

FROM PLATE TO PLOUGH: A SMARTER SUPPLY LINE

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Health & Sanitation and related issues

Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#)'s announcement of a 21-day all-India lockdown to break the chain of transmission of [COVID-19](#) would have led many to appreciate the threat posed by the virus. In 1918, the Spanish Flu infected 500 million people globally, when the world's population was just 1.8 billion. The [pandemic](#) claimed the lives of 50 million people — 14 million to 18 million of them in India. It's quite obvious that the PM did not want to take any chances. He is right. But the lockdown has also created problems for a section of the country's population. Migrant labourers in Mumbai, Delhi and other metros have left for their homes in Bihar, Jharkhand and UP. Let's hope that no such worker has been infected by the virus. Else, the pathogen could reach the rural areas of these states, where the public health infrastructure is badly strained.

The government has announced relief measures. Last week, the Finance Minister announced a welfare package of Rs 1.7 lakh crore. This is too small to cope with the onslaught of the virus. We believe that a package to compensate all losses, including business losses, should amount to at least Rs 5 to 6 lakh crore, if not more. How will the government find funds for this package? The windfall gains that have accrued to it as a result of the crash in crude oil prices could come in handy, the government could divert all subsidies and some development funds to fund this package and ask the country's corporate leaders to help with funds. The prime minister could even issue a clarion call to those with a fixed income (say above Rs 50,000/month) to voluntarily donate at least 10 per cent of their salaries to fund the battle against the virus.

But in this piece, we focus on the supply lines of food — what the government must do to ensure that people don't go hungry and the measures it must take to make sure people don't crowd a few outlets, increasing the chances of the virus spreading. The government has announced that the beneficiaries of the public distribution system can avail three months' ration at one go. The challenge is to ensure that fair price shops deliver the provisions in an orderly manner and their supply lines remain intact. Home (street) delivery of these provisions, to avoid crowding, is a good option. This is also an occasion to rope in civil society. NGOs, resident welfare associations, religious organisations and paramilitary forces can be engaged for orderly and safe distribution of food — both pre-cooked and fresh. NGOs with experience in food preparation and distribution, such as Akshaya Patra, could guide local authorities. People involved in this endeavour should be provided with safety gears.

The challenge, however, pertains to supplying perishables like fruits, vegetables and milk. These perishables must be sold in a packaged form in mobile vans. The weekly markets need to be temporarily suspended lest they spread the virus — at such markets, people are known to do quality checks on vegetables by touching and feeling them. Vegetable vendors can work with civil society organisations as well as e-commerce players to do this job in a safe manner.

Retail distribution lines need to be seamlessly linked to wholesale supply lines. Luckily, the government godowns are overflowing with wheat and rice — about 77 million metric tonnes (MMT) on March 1, against a buffer stock norm of 21.4 MMT on April 1. And, procurement operations for rabi crops are around the corner. The FCI and other procuring agencies need to be trained about safety measures and supplied safety gear. Farmers could be given Rs 50/quintal per month as an incentive to stagger bringing their produce to the market — say after May 10. They will also need to be screened, given training and equipped with safety gear.

There is another big question as well. This pertains to mandi operations for fresh produce in large APMC mandis like Azadpur in Delhi and Vashi near Mumbai. These mandis are usually

overflowing with fruits and vegetables and the labour force at these centres usually handles the produce without safety gears. The challenge of screening and providing safety kits to these workers is doubly daunting. We don't think that the country is fully prepared in this respect. The safety of workers in mandis — and other workers who handle agricultural produce — should be accorded as much priority as the safety of frontline health warriors. We should also use this opportunity to suspend the APMC Act and encourage NGOs, civil society and corporate houses to directly procure from farmers.

In such times, prices of essential food items are known to shoot up. But in India, prices of food items like chicken meat and eggs have registered a sharp fall. In Delhi's Gazipur Mandi, for example, the price of broiler chicken has fallen from Rs 55/kg in January 2020 to Rs 24/kg in March. In Namakkal in Tamil Nadu, prices of eggs have fallen from Rs 4/egg to Rs 1.95/egg over the same period. This has also pushed the maize prices down as poultry is largely fed packaged maize. The government may have to think of compensating poultry and maize farmers in due course.

Finally, when things settle, it will be worth knowing how the virus spread from Wuhan to Iran, Italy, Washington, India and other parts of the world. Which organisation or nation failed to blow the whistle and alert the world in time? Was it China's failure? Or that of WHO? Or was it the failure of all governments around the world to respond quickly to the outbreak? We need better global governance for pandemics to avert the next crisis.

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