

Asian Roundtable on Social Protection Network Newsletter

December 2020

Organizing and fighting for social protection for all in Asia



Advancing Transformative Social Protection *Introduction to the Issue*

In this December 2020 Edition of the AROSP Newsletter, you will find information about ASEAN People's Forum (APF) with active participation of AROSP Southeast Asia and a series of mini-researches initiated by nine AROSP members from six South Asian and Southeast Asian countries including Nepal, Bangladesh, India, the Philippines, Cambodia and Vietnam.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been occurring worldwide, causing more than 83.79 million positive cases and more than 1.82 million deaths by 31 December 2020 in more than 220

countries and territories. In Asia, there were more than 20.68 million cases and more than 337,000 deaths (Wikipedia). The pandemic has become more serious, with additional waves of the virus being experienced globally. Due to the pandemic, the working class has been faced with layoffs, unsafe and unhygienic working conditions, restricted mobility, heavy policing and violence, and inadequate social protection and healthcare. The lockdown of major cities left unregistered informal workers with no access to state welfare. Informal workers and migrants are trapped in

unsafe conditions and excluded from social protection schemes.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown the obvious failure of social protection and healthcare systems in most countries, including Asian countries that push for more debates on the limitation of the dominant social protection-related policies and discourses, especially from human rights and gender perspectives. Since the start of the pandemic, there have been renewed discussions and drive to re-think the nature of work and welfare, as well as increased reflection on the

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importance of community and collective care. The main concerns regarding social protection from the region's civil society, especially within the context of a pandemic like COVID-19, are HEALTHCARE, INCOME, JOBS AND OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY, SECURITY, AND ADVANCING TRANSFORMATIVE SOCIAL PROTECTION—as illuminated in the discussion under the APF's convergence space for Life with Dignity.

Several mini-researches conducted by AROSP members in Nepal, the Philippines, Vietnam, Bangladesh, India and Cambodia help to better understand the COVID-19 impact on workers' livelihoods and health, and urge the government to respond effectively, inclusively and comprehensively. For example, in India, the cumulative impact of the pandemic and other crises has affected the income cycle of the working population in such a way that it will take at least a few years for them to recover. The pandemic exposed the weaknesses and inefficiencies of existing social protection systems. In Vietnam, migrants, especially informal migrant workers, have low income, unstable jobs due to informal employment status, informal residence status, low- or unskilled jobs, and jobs that are more easily impacted by economic changes, politics, society,

epidemics and natural disasters. However, these groups are not identified or supported by the government and socio-political organisations because they are out of the targeted groups. In the Philippines, during the pandemic and the lockdown, formal workers like business process outsourcing (BPO) workers, especially single parents or breadwinners, need to be included in social protection programs in order to get by as a result of no work no pay (NWNP) scheme, floating and retrenchment. Many of these workers are excluded from social protection programs only because they are BPO workers. One of the workers' demands is that the government do better in helping them cope with the current situation. Workers believe that government aid should be made accessible to all, especially to the most vulnerable.

The COVID-19 pandemic has impeded traditional ways of organising. Various rules of lockdown, social distancing measures, repressive labour laws and media censorship in many countries have restricted citizens from holding governments and employers accountable. During these unprecedented times, people are nevertheless aspiring and striving to build a more resilient civil society. Across different countries, people have been establishing new voluntary associations and launching various initiatives

for mutual aid, especially where government policies were ineffective and inadequate. In Indonesia, for example, a sense of solidarity among grassroots organisations became the main driver of self-organising mutual aid. Different grassroots organisations established a cooperation, selling rice produced by the peasant community to urban workers with prices lower than the market. This kind of cooperation has mutual benefits, helping both the peasants who have difficulty selling their products, and urban workers who face the price increase of food commodities. Another example is in the Philippines, where gardening and online-selling gave households alternative income-generating activities for production of food, clothing and personal protective equipment (PPE) like facemasks and disinfectants. Or in Vietnam, civil society organisations (CSOs) have a lot of different kinds of worker supports, from providing emergency support such as cash, food and pandemic prevention supplies to national activities like advocating the government to revise policy to make them more inclusive and comprehensive; thus, CSOs can and should do more to advocate government to provide more welfare and support for people.

Enjoy reading,

*Asia Monitor Resource Centre
(AMRC)*

The AROSP Newsletter

The AROSP Newsletter is a bulletin that provides updates about the struggles, campaigns, and other activities of the members of the AROSP network. The articles are collated by the Asia Monitor Resource Center (AMRC), a non-profit labour rights NGO based in Hong Kong.

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The Editorial Team

Jillian Rene Smith
Nina Lau
Van Thi Thu Ha



Asia Monitor Resource Centre

Flat 7, 9/F Block A, Fuk Keung Industrial Building
66-68 Tong Mi Road, Kowloon, Hong Kong
Tel (852) 2332-1364 Fax (852) 2385-5319
Email amrc@amrc.org.hk
Website www.amrc.org.hk
f Asia Monitor Resource Centre
t @amrc.hongkong

VIETNAM

COVID-19 Response Initiatives by Various Actors During the Pandemic

A DOCUMENTATION*

by Center for Development and Integration (CDI) / Vietnam 3 February, 2021

As COVID-19 was unleashed across the country in early 2020, the Government of Vietnam (GVN) rapidly took a number of large-scale disease prevention measures. The impact of the pandemic resulted in increased precariousness for both formal and informal workers.

Given workers' difficulties, multiple actors implemented interventions that were responsive to the social and economic issues workers faced. Interventions were varied depending on actors' resources and the progression of the pandemic. To demonstrate the overall support available to workers, the Center for Development and Integration (CDI) conducted a documentation of various actors' initiatives during the pandemic.

Following analyses of the study's results, CDI identified six actors who supported workers, including: (i) the government; (ii) the Vietnam General Confederation of Labour (VGCL); (iii) other mass organisations; (iv) businesses and business associations; (v) multi-stakeholder initiatives and networks; and (vi) international and Vietnam-based NGOs, community based organisations (CBOs) and individuals.

The type of support provided to workers can be grouped into the follow-

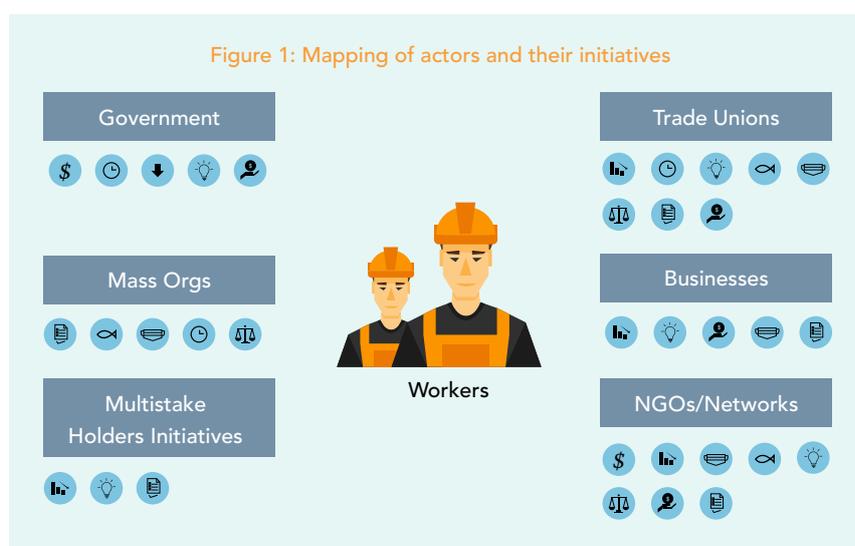


Figure 1: Mapping of actors and their initiatives

Notes:

- Cash
- Prevention supplies
- Essential goods and foods
- Tax/Price stabilization
- Tax/Fee deferral
- Preferential loan
- Training, propaganda
- Research, survey
- Policy and legal counseling
- Monitoring and policy advocacy

ing nine categories:

1. Prevention supplies (e.g., medical masks, personal protective equipment (PPE))
2. Essential goods (e.g., food, soap)
3. Tax/price stabilisation
4. In-cash support
5. Tax/fee deferral and preferential loan
6. Communication on COVID-19 and prevention measures
7. Job protection (training)
8. Policy and legal counselling
9. Monitoring, research and policy advocacy

Government usually provided in-cash support. Particularly, the GVN established a support package for displaced workers by Resolution No. 42/NQ-CP, ▶

*The CDI research, "documenting initiatives implemented by stakeholders to support workers to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic in Vietnam", was completed by the end of November 2020. It was carried out in six provinces and cities including Hanoi, HCMC, Hai Phong, Dong Nai, Hai Duong and Bac Ninh with 55 participants (49 women) from the following: textile and electronic sectors' workers, street vendors, scrap collectors, garbage collectors, government, labour unions and trade unions, CSOs, mass organisations, and business.

*COVID-19 Response Initiatives
by Various Actors... from p. 3*

dated April 9, 2020 and Decision No. 15/2020/QĐ-TTg. Survey results, however, show that migrant workers found it difficult to access support under this scheme due to: (i) criteria required for accessing support do not take into account that most workers are migrants; (ii) some criteria for workers to receive benefits are quite strict, leading to a situation where many workers were severely affected by COVID-19 including sudden loss of job and income but without access to support; (iii) problems accessing information about the scheme; (iv) difficulty in verifying documents that workers provide to demonstrate eligibility for support. Additionally, each provincial authority had its own support policies available for its citizens and workers, which depended on the resources and the specific context of each province.

Other actors also implemented various support programs for displaced and disadvantaged workers. Initiatives of businesses, the VGCL and the trade union at all levels, mass organisations along with NGOs included in-cash and in-kind support, legal counselling, policy advocacy and providing recommendations to the GVN. Businesses advocated for policies with preferential loans and reducing tax burdens for their operations. Mass organisations tended to support workers who were most disadvantaged with job loss, regardless of their migrant worker status. As they were short of available resources, such organisations mobilised funds and essential goods such as foods and masks from businesses and individuals to support people in difficult circumstances. There was no systematic information available as to the scale and effectiveness of these different support programs.

Based on the findings, CDI suggested the following points for workers' recovery post-COVID-19 and resilience to similar events in the future:

1. The government may consider:
 - Implementing policies so that they are timely and reach those in need.
 - Adjusting the eligibility conditions of the 62 trillion-vietnam Dong package so that more workers who are affected by COVID-19 can be supported. The government has considered removing the condition that workers in enterprises that cannot afford to pay salary do not need to take one month or more of consecutive leave to be eligible, which is a positive step.
 - Increasing the amount of financial support for informal workers so that it is equal to that of formal workers.
 - Expanding vocational training programs for workers so that workers have alternative livelihoods and are better at coping with job loss.
2. Most of the support was in-cash or in-kind. However, there is no mental healthcare support for workers. Trade unions and social organisations can support workers with mental health counselling and expand online counselling services.
3. VGCL and trade unions should consider that:
 - The pandemic shows that workers are paid a low (basic) and insufficient salary, so they are overly dependent on overtime wages, which puts them at risk when it is cut or reduced. Trade unions, therefore, need to promote substantive collective bargaining to increase wages for workers instead of simply adjusting the minimum wage.
 - At the same time, it is also necessary to invest more in training to improve the skills and capacity of workers ■

ASEAN

Convergence

by AMRC / December 2020

The ASEAN People's Forum (APF) 2020 was organised in Hanoi, Vietnam on 5–7 November, 2020. The three workshops under the APF convergence space of Life with Dignity (LWD) were conducted both offline and online, with joint coordination from three networks including Asia Roundtable for Social Protection (AROSP), Network for Transformative Social Protection (NTSP) and HomeNet South-East Asia (HNSEA). The three workshops were namely to: 1) Guaranteeing the Health and Lives of People in South-east Asia; 2) Securing income, jobs and occupational safety of workers; and 3) Success stories and strategies in advancing transformative social protection in ASEAN.

There were a total of 376 participants online and offline, and 27 organisations participated as speakers. Of these 27 organisations, 13 were from AROSP, including Network of Action for Migrant Workers (M.net) Vietnam, Mekong Migration Network (MMN) regional, Oxfam Cambodia, DIGNIDAD coalition Philippines, Coalition of Cambodian Apparel Workers Democratic Union (CCAWDU) and Independent Democracy of Informal Economy Association (IDEA) Cambodia, Konfederasi Pergerakan Rakyat Indonesia (KPRI) and Indonesian People's Struggle Union (SPRI) Indone- ▶

People's Forum (APF) *Space for Life with Dignity*

Posters of the workshops under the APF convergence for Life with Dignity

asia, HomeNet Laos, HNSEA, NTSP Philippines, and AMRC.

The offline workshops were organised in Hanoi, Vietnam, co-organised by AMRC and M-Net, with 120 participants (86 women) from street vendors, waste collectors, INGOs/NGOs, network, Ministry of Labour Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA), trade unions, women unions, institutes and universities. Other offline workshops in Hanoi were from Bangkok, organised by HomeNet Thailand, and from Laos, organised by Oxfam Laos.

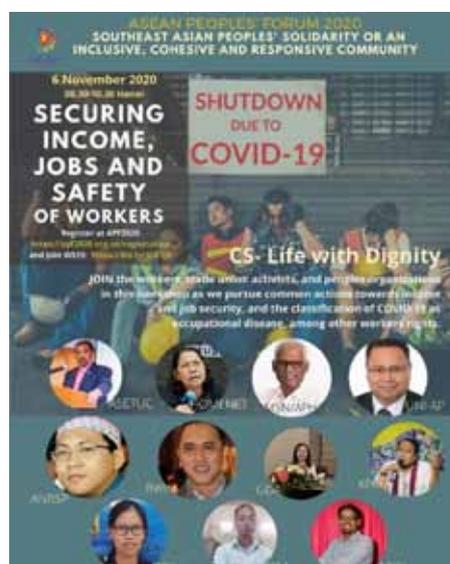
Evidence of health, economic and social impacts on people, specifically workers and the elderly in the context of COVID-19 were discussed in the first two workshops; successful advocacy stories and strategies on social protection were shared in the third workshop. All three workshops came up with specific recommendations that were consolidated for the whole LWD convergence space were presented on the last day of the APF and included in the joint statement of the APF 2020 by the APF Coordination Committee.

The consolidated recommendations to governments in ASEAN/Southeast Asia include to:

1. Immediately adopt, implement and finance universal healthcare that covers all diseases including COVID-19, with a strong focus on preventive and promotive health;

classify COVID-19 as an occupational disease; make COVID-19 testing and vaccination free for all; and implement health measures in the workplace.

2. Increase gender-based budget expenditures to realise (qualified, available and accessible) comprehensive social protection for all, timely extended especially to vulnerable groups—informal and migrant workers, women, children, elderly and persons with disability. This social protection includes healthcare, education and other basic public services, as well as adequate social pension and income support for calamity survivors and the unemployed. To guarantee its implementation, integrate in macro policies, and build national funds from taxes as well as regional social protection funds such as Global Social Protection Fund.
3. Provide more social spaces for people to be part of the government's formulation or policy decision-making, implementation and monitoring of its social protection strategy, such as but not limited to recovery plans or economic stimulus packages. Support community-based programs and other initiatives to ensure their basic needs like income, food, and health and safety ■



PHILIPPINES

BPO Workers Need Social Protection Too*

by BPO Industry Employees Network (BIEN) / 30 September, 2020

Work in the BPO industry is often viewed as better and more comfortable than work in other industries. Working in tall corporate buildings in commercial and post-industrial economic zones, BPO workers are often thought to live richly with high-paying jobs. The reality of precarious employment hounded tens and thousands of BPO workers as the COVID-19 pandemic wreaked havoc on the global economy. Relying heavily on clients based in the Global North, BPO companies scramble to remain competitive amid the pandemic-induced global recession. As a consequence, attacks on BPO workers' rights to security of tenure escalated.

The COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected BPO workers' jobs and livelihoods. Many BPO workers found themselves in no work no pay (NWNP) or floating statuses for a variety of reasons. Some workers are willing to work but end up in NWNP status due to lack of transportation and other logistical support needed to shift to working from home. One BPO worker from Taguig City lamented:

No transportation was provided to workers who are working on site. Apparently, I had to walk, hitch, and walk again. The company gave no assistance whether financial, emotional or spiritual. I am in no work no

pay from March to June. This left me helpless with anxiety, depression but I still need to be strong to find ways and means to survive (Interview, 2020)

More commonly, clients of BPO companies have either downsized or pulled out due to economic slowdown and BPO companies are cutting costs through flexible labour schemes. The precariousness of the situation is so palpable to the BPO workers. One BPO worker from Cavite shared:

Due to lockdown, I didn't have work for a few months. It was hard.... Recently, I got employed with another account. We were again put in floating status without an assurance when we are going to be re-profiled to a different account. I was lucky to be re-profiled again, but many of my colleagues are still jobless. And some of them resigned already so that they can find another job that will feed their family (Interview, 2020)

But precisely because of the misconception that BPO workers are better off than other types of workers, government aid to BPO workers who were displaced is very limited. Many BPO workers found themselves excluded from government cash assistance during the pandemic. Such can be a daunting and hopeless situation for BPO workers, especially those who have dependents

to feed. One worker based in Manila shared:

It's really hard, at times, you get sick because you're really stressed out with your current situation; you can't even buy the food you want to eat. Sometimes you're thinking a way out, like selling your kidneys in order to survive during this pandemic period (Interview, 2020)

In order to cope with the crisis, BPO workers find themselves applying for all sorts of loans from relatives, friends and government institutions. Some merely rely on the kindness of other people. A female BPO worker from Caloocan shared:

I was fortunate enough to have an understanding landlord who's been helping us with our daily needs. They share with us their meals and somehow we were getting some relief goods from the local government (Interview, 2020)

Others stretch the limited savings or "relief goods" provided by the government. One BPO worker from Bulacan grieved, "We have to take hunger and pain to the next level [and accept] the fact that life is not the same as before...." Others, conversely, simply have to find new jobs and sources of income to get by.

BPO workers who are forced to work on-site despite the threat of COVID-19 practically risk their lives as absence of mass testing and poor COVID-19 prevention policies in the workplace lead to COVID-19 illness or even death. For those who become se-

continue on p. 12

*This article is drawn from "Risking Life and Limb", a mini-research completed in September 2020 by conducting interviews and online surveys with 24 call center/BPO workers (16 women) and using secondary sources from government data, research institutes and BIEN records. Apart from documenting their experience during the pandemic, the interviews also became an opportunity to mainstream social protection as a comprehensive and important policy that must be campaigned by BPO workers and prioritised by the government at this time.

An Experience on Social Protection Research in COVID-19 in Kathmandu*

By Om Thapaliya, ED, HomeNet Nepal (HNN) / 31 January, 2021

HomeNet Nepal (HNN) has recently obtained in-depth information about the needs and issues that workers in Nepal have been facing over the past two decades, including social protection of the informal sector's working poor. Since its inception in 2000, HNN has supported informal sector workers, especially home-based workers who are overworked and underpaid, isolated, unorganised, and invisible and excluded from existing policies.

After a decade-long effort of several actors, the Government of Nepal (GoN) had successfully promulgated the Social Security Act and brought social security schemes in Nepal by which like-minded organisations including HNN became excited and hopeful for its coverage for all workers in the country. But unfortunately, the GoN has again excluded informal sector workers.

The COVID-19 pandemic began in early 2020, and has not only threatened the lives of Nepal's people but has also destroyed people's employment and livelihoods, especially for informal sector workers. Apart from very few workers in the informal sector who left Kathmandu Valley as soon as the lockdown was announced at the end of March 2020, all the difficulties, inadequacies and discriminations being faced by the majority

of informal sector workers were caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

To understand the core and emerging issues of informal sector workers due to the pandemic, HNN, in partnership with Asia Monitor Resource Center (AMRC), conducted an action research on social protection. After discussions with AMRC and within HNN's wider network, a detailed questionnaire covering food and health needs as key social protection components was finalised. The research began in mid-July 2020; however, as Kathmandu Valley became a hot zone for COVID-19 that month, the research was postponed until August 15, with many of the enumerators refusing to continue the research. Thus, HNN identified four new enumerators from the respective communities so that there would be less risk of COVID-19. Along with general questions, there were a list of key informant interviews (KII) on several areas related to food, nutrition, health and women's protection issues of informal sector workers. With partner support, HNN's relief material distribution work was completed at the end of June, and field work was completed by the end of October. This action research on social protection issues covered both horizontal and vertical aspects of Nepal's infor-

mal sector workers.

Finally, HNN produced a comprehensive report on social protection, highlighting key recommendations for action to the concerned authorities and stakeholders, some of which are outlined below:

1. Local to central levels of government and key actors of the private sectors work together to create alternative employment opportunities for those who have lost income due to the COVID-19 crisis, particularly promoting and strengthening the family-based and home-based production.
2. All three layers of GoN run a special nutrition program targeting malnourished children that includes a support package with seed money to grow nutritious food at household level.
3. The GoN, Ministry of Women, Children & Senior Citizens and Ministry of Finance to implement an income replacement plan to provide nutritious food for children and pregnant women, targeting urban and peri-urban areas.
4. The Ministry of Labour, Employment & Social Security to implement Food for Work Schemes

continue on p. 12

*The HNN "Social Protection Action Research on the Impact of COVID-19 on the Food & Health of Informal Sector workers of Nepal", completed in October 2020, carried out in four municipalities within the Kathmandu Valley, with 516 participants (320 women) including 500 workers, 10 key persons (leaders of Public Health Post and four municipalities, a health journalist, NGO worker, health problem survivor, and food and nutrition expert) and HNN's six-member research team.

DOCUMENTING SOLIDARITY-BASED ACTIONS

Research results showed that almost all forms of livelihood stopped during the lockdown, and mobility was severely restricted with no means of transport. It has also affected the local economy: “The closure of Tiangge (market) in Taytay resulted in thousands of producers, sellers and resellers of the garment’s industry in limbo, leaving no income at all or suffering from worsening the family income and economic activity.”

According to participants: “The loss of income is a big factor because it has a domino effect on health spending, utilities payment, daily basic needs expenses, payments for debts and loans.” People ate less, suspected COVID cases experienced discrimination, mental stress increased due to the economic and food crises, and there was an increase demand for resources such as gadgets for online learning. There was a noticeable rise in violence against women and children, as indicated by a spike in human trafficking, voyeurism, and pornography.

A focal group discussion (FGD) sums up the overall impact of COVID-19 as:

The biggest challenge not only to the economy but also to the health of everyone. It strikes any age, gender, status in life, location and time. And at this instance, the government was not ready with the facilities for the number of the infected and the medicines for them. Neither were funds sufficient especially



for the poor and the workers of the informal economy.

People were forced to physically distance, wear masks, and bring alcohol, hand sanitiser or hygiene kits when they left their home, especially when selling products and buying goods. “We walked for lack of transport, which even now is sparse as owners cannot afford to run their business due to specified limits.”

Government assistance in-cash (Social Amelioration Program or SAP and Tulong Panghanapbuhay para sa Ating mga Displaced Workers or TUPAD) and in-kind (rice, canned goods) was not enough to sustain the families during the lockdowns. Donations from neighbours, friends, church groups, PATAMABA, HomeNet and other CSOs had to cover shortfalls.

Key takeaways include an emphasis on the following lessons: the will to sur-

vive individually and collectively—as households, communities, organised groups must prevail; faith in what the organisation has done and can do is crucial for community cohesiveness and synergy; increasing use of IT for online communication and marketing is now part of the new normal; and visibility, voice, and collective strength based on solidarity are essential elements in individual, group and community empowerment.

Ways forward. The following advocacy agenda comprises the immediate steps to move forward:

- More and better-delivered assistance to informal worker communities, to be pushed at both local and national levels.
- Universal healthcare with informed citizen participation, continuing advocacy for the Magna Carta of Workers in the Informal Economy (MACWIE) which has strong so-

PHILIPPINES

AS SOCIAL PROTECTION RESPONSE

*A Participatory Research**

by The HomesdexNet Philippines and PATAMABA / 17 November, 2020

cial protection provisions.

- Access to financial resources, through building and rebuilding Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLA).
- Food First in the face of increasing hunger, through urban gardening and community-supported organic agriculture.

Livelihood recovery for survival should be the immediate focus. As a home-based worker leader remarked:

Basic necessities such as food, disinfectants, medicines, milk, vitamins (to strengthen the immune system) and income are the most important things for the family to survive. Economic activities should be revived and strengthened, as it is the foundation for family and community survival. If we have no income, how can we spend it?"

Summary of insights, challenges and policy directions

Even before COVID-19, workers in the informal economy (WIE) were confronted with multiple issues. Foremost was, and continues to be, the lack of social protection in health, housing, education, food and livelihood. Likewise, there is no clear law for the protection and rights of WIE. During the time

of the pandemic, issues of WIE revolved around employment, health and organisational concerns. Employment issues cover the loss of livelihood and income, and limited operation due to prolonged lockdown period. Those in production were faced with limited orders and lack of transportation to deliver the products.

Gender issues (mental stress, violences against women and children, and unpaid care work). Online classes for children brought about heightened stress for women, including concerns about where they will get the money to buy the necessary gadgets, internet installation, and wi-fi subscription.

Increased cases of violence against women and children were also noted with the stay-at-home arrangement for those who have become jobless. Domestic work or unpaid care work of women also made women's workload heavier.

Organisational matters. Mobility constraint was a barrier in monitoring and following-up with members, and social distancing was a problem in conducting meetings. Community leaders had to learn to use the social media platform and new technologies like chat, video call/conferencing and Zoom.

Moreover, plans, programs and budgets had to be adapted to the new situation. Alternative plans had to be created in relation to livelihood, such as social enterprise development, online marketing, and local economic development for one town one product, urban and rural backyard gardening and communal gardening to produce "food always in the home" with surplus for sale.

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), the lockdown, other stringent measures and the fast spread of COVID-19 have brought about negative effects to 81% of the 3.3 billion workers globally. Sixty-one percent of the worldwide labour force (2 billion workers) are workers in the informal economy and they comprise 90% of the total labour force in developing countries.

Mobility restrictions to prevent the further spread of COVID-19 during the enhanced community quarantine (ECQ) resulted in a major downturn for the majority of workers in informal labour as well as for those in formal labour. Every day that there was no work meant no income. Staying at home meant only hunger for the family. Exposure to the virus cannot be prevented when one has to work outside the home. ►

*The HomeNet Philippines: "Participatory Research on the Impact of COVID-19 on Workers in the Informal Economy: Documenting Solidarity-Based Actions as Social Protection Response" was completed in August 2020. This research unravelled the effects of COVID-19 on the livelihood of home-based and other informal workers, its impact on health, the local economy, and the adjustments done to mitigate the impact. It also documented the solidarity-based actions undertaken in the different areas. The research was conducted by HomeNet and PATAMABA leaders in partnership with community-based groups and youth leaders, involving participation of 68 workers including 62 women workers from five PATAMABA areas of Rizal, Quezon, Caloocan, and Bulacan. From the deep interviews and focus group discussions, 12 workers' stories were developed to illuminate the workers' situations amid the COVID-19 crisis and their alternative economic activities and solidarity actions.

*Documenting Solidarity-based
Actions as SP Response... from p. 9*

Given this context, PATAMABA called for the following through its National President Lourdes Gula:

- Land-use planning should include building of hospitals with dormitories and housing for the poor medical frontliners, and community markets to sell products of small farmers, fisherfolk and workers in the informal economy. Financial and technical support must be given to the aforementioned basic sectors.
- Rebuild the National Food Authority (NFA), which was destroyed in favour of the rice cartel to strengthen our national food security. Stop the importation of rice and other food items and transfer to NFA the



management of the national network of stores that will sell food at affordable prices.

- Build health units for testing and treatment of COVID-19 and immunisation in all communities once an effective vaccine has been developed. Gather all scientists to

fully support the development of the medicine or the vaccine against COVID-19 or any other epidemic.

- The voice of workers in the informal economy must be heard. One urgent demand is the passage of the Magna Carta of Workers in the Informal Economy. ■

*COVID-19 & and the Crisis of
SP in India... from p. 18*

- In order to enable the people crossing the poverty line and empower them to avoid falling into poverty, the government needs to: a) include all people up to the income level of double the minimum wages in to the Public Distribution System (PDS) to receive necessary goods at a subsidised rate, and number of goods distributed by PDS must be increased to cover at least the major necessities; b) exclude all people up to the income level of double the minimum wage from all direct and indirect taxation.
- The PDS system must be re-conceptualised as a major initiative for boosting economic growth with double dynamics, helping the poor to move out of poverty and thereby expand the consumer market and

accelerate industrial growth. It must be further re-imagined as a means to help small-medium farmers, relevant small industrial units, own account/self-employed workers and workers' cooperatives by providing an ensured market for their products through procurement on minimum support price for distribution through PDS. Hence PDS may help accelerate economic growth, and may also help a large section of the population move out of poverty.

- Large-scale initiative for government industrial housing schemes in all localities to ensure decent accommodation to workers on cheaper rent.
- The social protection system in the informal sector must offer all important social protection benefits offered to formal sector workers, but with a different institutional dynamic, by way of creating decen-

tralised occupation-based workers' welfare boards operating at district levels with functioning units at village Panchayat, urban local body, industrial area levels, and coordinated at state level.

- The state government in collaboration with all workers' welfare boards must establish a Workers' State Insurance Corporation (WSI), and Workers' Provident Fund (WPF) which may offer the same facilities and benefits as the formal sector's Employees' State Insurance (ESI) and Employees' Provident Fund (EPF).
- The financing of workers' welfare boards may be based on: (i) cess from all formal and informal enterprises engaged in particular economic sectors; (ii) workers' contribution; (iii) all CSR funds applicable on enterprises in particular sectors; and (iv) shortfalls covered by the state government. ■

CAMBODIA

Social and Economic Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Tuk-Tuk Drivers, Street Vendors, & Domestic Workers in Phnom Penh, Cambodia

by Independent Democracy of Informal Economy Association (IDEA) / February 2021

The first draft report of the IDEA research on “COVID-19-Related Social-Economic Impacts on Vulnerable Workers (Especially Women Migrants) in Cambodia” was completed in December 2020. It was carried out in Phnom Penh, Cambodia with 604 participants (313 women), including tuk-tuk drivers, street vendors and domestic workers.

COVID-19 has affected people around the world in almost all sectors. The first case in Cambodia was a Chinese man on 27 January, 2020 and by today, there are 263 cases, among these 243 have recovered (by 25 December 2020. It rapidly reached 3,028 positive cases by 9 April 2021, Worldometer). After that, the number of tourists deeply decreased, severely impacting tourism sectors and workers in the services sector and transportation. In the meantime, the Government of Cambodia announced many measures to prevent the spread of the virus that affected millions of informal workers, namely street vendors, tuk-tuk drivers, domestic workers, waste pickers, workers in restaurants, coffee shops and entertainment facilities, and part-time cleaners working in offices and homes. Their income was partially or completely lost and, despite this, many are excluded from social protection services. Over 80% of tuk-tuk drivers, domestic workers and street vendors lost at least 50% of their monthly income, of which 7.3% lost 100% of

their income and 40.4% lost 75% of their income. Nearly 83% of them say their family income has decreased by at least 50%. To deal with these changes, they had to borrow money (53.2%), use their savings (22.9%), do other jobs or go back to their hometown (5.9%). Many work long hours (52.4%) while 41.6% said they work with no personal protective equipment (PPE) such as masks and alcohol. While concerned about the spread of the virus, the majority (97%) say the PPE is too expensive to buy. To handle the economic situation of the families, workers need loans to buy equipment to run their business (75%), basic technology to protect and strengthen their business (22%), for vocational training (43%), or to set up their business in their hometown (45%). Very few workers received government support; 89% did not receive any government support, and 33.8% are in the process of getting cash support. To help people respond to the crisis, the majority of workers expect the government to: guarantee universal healthcare without considering type of employment or poor situation (72%), guarantee decent income without considering age or type of employment (52%), and provide urgent support to all citizens (98%).

Recommendations

- The Government of Cambodia should amend the definition of

informal workers to ensure vulnerable informal workers are able to receive health equity cards from the National Social Security Fund (NSSF).

- Similar to the cash transfers received by formal workers in garment and textile, the Government of Cambodia should provide cash transfer to vulnerable informal workers during the pandemic.
- The Government of Cambodia should recognise and register street vendors to ensure they are able to get support during precarious situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Most street vendors migrated from rural areas and lack citizen documents. This means they are not able to receive government support. The government should provide documents to the poor people, such as National Identity cards, family record books and family and resident books.
- The government should increase the national budget for social protection to include health equity cards for informal workers, especially for those who are most vulnerable.
- The government should provide vocational training to marginalised informal workers with enough support for daily living. ■



HomeNet Nepal holds focus group discussion (FGD) with home-based workers.

A Research Experience in SP on COVID 19 in Kathmandu... from p. 7

in collaboration with the Prime Minister's Employment Program (PMEM). The Ministry of Health to amend the existing laws and policies relating to public health services and ensure effective monitoring through accountable and timely health administration of the country and by the competitive and relevant agencies.

5. The GoN's Ministry of Health to review its strategy for the effective implementation of Health Insurance Scheme and Poor Citizen's

Healthcare Schemes targeting the most vulnerable segment of informal sector workers.

6. The Department of Health Services, respective District Public Health Office and respective municipalities ensure proper training of public health posts and lab equipment in the public hospital and health posts.
7. The respective District Public Health Office and respective municipalities build and run birthing centers especially in such locations as Lele (a place west of Kathmandu Valley in Lalitpur and Shankharapur in Kathmandu).

8. To undertake strong and collective advocacy intervention for necessary plan and policy changes that consider the Social Protection needs of most vulnerable workers in the informal sector, and also for effective implementation and appropriate annual budget allocation.
9. HNN is thankful to AMRC for their crucial cooperation to bring this research report to fruition. We hope the report will remain instrumental to all of us not only at country level, but also at Asian level.
10. To ensure easy access to this report, it will soon be placed in the HNN web portal. ■

BPO Workers need SP too... from p. 6

verely ill and hospitalised, hospital fees can cost a fortune even if they already have private health insurance coverage. BPO workers who lose their life battling COVID-19 can leave a heavy toll on their family's livelihood especially if they are the breadwinner. The eldest daughter of a BPO worker who succumbed to COVID-19 shared that bouncing back after their father's tragic death will be hard and long considering that he was their only provider. She

calls on BPO companies and the government to be more proactive in ensuring the safety and health of workers and their families during the pandemic:

Next time a worker gets sick in the workplace, the company should not simply send home the worker like what they did to my father. They should immediately have the worker checked by a doctor and conduct a swab test, so a similar tragedy will not happen again (Interview, 2020)

The economic impact of the COV-

ID-19 pandemic and the lockdown only showed that BPO workers need social protection too. To cope with the economic crisis, BPO workers need to be included in the government cash aid programs. Adequate, prompt health response, stringent policies in the workplace (i.e., mass testing, contact tracing and free treatment) and inclusive and participatory decision-making (i.e., worker-led occupational health and safety committees, freedom of association) should also be enforced to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace. ■



The New Normal for Many Workers Means Hunger A Worker's Story*

by Kamz Deligente, CTUHR, Philippines / 9 December, 2020

Elena, 54, is a mother of three. She works at a garments factory in Bulacan. Her husband works at a rice mill near their house.

Before the pandemic, she was working in a different garments factory. She left the company because of a labour dispute. She joined her co-workers in filing a complaint against the company when they suddenly announced a drastic reduction of their wages. They work under a piece-rate system or “pakyawan”. The company claims that they have been losing income due to low sales so they have to reduce wages. “With the new rates that they introduced, it became so hard for us to earn even just Php150 (around US\$3). We did not agree to it. We left the company and filed a complaint to the Labor Department,” Elena shared.

Not long after, she was able to land a new job; however, her fate there was the same. She was still under a manpower agency. Again, she worked under a pakyawan system and the com-

pany implemented reduction of wages. Around April, they were paid Php1.60 per operation (operation is equivalent to a portion of the garment sewn). With the sudden change, the cost per operation is now Php1.

When the pandemic hit, the company reduced our wages. I still have my job but it's very hard with the new system. For four days, I only earned P400. This week, I opted not to come to work. I'm selling banana cue in our neighborhood.

Before COVID-19, she could earn at least Php500 per day. It's still not enough for her family's needs but they could get by somehow. When the pandemic hit, they really experienced hunger. During the enhanced community quarantine, the factory she worked in stopped its operations, resulting in loss of income. They had to depend solely on the earnings of her husband as a worker in the rice mill. However, his income was also reduced, as they only had work for two days per week.

Elena shared that they can't even afford to pay for their rent. She lives in a relocation site in Bulacan and they are required by the National Housing Authority to pay monthly rent or contribution for the housing. Elena says “we can't even afford to put enough food on our table, how can we afford to pay for our rent”.

She also shared her struggle in coming to work with limited operations of public transportation. “A big chunk of my measly earnings go to transportation costs. The company does not provide shuttle service for us employees. We have to ride the tricycle to and from work, which amounts to Php100,” she shared. She continued, lamenting:

It's so depressing. It seems that nowadays, it's really difficult to find a good company that would not abuse its workers. With no vaccine for COVID-19 yet, they say we have to get used to this “new normal”. But how do we do that when this “new normal” means hunger for us? ■

CTUHR: LOCKDOWN STORIES Workers' Struggles Amid the Pandemic. The Center for Trade Union and Human Rights (CTUHR) collaborated with Women WISE3's local chapters in Metro Manila and its allied network in Bulacan, the Solidarity for Workers Network (SWN), to conduct this solidarity-based action, completed in August 2020. Involving 33 workers in Caloocan City, Valenzuela City, Quezon City and Bulacan. The group also held online meetings to share and analyse results of the interviews and plan future courses of action. From the interviews, five workers' stories were developed to further illuminate the workers' situation amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Economic and Social Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Informal Migrant Workers in Hanoi & Ho Chi Minh City of Vietnam

by Network of Action for Migrant Workers in Vietnam (M.net) / 17 February, 2021

In the absence of vaccines against the new coronavirus, the Government of Vietnam concentrated on social distancing measures, considering it one of the important strategies, including closing down schools and non-essential service establishments, introducing quarantine measures and travel restrictions to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19. According to a report of the General Statistic Office (GSO) in October 2020, informal workers faced numerous difficulties and disadvantages while also struggling to access social insurance and welfare regimes. The informal economy is a major contributor to the livelihoods of women and men in Vietnam. Informal workers lack the basic benefits usually provided by a formal job, including social protection coverage. If they stop working due to economic downturn, sickness or social distancing, they have no income security. Millions of workers in the informal economy in Vietnam do not have access to financial health protection. Almost 13 million among them worked in sectors facing the largest economic shock.

Key findings

Although the average income of informal workers is low (nearly half (41%) of the respondents earn less than the minimum wage), the majority of informal workers (99% street vendors and 93% garbage collectors) reported that they contributed partially or completely

to their family expenses before the outbreak of COVID-19. Regarding accommodation, most migrants (90%) live in a rental house. Due to having a low average income, most of the spending of informal migrant workers (IMWs) is to cover daily expenses, including food, water, electricity, travelling, telephone communications and children's tuition fees. Also because of the low income, savings are limited.

The COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted the employment and income of IMWs; up to 72% of them lost 50% and more of their income, with 40% reporting 100% income loss. In particular, 82% of informal workers earning less than minimum wage lost 50% or more of their monthly income due to COVID-19. During the COVID-19 outbreak, up to 72% informal workers could not maintain their usual jobs. Nearly 30% had to borrow money during this decreased or lost income period. They reported hardships during these difficult times, including hard-to-reach clients, exposure to risky working conditions, long working hours and more childcare work.

Being migrants with modest resources, informal workers have poor connections with local authorities and social organisations. Up to 66% of respondents reported that they are not members of any organisations or groups in the receiving areas. When there was a policy of assistance to those who face

Some key short-term and long-term needs of IMWs

- Repay debts
- Access bank loans to recover their business,
- Adapt to new working condition
- Acquire new skills to change jobs

great difficulties due to the impacts of COVID-19, very few IMWs received the assistance because they were unable to get verified by an official organisation.

During the COVID-19 affected period, authorities at all levels and many organisations and individuals provided significant assistance to different social groups facing difficulties, including IMWs. Unfortunately, more than 50% of informal workers participating in the research reported that they did not receive any support during this time.

Being a group that usually finds it difficult to access social protection services and government support, the majority of IMWs expected that the government would ensure the living income for everyone who needed it, regardless of their age or employment status. Most of them also expected an emergency relief fund to support all needy ones without any conditions and a subsidised mechanism for rent, electricity, water fees, etc. The government issued a guideline for delivery of an emergency relief package for those affected by the pandemic, including workers in the in- ▶

VIETNAM



Mrs. T., 34 years old, a garbage collector, Ho Chi Minh City.
Mrs. T. and her three children at her rental house.



formal sector; however, in reality, only few informal workers could access this government relief package due to barriers in the verification of eligibility and application procedures.

Research findings showed that the pandemic has severely affected workers in the informal sector, migrant workers and women. Their difficulties and needs should be prioritised and addressed in a timely manner. IMWs face multiple impacts by having to pay for rent and other essential costs like electricity, water, tuition fees, healthcare services including health check-ups, medical treatment and vaccination; they must also pay for temporary residence registration and security and social order at higher prices than those paid by the locals. Meanwhile, their jobs are unstable with low income and very little savings for sustaining their life during sudden shocks. They do not receive social protection such as social insurance or health insurance, thus facing greater difficulties in sustaining their lives. These

urgent issues should be recognised and addressed immediately and efficiently by the government and stakeholders to reduce the vulnerability of this group.

Short-term recommendations

For the government's support packages for informal employees: It is necessary to simplify the registration and payment procedures and processes; create a flexible application of registration forms (offline or online); disseminate information widely so that employees can actively register at their place of residence; and extend registration time and increase amount of support where applicable.

Support packages should be applied on a large scale and for a sufficient period of time. Depending on government resources, priorities should include the most affected groups, including informal workers and SMEs; the goal is economic recovery, not just emergency relief. The implementation of support packages should be timely and effective.

The government must have timely emergency support policies to ensure a minimum living standard for all people affected by the epidemic, including financial support, food support and personal protective equipment, regardless of status of residence or occupation.

Mobilise the participation of businesses, civil society organisations (CSOs), media and the community in the implementation process of supportive policies.

Gender-based violence and domestic violence prevention programs must be incorporated throughout the process of designing, building, implementing and monitoring the implementation of the policy before, during and after the epidemic.

Long-term recommendations

Reforming policy in the direction of social protection: ensuring a minimum standard of living as well as opportunities to restore livelihoods and economic integration for the groups affected by ►

Economic & Social Impact of pandemic on Informal Migrants... from p. 15

natural disasters, epidemics and fires.

Ensure sufficient budget to finance the expansion of social protection, with enough flexibility in times of crisis, in which the government plays the leading role and mobilises the participation of businesses, communities and CSOs.

Recognise migrant workers as a group in the economic system, promulgate policies targeting this group and policies not tied to the conditions of legal residence (household registration, temporary residence registration); adjust regulations on residential registration to be flexible and accessible, especially to allow online registration.

Incorporate IMWs into the Emergency Support Policy when natural disasters or epidemics occur.

Permit greater flexibility and variety in the registration for supports; promote online registration, not have to rely on the household registration book to meet the requirements of accuracy and timeliness in resident's management, and to ensure policies enforcement to the right subjects and not exclude those who need support when crisis occurs.

Deploy independent and public feedback monitoring systems through monitoring channels owned by the public, social organisations and media.

Gender-based violence and domestic violence prevention programs must be incorporated throughout the process of designing, building, implementing and monitoring the implementation of the policy before, during and after the epidemic.

Response models of all countries should be shared and developed into a code of conduct to encourage collaboration among countries. ■



The research was conducted from July to November 2020 in suburban areas of Dhaka city, Savar, Habiganj, Chattogram and Rangpur with 100 formal and informal workers (60 women) from Ready Made Garments (RMG), leather supply chain, tea sector, home-based workers, construction sectors, ship-breaking sectors and domestic workers.

Key findings

Nineteen percent of respondents had only one family member who was jobless during lockdown, while 21% reported that two family members had no work during lockdown. Most of the workers are home-based workers among the jobless people. Twenty-three percent of respondents lost their income, while 30% said that their income didn't decline. Income reduced by 50% for 14% of respondents.

To cope with the adverse impact of the pandemic, 37% of the workers borrowed money from their relatives, neighbours and others, and 21% withdrew their savings. To cope with the adverse effects of the pandemic, workers have needed government cash and emergency food support, but the government has distributed relief and cash support for only 19% of the workers. Sixty-nine percent of the respondents

reported that although they were eligible to provide the cash or food support, they didn't receive the support. Lack of proper documentation, social stigma and political nepotism are the root causes for workers not receiving government support.

Though the government has failed to provide cash and emergency support to the vulnerable workers, 74% of the workers have been provided emergency food, PPE and other kinds of support from non-government organisations and individual initiatives. Sixty-five percent of trade union members (60% of the respondents), however, didn't receive any support or cash from their union and federation as their union and federation was not financially capable of providing such support.

Only 8% of the respondents and 11% of their family members benefited from government social security schemes, but almost all respondents (92%) and their family members (89%) are not covered by any social security schemes by the government. Old age benefit and widow's benefit are included in this coverage. The study also showed that 28% of the respondents are getting social security and health security from the employers, while 72% are not getting any social security services

Workers' Safety and Grassroots Response Initiatives and Financing for Social Protection Floor

by Bangladesh Occupational Safety, Health and Environment Foundation (OSHE) / 2 February, 2021

or medical care from the employers; that is a big gap in terms of social security from the employers.

Across the country, several sources have reported increased instances of domestic violence during the lockdown period. Approximately 48% of the respondents remained silent on domestic violence, while 30% of respondents said family violence and women oppression has increased. However, 11% of respondents said family violence has decreased during the pandemic.

Safety in public places is a big concern, especially for the women workers. The study shows that 80% of the respondents reported that safety in public places and public transportation has decreased or lower since the pandemic began.

The government has already created a project in response to the COVID-19 crisis. A package of Taka 1135 crores (US \$134 million) crores has been announced for destitute workers in export-oriented garments, leather goods and footwear industries. Every worker will be paid Taka 3,000 (US \$35.41) per month for three months. The government has planned to provide this assistance to 1 million workers.

However, the key informant interviews showed that the Bangladesh

Labour Welfare Foundation under government has not been able to properly stand by the workers of the country during the ongoing COVID-19 crisis. It is very disappointing that in this crucial period, the foundation has not been able to support the workers, especially the helpless workers of the informal sector due to its complicated process and methodology.

Learnings and recommendations

1. The workers of formal and informal economies need support to survive and recover from this global crisis.
2. The crisis has highlighted that the country's existing social security must be reformed and strengthened. Government should reduce the gap of coordination among different ministries and departments, and take initiatives to ratify the International Labour Organisation's Convention of Social Security (No-102). A universal social protection system should be implemented by the government and structural gaps in the existing social protection should be mitigated.
3. Better social protection can help support citizens through enhanced resilience against disasters.
4. A well-planned, sustainable method

should be formulated to effectively assist workers during the crisis.

5. Support informal workers such as home-based workers by creating alternative income-generating activities.
6. Government initiatives in response to COVID-19 should be more structured, systematic and transparent.

Concluding remarks

The government will not be able to mitigate the situation alone; individual efforts from citizens, direct involvement of the nation's public health experts, and international help are urgently needed. The pandemic has led to misery and destitution for marginalised informal workers at a very large scale, and has posed complex relief-related difficulties.

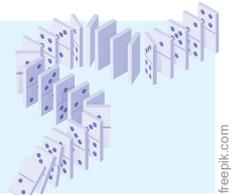
Government should involve workers and their representatives to design and deliver social protection and ensure appropriate safety nets for workers. Still, many of the recommendations in this study are simply reformulations of what has been suggested many times before by more diverse and seasoned proponents. A deeper dive into the mechanisms needed to ensure the effectiveness of the suggested recommendations is required. ■

INDIA

The COVID-19 Pandemic & the Crisis of Social Protection in India



by Surendra Pratap, Center for Workers Education, New Delhi / September 2020



The study, “The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Crisis of Social Protection in India” was conducted from June to October 2020. The research involved 35 workers (five women, 20 garment workers and 15 construction workers) in NCR Region through in-person and telephone interviews, four leaders from four organisations including one trade union working with garment workers and three organisations working with construction workers in Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh and Odisha. Secondary data sources include published reports of the government, trade unions, NGOs and newspapers. A Zoom meeting was organised in September with participation from three organisations: Center for Workers Education, New Delhi, Bandhakam Mazdoor Sangathan, Gujarat and Odisha Chas Parish Sangathan, Odisha. These groups digitally assembled to discuss and finalise the recommendations on how to strengthen the social protection system.

The study’s key findings are as follows:

1. Job/income loss during the COVID-19 pandemic created a survival crisis due to low wages and lack of savings for workers to adequately face the emergency situations.
2. There were numerous housing-related problems. Due to 3–5 people sharing small rooms and 15–20 people sharing the same washroom and drinking water facilities, it

was impossible to maintain social distancing; people were not able to pay rent, and therefore not in a position to stay longer in the cities.

3. No access to health services. This was particularly problematic for those who were pregnant or facing pre-existing health problems.
4. The pandemic contributed to a violation of human rights. With the imposed lockdown, transport became unavailable. People were compelled to take long journeys on foot, but the government did not allow this and resorted to repression.
5. People were not able to raise an effective, collective voice for their rights due to lack of organisation.
6. These numerous, interrelating factors have contributed to a long-term crisis: Most of the workers had to accept loans for survival, and without any income for more than three or four months they were thrown into a debt trap.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the weaknesses and inefficiencies of existing social protection systems. On the basis of various aspects of this crisis that emerged during the pandemic, the present study proposes alternative policy measures and implementation strategies to effectively address this crisis.

Nature of initiatives needed to strengthen the social protection

Basis social protection: Meant for survival with ability to face normal contingencies

Minimum wage and minimum income

- The basic minimum income must be ensured to all as a legal right. This must also apply in case of: a) long-term loss of jobs/livelihoods of workers due to retrenchment, closure of factories, natural calamities, etc.; b) unemployed youth; c) long-term loss of income due to temporary disability, long-term diseases or major injury; and d) permanent loss of income due to superannuation without retirement benefits, permanent disability and death of earning members of the family.
- The minimum wages must form the basis of determining the minimum income to be ensured to all families and individuals. The criteria for determining the minimum wage are based on minimum needs for survival; hence the minimum wage must form the basis for the poverty line, and thereby also to determine the financial assistance to be provided to cover the shortfalls in income of relevant individuals/households.

continue on p. 10