

Suspension and Disruption of public and other transportation creating a humanitarian and health crisis

A Note by Jan Swasthya Abhiyan and All India People's Science Network

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We, Jan Swasthya Abhiyan and All India People's Science Network are extremely concerned at the way the Government has announced the nationwide lockdown in an arbitrary and poorly prepared manner without notice, which has had serious implications especially for poor and vulnerable sections. The total clampdown on public and other forms of transportation, which threatens the health and lives of the people, are of particular concern. Global evidence as also reiterated recently by the World Health Organisation (WHO), indicates that lockdowns by themselves will not break the chain of infections, but must be accompanied by other measures.

The total lack of any mode of personal transport, as well as disruption in the movement of essential goods and services has caused a gigantic humanitarian crisis. This has come at significant social, economic and human costs, evidence of which is now clear from media and civil society reports from different corners of the country.

Humanitarian crisis emerging from the forced movement of migrant population

It is clear that the predicament of migrant workers of all categories in the lockdown-triggered context of loss of employment and incomes, loss of shelter, deprivation of food and high exposure to the Covid-19 epidemic in conditions of overcrowding and potential malnutrition, was not taken into account when announcing the lockdown. No preparatory actions were taken either. This led to obvious anxiety, desperation and pronounced desire to return to native villages and towns where migrant workers and their families perceived that at least basic food, shelter and social support structures would be available. A week into the lockdown, lakhs of distressed, hungry and fatigued people, including women, children, pregnant women and infants, waited [desperately in overcrowded conditions](#) at various places for transport that would take them back to their towns, villages and homes and, in its absence, embarked on long journeys on foot with little or no food, water or money, endured harassment and beatings by police on the way, taking a huge toll on them. [More than 22 deaths](#) have been recorded of migrants, including of children, on the road and actual number of deaths may be higher. A few thousand were transported in buses by State governments at least part of the way. A few lakh made it back to an uncertain future in locations with poor health services and unknown exposure to the infection. But many more lakhs were left stranded in different States when the Central Government banned all migration between or within States, were often treated very badly, with bleach sprayed on them in UP, declared criminals and interned in stadiums in Haryana, threatened with "shoot at sight" orders in Telangana, and finally taken into crowded shelters under "quarantine." While the Home

Ministry notification also spoke of landlords and employers protecting migrants, and directed States to provide them food and shelter, there were no uniform guidelines or support, and implementation has been poor. These actions and notifications have been an absolute travesty of justice and violation of human rights of some of the poorest and most vulnerable people of this country. JSA and AIPSN issued a [Press Statement](#) demanding that government needs to stop criminalizing the migrant workers and provide them with adequate relief measures. The situation that the migrants are in today is a reflection of continued and long-term State apathy towards the poor. Starting with the complete ignoring of the entire category of migrant, daily-wage, unorganized sector and self-employed workers while announcing the nationwide lockdown, followed by their total neglect of their growing desperation in the days that followed, these developments betray a deep-seated bias against them by the State.

Health crisis emerging from suspension of public transport

National and state governments have suspended all public transport including buses, auto rickshaws, taxis etc., in order to impose the lockdown. This has affected access to various services for a wide range of people, especially for the elderly, single women, persons with disabilities, those with mental health issues and other vulnerable sections who need to reach these services are especially finding it difficult to do so and [deaths have been reported](#) in their attempt to reach medical help. In [Gujarat a 62-year-old man died](#) after he had to walk 8 kilometres from the hospital to his house as no transport was made available.

Moreover, access to health care has been denied for a large number of patients of various ailments who are unable to reach hospitals. Additionally, with many hospitals ordered to shut down OPD services, many patients with chronic diseases such as hypertension, diabetes, kidney disease, TB, [HIV](#), and those [requiring dialysis](#), [chemotherapy](#) are facing discontinuation of their medication and follow-up consultations.

The health system is unable to cope with the large demand for ambulances, which are now mostly not available for other conditions but cover only specific conditions such as accidents and deliveries. . Even here, for instance, a woman in Uttarakhand who had just delivered [had to walk home with her newborn](#) after being discharged from the hospital, and another was [forced to deliver at home](#), both because there was no public transport or government vehicle available. Closure of inter-state borders also cause problems for those patients who normally travel to hospitals closer in a neighbouring state, for example in Kerala's Kasargod with Karnataka [refusing to allow patients to travel](#) to Mangalore.

Disruptions in essential services due to suspension of transportation

Even those engaged in providing essential services are facing huge problems due to suspension of transport services. There are reports of medical professionals, health workers and support staff having [difficulty in reaching their place of work](#). Care givers, for example, of persons with disability or the elderly are unable to provide the necessary care.

Those engaged as guards, cleaners, sanitation workers etc. are forced to walk many kilometres to their workplace and are often not provided adequate food support, impacting on their health and immunity. Women workers often do not own even motorised transport or even bicycles and are thus more vulnerable. .

[Disruption in transportation](#) of farm produce, especially of grains, since the rabi crop is being harvested now, apart from vegetables, fruit, spices, and milk, meat, chicken and fish, is another serious repercussion. While the Central government has in the past week allowed farm operations, mandis, and local as well as inter-state transport of these and other essential commodities, implementation on the ground has been patchy at best, with reports of long queues at state borders and continued prohibitions in practice within cities and other local areas. Retail stores are also running out of stock, clearly indicating disruption in transport from producer to wholesale and onwards. E-commerce chains have also reported severe disruptions in supplies and in home delivery with delivery workers harassed or beaten up by police. With the nationwide lockdown only roughly halfway through its scheduled 15 days, this disruption in transportation means even more hardships for the common people, serious shortages in foodstuffs, medicines and other household essentials, and deprivation of badly-needed nutrition for poorer classes.

JSA and AIPSN urge the Central and State governments to immediately undertake the following actions:

Steps to alleviate problems faced by the migrant workers

- Retract immediately any notifications, orders that criminalise, use coercion and violence to prevent the enforced movement of migrant workers. No coercion should be permitted either through government directive or through administrative decisions. The State instead needs to uphold the human rights of people, and address this health and human crisis with compassion and care.
- Facilitate free transportation of those who are stranded in various places to take them to their respective villages, towns, cities; the state must undertake all necessary measures to ensure utmost protection in the course of the journey as well at the destination to prevent COVID-19 infection. The central government may issue guidelines to the states to screen such workers and start transportation through road or railways. This transport should be completely free, without any conditionality of possession of any documentation.
- Urgently ensure provisioning of all necessary services (food, shelter, water, healthcare, information) for all those migrant, daily-wage, unorganized and self-employed workers still living at their place of work, as well as to all migrant workers now interned in various States. State support should be given to all these categories of working people even in the absence of any documentation.

- Implement urgent measures to provide comprehensive information about COVID-19, reassure and mitigate concerns and panic. Initiate public messaging against discrimination and implement steps to address any violations by employers, landlords and governments (refer MHA notification dated 29/03/20) such as removal of poor, migrant workers, families from rented accommodation, non-payment of salaries, etc. wherever they are currently located.
- Implement urgent measures for maternity care for women among migrants and other unorganized sector workers who are pregnant and provide food and milk supply to infants and children
- Stop penalizing migrant workers and revoke notifications / orders on conversion of stadiums or other spaces into jails; instead, use such spaces for shelter and put in place measures for provision of food and health care.
- Stop police brutality on the migrants and hold accountable, take action against the officers of the police force and administration that have inflicted violence.
- Stop spraying chemicals/chlorine on migrants returning at the borders in the name of 'disinfecting' and other such deplorable measures that are serious human rights violation and extremely harmful for people's health and pose serious risks.
- Involve civil society, mass organisations and worker's unions in facilitating the process to alleviate the problems being faced by migrant workers.

Steps to facilitate healthcare access

- Make urgent arrangements to permit or provide transport facilities for people seeking access to health care and other essential services as required by the people. This may be done through requisitioning of vehicles by health and local administrations at block and district levels (around 10 vehicles per block) for to and fro transport. . Government has to create a dedicated phone number and publicize it so that patients and others are able to access such transportation.
- Ensure transportation for those providing health care, sanitation and other allied workers (including for those in contractual positions) and for those who need to travel to provide health services, for migrants, destitute and homeless people.
- issue an advisory to provide screening / testing facilities for medical professionals, health workers and other related workers (and their families) who are engaged in working with patients or who are clinically suspected of COVID-19 and facilitate home-quarantine.

Steps to facilitate transportation of essential services workers and goods

Ensure seamless inter-state, intra-state and last-mile transport services for all essential goods and services and monitor exemption of such transportation services from lockdown restrictions at all levels

Lastly, JSA and AIPSN urge the Central Government, in consultation with State/UT Governments, to immediately undertake an evidence-based review of the nationwide lockdown. The lockdown should be lifted in a phased manner, starting now, and arrangements made so that it is not needed again after 14th April. All remaining lockdowns and other restrictions should be implemented in a humane manner, supportive of rather than hostile to citizens, along with urgent measures for mitigation and preparedness of the health care system as well on other economic and social fronts. The State must uphold the human rights of people and refrain from force, instead addressing this health and human crisis with compassion and care.