



SEWA Federation's experience and recommendations in COVID relief

The COVID-19 outbreak has thrown the country into uncertainty. The spread of the virus and the consequent lockdown has impacted the livelihoods of informal women workers adversely. The government took immediate action to curb the spread of the virus through a lock-down, and later announced several welfare measures to provide support to all citizens, especially those engaged in the informal economy. Along with the State, philanthropists and civil society organizations have also been active.

At the national level, the relief and welfare measures announced were in a relief package of Rs. 1.7 lakh crores that was announced under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana. The Gujarat state government has also put in place several welfare measures to protect the vulnerable.

SEWA Federation has also stepped up its operations by raising funds to reach ration and health kits to those who may slip through the gaps of State protection. In doing so, we have seen some challenges in reaching those in need of this support

PLANNING/DESIGN CHALLENGES

The quantity of rations announced and distributed were enough for 7-10 days, for a family. As a result, those who are daily wage earners worry about how they will manage once this initial package of the rations is over. Many of those who have received the kits are daily wage earners, who now have no source of income. Although they were relieved to have received supplies for upcoming days, they still expressed a need for cash to arrange things like vegetables, milk, oil, spices, etc.

OPERATIONAL CHALLENGES

There have been instances where the government-approved ration shops are running low on the necessary stock. Consequently, some beneficiaries don't get wheat or rice, whereas some don't get sugar.

ADMINISTRATIVE CHALLENGES

With priority given to Below Poverty Line (BPL) cardholders, many Above Poverty Line (APL) card holders faced difficulties in accessing benefits. When they tried to avail the ration at the fair-priced shops, they weren't able to get it since they did not fall under the National Food Security Act (NFSA). The NFSA which was implemented in September, 2013 identifies

households covered under the Antyoday Anna Yojna and households which are covered as Priority Households under the Targeted Public Distribution System as eligible. Families identified under the Antyoday Anna Yojna are only those who fall under the BPL category. Consequently, in the first leg of the ration distribution, only BPL cardholders were given priority leaving behind many APL cardholders. Needless to say, the whole BPL-APL issue has been a controversial issue with many exclusion and inclusion errors.

At one instance in Jamalpur area, some people were also asked to present the Aadhar (Unique Identification) card along with the ration card. However, as per the government's rules, there is no need for anyone to show their Aadhar card to avail the ration. In the end, with support from the members of the Gujarat Legislative Assembly of the area, the ration was availed. Recently, it was announced that the government of Gujarat has announced that free grains will now also be given to APL-1 cardholders.

At many other places, a token system has been put in place where the beneficiaries need to maintain social distancing where the beneficiaries need to get a token a day in advance. All the ration shops have been opening for a specific amount of time and those with a token come, wait in the queue for their turn. At some places where there is no token system, if some are not able to get their ration, they have to come back again, stand in a queue and receive it.

It was also observed that those BPL cardholders who had not actively used their ration cards in the past two-three months weren't able to avail of rations as their cards were considered inactive and therefore not valid.

SEWA Federation's response

SEWA Federation has been able to reach rations and health kits to several households in Ahmedabad city. The focus was on distributing more relief in the city, than rural areas since here, the houses are smaller, people live in close quarters, there are many migrant workers--all making workers here more vulnerable to the adverse impacts of COVID-19.

Distribution of relief so far

Relief strategy	Number
Ration Kits	1183
Health Kits	30
Total households reached	1233
Total individuals reached	6165

Apart from direct relief distribution, SEWA Federation has also been in close contact with our member cooperatives. With SEWA Homecare (domestic workers' cooperative), we negotiated full salary payments for all workers in the month of March. We have also reached out to employers to continue payments for April. For many of the women in our cooperative, their salaries are the main source of income for the household. Their husbands are either unemployed or daily-wage workers, who have completely lost their livelihood.

Sr. No.	Shift type	No. of workers	Salary (INR)	Total cost (INR)	Total cost (USD)
1.	4 hrs	7	3000	21,000	272.7
2.	6 hrs	2	9000	18,000	233.7
3.	8 hrs	21	12,000	2,52,000	3272.7
4.	10 hrs	22	13,000	2,86,000	3714.26
5.	12 hrs	5	14,500	72,500	941.5
6.	24 hrs	16	18,000	2,88,000	3740.24
		73		9,37,500	12175.25

Finally, the Federation has continued vegetable supply from farmers in Kheda, to our existing bulk buyer in Ahmedabad, which supplies food to the homeless in Ahmedabad city.

As the lockdown continues, the Federation is measuring the scale of losses at both the individual and cooperative level. Alongside, we are strategizing alternative livelihoods, including work in the digital economy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We have seen that the most effective means of relief distribution is to conduct this in a decentralized manner with local women leaders or aagewans being responsible for this. SEWA Federation's aagewans have shown that they have the capacity to take charge of relief work. They have contacted local shops, and arranged for distribution of food and health and hygiene kits in a timely manner. Furthermore, being embedded in the communities they serve, they are

able to improvise, be flexible and come up with solutions quickly, and recalibrate logistics in response to changing circumstances. Moreover, they customize relief packages based on the needs of the area which leads to a more efficient and appropriate allocation of resources.

It is also our recommendation that the quantity of relief — food and cash — be increased, as the current levels of support are not enough to cover the needs of informal workers and migrant workers who depend on their daily earnings and have very limited savings. Having larger relief packages will reduce the need for more frequent delivery of the benefits, and will mean less exposure to the virus for frontline workers, as well as for those whom we are reaching.

ANNEXURE

At the national level, in the announcement by the Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, detailed information on the categories of beneficiaries and the type of support that they will receive was highlighted. A relief package of Rs 1.70 Lakh Crores was announced under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana which covers the following beneficiaries:

- Health workers working against COVID-19 are to receive an insurance cover of Rs 50 Lakh.
- 5 kg of wheat/rice and 1 kg of pulses of choice will be given to around 80 crores poor people with ration cards free of cost for three months.
- Free of cost gas cylinders will be provided to poor families for the next three months. Specification or definition of ~~the~~ poor families is not given.
- The government has also proposed to pay 24% of their monthly wages into the PF accounts of low wage earners of the organized sector, with salaries less than Rs. 15,000.
- All Jan Dhan account holders will receive Rs. 500 per month for three months.
- MGNREGA wages will be increased from Rs. 182 per day to Rs. 202 per day.
- Poor senior citizens, poor widows, poor women and those who fall under the Divyang category will receive an ex gratia amount of Rs. 1000.
- Farmers will receive an installment of Rs. 2000 as part of the PM Kisan Yojana.

At the state level, the Gujarat government has announced:

- The state government will provide all essential goods and ration to 60 lakh poor families who live on daily wages. The state government will provide 3.50 kg wheat, 1.50 kg rice to individuals and per card 1 kg sugar – , Ssalt –, dal will be provided from approved ration shops. The families who were to receive the essential ration were at first the BPL cardholders who are a part of the National Food Security Act.

- Under the Ann - Brahm Scheme, food grains were provided to labourers and their families who had come to Gujarat in search of livelihoods but couldn't go back to their homes. Rs 40 crores were allocated from the SRDF to build the Shelter -Relief Camp Shed' where they would be provided shelter and basic amenities in order to prevent the return migration of labourers. It is not necessary for these labourers to hold ration cards to avail the food grains.
- Vadil Vandana'- a program to provide free of cost meals to the elderly and the aged living alone in the metropolis of the state was also initiated by the government.
- Recently, the government also announced that the small milk producers, who are not members of milk cooperatives, can also deposit their milk and milk produces with primary milk cooperative societies
- The Chief Minister has also announced that the monthly pension of destitute, specially-abled, 'Ganga Swaroop Mothers – Sisters (Widows) and beneficiaries of various social welfare schemes of the state government should be paid in advance for the month of April so that these people don't face any financial hardship in the present situation of the lockdown.
- Chief Minister of the state Mr. Vijay Rupani had announced free food grain distribution during April for 60 lakh non-NFSA APL-1 cardholders. Accordingly, the state government will commence the distribution of free food grains from 13th April, 2020 through 17,000 fair price shops approved by the government.
- A welfare-oriented decision for 4.43 lakh BPL women and girls. The government of India has announced an ex-gratia grant of Rs.500 per month for April and May. 97,474 women and girls will avail this assistance from GOI. The remaining 3 lakh 47 thousand 417 women and girls will receive the same grant from the state government. The state government will bear an additional burden of Rs. 34.64 crores for the same.