unions, and slum welfare unions have prepared a comprehensive set of recommendations and of demands in response to the ongoing situation. We would like to take a delegation to meet you with our demands and urge you to take an urgent cognizance and action on the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economic and social vulnerabilities of informal workers.

Sincerely,

The Working People's Charter (WPC)

CHARTER OF DEMANDS

We urge to Central government on behalf of the informal workforce of India:

The Central Government Economic Response Task Force ought to create a Rs. 50,000 crores Emergency Workers Welfare Fund which can add to and complement the state government relief packages and allow states with limited fiscal capacity to rely on central assistance.

In view of the negative impact on work and sources of income as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic:

- 1) Special PDS package to workers holding BPL and APL Card, which can sustain their food requirements at least for 3 months. This can also be supplemented through other state feeding institutions (government canteens or feeding centres), or through the subsidising of locally produced and distributed means by non-state actors.

- 2) All the workers holding BPL and APL cards should be given 'Immediate cash transfer' either equivalent to the minimum wage or any amount not less than Rs.10,000 if the minimum wage is less than Rs. 10,000. It is critical that the cash transfer continues for the entire period during which such ' social distancing' and other such measures are in place, which are disrupting people's livelihoods.
- 3) Workers enrolled in MGNREGS and agricultural workers should get an upfront payment for 50 days of minimum wages, along with either equivalent to the minimum wage or any amount not less than Rs.10,000 if the minimum wage is less than Rs. 10,000.
- 4) Workers possessing 'construction worker welfare board card' should be given either equivalent to the minimum wage or any amount not less than Rs.10,000 if the minimum wage is less than Rs. 10,000.
- 5) Street vendors possessing licence for vending by municipal institutions or registration under shops and establishment act, or surveyed, challaned, trained by FSSAI, or a part of registered union should be given either equivalent to the minimum wage or any amount not less than Rs.10,000 if the minimum wage is less than Rs. 10,000.
- 6) Daily wage workers/migrant workers, domestic workers, waste picker workers carrying any worker organisation card such as Trade Union, Worker Collective or CSO should be given either equivalent to the minimum wage or any amount not less than Rs.10,000 if the minimum wage is less than Rs. 10,000 and send a directive to all employers not to deduct salaries of employees who cannot work remotely, who work on full time or part time basis .
- 7) Auto rickshaw, e-rickshaw and tempo goods carrier workers, along with taxi drivers (both commercial and private) possessing driving licence should be given either equivalent to the minimum wage or any amount not less than Rs.10,000 if the minimum wage is less than Rs. 10,000.
- 8) Slum residents including those of non-recognised slums along with street/pavement dwellers and homeless should be given either equivalent to the minimum wage or any amount not less than Rs.10,000 if the minimum wage is less than Rs. 10,000.

9) Along with cash, all the workers also need to be provided with safety gears as required.

10) As the shoots of TV serials, Films, Web Series have come to a halt, it will affect the workers involved in the production. Direct all the production companies not to deduct any salary of the employees on full time or contractual basis and provide an upfront payment of 30 episodes to them.

11) Initiate a committee that can provide an assessment of how the relief fund can operate and enlist most vulnerable groups and people.

In view of the closure of schools, ICDS centres (i.e. anganwadi centres) and supply markets:

12) Mid-day meals and supplementary nutrition to be provided at the doorstep for under-5 children who cannot go to the anganwadi because of the shutdown. The equivalent in dry rations should be supplied to each household - whether urban or rural, so that children continue to have access to the nutrition, including eggs, milk etc.

13) Ensure steady supply of meals and take-home rations that can be collected and increase supplies to every ration shop.

14) Immediate measures must be taken to guard against price gouging & monopolization of all essential items, particularly medicine, food, sanitizers, masks, and medical equipment. Restrictions should be placed on the number of essential items people can buy at a time.

15) Ban all price hikes and withdraw recent price hikes like on cooking cylinders.

16) We understand that a large number of health workers/scheme workers/Honorary workers/ CPWD contract workers will be accessing the honorarium, however their health will remain at high risk. We demand Rs 10 lakhs ex-gratia compensation in case of fatality, and reimbursement of entire medical expenditure.

17) Directed provision of evening clinics and temporary health infrastructure in informal/migrant settlements should be made available as an emergency response, focusing on migrant population.

18) Free admission, diagnostic and treatment costs for all suspected patients in worker areas.

In view of ongoing forced eviction notices, necessity of basic services, and informality of livelihood:

19) Halt all forced evictions of slum settlements, including evictions of tenants and mortgage payments

20) Provide water in communities where water is not available to ensure containment of the outbreak

21) Suspend utility bills: Suspension of utility bills payments for a period of at least two months for working- and middle-class income bracketed households should be enforced. Revise energy agreements for high- and middle-income groups to ensure uninterrupted energy supply in this period without hurting poor consumers.

22) Safai karamcharis involved in third party contractual work must be provided statutory entitlements at par with organised sector workers, such as equal wages for equal work, EPFO, ESIC, etc,

23) Special trains must be provided to ensure dignified transport to migrant workers in case the affected workers want to go back to their source states.

24) Nationalised and private banks must create progressive lending instruments to ensure the expansion of affordable credit for SMEs & other businesses so that they can survive the crisis period.

25) Special and fast track courts to hear pleas of cases relating to domestic violence and other violence as a result of social distancing, self-isolation, etc.

26) Create a national emergency helpline number for women and child safety in both private and public spaces. Create a protocol for immediate removal of the victim without putting the burden of proof.

It is important that emergency packages at both state and central level must bring together and coordinate different forms of relief for workers. This Fund must be both *protective* as a response to current welfare shocks which workers are facing as well as be *preventive* to build a foundation to prevent the next phase of economic vulnerability. It can be used for both direct and indirect support to workers.

Undersigned by:

1. Kalyani Menon-Sen, *Feminist Learning Partnerships*
2. Deepak Dholakia, Indian Community Activists Network
3. Prem Chand, General Secretary, Indian Public Services Employees Federation (IPSEF)
4. Sagari Ramdas, Food Sovereignty Alliance, India
5. Prabha Kotiswaran
6. LA Samy, AREDS Tamilnadu
7. Shweta Tambe, Habitat and Livelihood Welfare Association and Platform for Social Justice Endorses
8. NNSW (New Network of Sex Workers)
9. All India Network of Sex Workers
10. Sudhir Katiyar, Prayas Centre for Labor Research and Action
11. Amrita Gupta, Social Science Researcher
12. Centre for Community Services, Tamil Nadu
13. Amita Bhide, TISS
14. Aajeevika Bureau
15. Angmehnati Kashtakari Sangharsh Samiti, Maharashtra
16. Hamal Panchayat, Pune
17. Yuva Mumbai
18. Delhi Shramik Sangathan
19. Hawkers Joint Action Committee
20. Hasirudala, Karnataka

21. Grakoos, Karnataka
22. Dihari Mazdoor Sangathan Uttar Pradesh
23. National Campaign Committee for Eradication of Bonded Labour, New Delhi
24. Aravali Mazdoor Sangathan Rajasthan
25. National Progressive Federation for Domestic Workers

Copy to

Shri Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India

Shri Santosh Gangwar, Minister of Labour & Employment