

# MAKING SOCIAL WELFARE UNIVERSAL

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Government policies & interventions for development in various Sectors and issues arising out of their design & implementation incl. Housing

People queue up outside the Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation office in Hyderabad with Aadhaar cards to collect rice and 500 promised by the State government on April 1, 2020. |

Photo Credit: [Nagara Gopal](#)

India is one of the largest welfare states in the world and yet, with COVID-19 striking in 2020, the state failed to provide for its most vulnerable citizens. The country witnessed multiple crises: mass inter- and intra-migration, food insecurity, and a crumbling health infrastructure. The extenuating circumstances of the pandemic has pushed an estimated 75 million people into poverty. The second wave has brought even the middle and upper-class citizens to their knees. Economic capital, in the absence of social capital, has proven to be insufficient in accessing healthcare facilities. Illness is universal, but healthcare is not.

The country has over 500 direct benefit transfer schemes for which various Central, State, and Line departments are responsible. However, these schemes have not reached those in need. The pandemic has revealed that leveraging our existing schemes and providing universal social security is of utmost importance. This will help absorb the impact of external shocks on our vulnerable populations.

Also read | [People without ration cards left out of COVID-19 food safety net](#)

An example of such a social protection scheme is the Poor Law System in Ireland. In the 19th century, Ireland, a country that was staggering under the weight of poverty and famine, introduced the Poor Law System to provide relief that was financed by local property taxes. These laws were notable for not only providing timely assistance but maintaining the dignity and respectability of the poor while doing so. They were not designed as hand-outs but as necessary responses to a time of economic crisis. Today, the social welfare system in Ireland has evolved into a four-fold apparatus that promises social insurance, social assistance, universal schemes, and extra benefits/supplements.

A similar kind of social security system is not unimaginable in India. We have seen an example of a universal healthcare programme that India ran successfully — the Pulse Polio Universal Immunisation Programme. In 2014, India was declared polio-free. It took a dedicated effort over a number of years. However, it shows us what is possible. With the advancements in knowledge and technology, a universal coverage of social welfare is possible in a shorter time frame.

Existing schemes cover a wide variety of social protections. However, they are fractionalised across various departments and sub-schemes. This causes problems beginning with data collection to last-mile delivery. Having a universal system would improve the ease of application by consolidating the data of all eligible beneficiaries under one database. It can also reduce exclusion errors. The Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana (PMGKY) is one scheme that can be strengthened into universal social security. It already consolidates the public distribution system (PDS), the provision of gas cylinders, and wages for the MGNREGS.

Also read | [Centre to give 5 kg foodgrains free to poor](#)

Generally, social assistance schemes are provided on the basis of an assessment of needs. Having a universal scheme would take away this access/exclusion barrier. For example, PDS

can be linked to a universal identification card such as the Aadhaar or voter card, in the absence of a ration card. This would allow anyone who is in need of foodgrains to access these schemes. It would be especially useful for migrant populations. Making other schemes/welfare provisions like education, maternity benefits, disability benefits etc. also universal would ensure a better standard of living for the people.

To ensure some of these issues are addressed, we need to map the State and Central schemes in a consolidated manner. This is to avoid duplication, inclusion and exclusion errors in welfare delivery. Alongside, a study to understand costs of welfare access for vulnerable groups can be conducted. This will help give a targeted way forward. The implementation of any of these ideas is only possible through a focus on data digitisation, data-driven decision-making and collaboration across government departments.

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To reassure Indian Muslims, the PM needs to state that the govt. will not conduct an exercise like NRC

**END**

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