

# FROM APATHY TO ACTION

Relevant for: Indian Economy | Topic: Issues Related to Poverty, Inclusion, Employment & Sustainable Development

Migrant workers and their family members walk on a highway to go to their village during the national coronavirus lockdown in Ahmedabad on March 28, 2020. | Photo Credit: [AFP](#)

In dealing with the health and economic crisis, the Central government's apathy is disappointing. The Prime Minister's speech created panic even for the well-off. For the most vulnerable, it triggered a huge exodus from the cities. They were given neither time to prepare for the unplanned lockdown nor support to cope with it. A few days into the lockdown, either as an afterthought or due to public pressure, a relief package was announced, but it is woefully inadequate. For a government that cares so much about optics, the lack of acknowledgement of, let alone relief for, the millions of migrant workers who are stranded without work, money or transport was perplexing.

## An inadequate lockdown package

The government chose to ignore the plight of migrants even though a solution exists. School buildings, community halls and stadiums can serve as temporary shelters. Foodgrains can be supplied in these places for workers to run self-managed community kitchens for themselves, with hygiene protocols. They can prepare food packets (to reduce crowding) for anyone who is hungry. The more shelters and community kitchens, the less crowding there will be.

Some existing programmes have been declared as new relief measures — for example, the payment of the first instalment of the PM Kisan Yojana money. The Finance Minister announced that MGNREGA workers would earn an additional 2,000. This assumes that work sites are open, and that the Central government will guarantee 100 days of work. In the last financial year, less than 7% of active job card holders got 100 days of work. The wage increase of 20/day was, in fact, part of an annual exercise which preceded the lockdown. Similarly, some States too are focusing only on optics. The U.P. Chief Minister announced that 556 crore of wages due to NREGA workers (from the previous financial year) will be paid immediately. So, wages that are already overdue are being projected as a new relief measure.

Oddly, the Centre has blocked attempts by others to ease the economic blow. When two High Courts granted temporary relief on loan recoveries, the Supreme Court stayed those orders in response to a challenge by the Union of India.

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Though there is a glimmer of hope from State governments, they lack sufficient resources as they are still owed their GST refund by the Centre.

Kerala has been at the forefront of fighting the disease spread and planning for a lockdown. When Anganwadis and schools had to be shut down, Kerala initiated dry ration supplies to their homes. When other States also shut down schools and Anganwadis, the Supreme Court took suo motu notice of Kerala's actions. In response, the Central government issued an advisory to provide cooked meals or food security allowance. Jharkhand opted for cash. During the lockdown, when people are being asked to stay home and supply chains are in danger of being disrupted, what sense does it make to give cash?

Some States are also learning from one another: community kitchens already exist in some States such as Tamil Nadu. Others like Kerala and Delhi have quickly scaled up. Other relief measures include advance payment of social security pensions, free PDS ration, food packets for those who are not covered by the PDS and free bus travel (Rajasthan).

[Coronavirus lockdown](#) | [At 'Zero Point' on Yamuna Expressway, flight from hunger beats fight against virus](#)

One welcome announcement on March 26 was the doubling of PDS rations for the coming three months. Here too, Central inaction and class bias are evident. While a Personnel Ministry order says biometric attendance for Central government employees will be stopped, to reduce the risk of community transmission, no such order from the Food Ministry has come yet. Some States have already suspended biometric authentication for buying PDS ration. Biometric authentication has been a source of exclusion (example, when authentication failed) from the PDS. Suspending it will help further. The Centre should support the States' actions and learn from them. Before it is too late, the Centre itself must act by increasing resource allocation and setting up sector-specific committees to facilitate prompt responses.

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