URGENT NEED FOR CENTRAL GUIDELINES FOR TAKING THE URBAN POOR ALONG IN RESPONSE TO COVID - 19

Submitted to

THE NATIONAL DISASTER MANAGEMENT AUTHORITY
6th April, 2020

TATA INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
MUMBAI

TISS COVID-19 RESPONSE

Introduction

The COVID-19 is an unprecedented global disaster whose spread, morbidity and mortality, India is currently attempting to minimize. The public health measures have on the other hand impacted the urban poor negatively, resulting in loss of livelihoods, compelling people to explore options of returning to their native places despite the risks involved and creating a deep crisis of hunger and uncertainty for thousands of others who chose to stay back. There have been several measures undertaken by the central, state and local governments to mitigate some of these impacts in the last few days through social protection measures in the form of food relief, cash transfers and setting up of camps for migrants, homeless etc. The crisis experienced by the diverse categories of urban poor is however multidimensional and is only partly mitigated by these measures. The implications of a failure to take the urban poor along in the measures to deal with the pandemic may be far too costly for the nation and hence, it is necessary to recognize and respond to the impending humanitarian crisis as much as the health crisis. It is with this objective, that this note outlines some suggestions.

Backdrop

- The urban poor constitute a sizeable proportion of the urban population and scale of the measures need to match this and recognize this contingent as the 'mainstream' of policy and not marginal or exception to it.
- Urban poor is not a homogenous group and are highly diverse, comprising migrants who stay at workplace, residents of informal settlements, homeless, street children, commercial sex workers and unorganized sector workers. Many of them face multiple kinds of exclusions in addition to these primary attributes described above.
- The larger the scale of the city, the complexities and scale of issues faced by urban poor is more complex. For several of them, entitlements are unclear; relationship with local governments is transverse. Their access to ration cards, basic services is variable. Many of them may not be included in BPL lists, have yellow ration cards, caste certificates as they are migrants.
- At a time of crisis, all of these aspects matter. Everyone needs to be included and made a partner in the effort to minimize the potential damage of the pandemic. It also is an opportunity to correct the historical injustices done to this contingent of the city which toils and contributes to the city but is given very little in return.
- The importance of police in maintaining discipline is important but it is even more important for state actions to be seen as 'caring', for eliciting cooperation of the urban poor.

Suggestions

A. Redressing the crisis of hunger

- Universalize the food entitlements temporarily so that every urban resident, irrespective of name in ration card or the colour of ration card receives grain
- Ensure that the contingent of free food is given prior to the regular rations
- Homeless and single migrants to be given cooked food
- Responsibility of delivering rations at the fixed entitlements should be that of the state machinery ie the collector offices who should prepare lists and ensure a regular delivery of these entitlements
- Even when contributions from private sector and NGOs are sought, the collector office should ensure norms for ration and their universal coverage and compliance. Variable

standards in delivery, unevenness of coverage, duplication, wastage and gaps should be avoided by this
- Local ward levels should be the centres of grievance redressal for all these issues
- Setting up of community kitchens in localities of high migrant population should be the responsibility of the local government and collector office. NGOs and civil society support can be sought but with logistic support from the state.

B. Needs of informal settlements
- Informal settlements are dense and often have very poor basic services. The water and sanitation facilities in these settlements need an urgent ramping up if frequent hand washing is to be promoted and faeco-oral transmission is to be prevented. In several cities, there are already dormant networks passing through the informal settlements and this should be leveraged.
- In cases where such networks are absent, makeshift infrastructures such as water provision through tankers, mobile toilets etc should be undertaken. The objective should be to create a universal coverage at acceptable norms.
- The fear of the pandemic has prompted several settlements to undertake actions where gullies or lanes are being organised as restricted entry enclaves with water drums or tubs at the entrance with soaps. These initiatives need to be built upon.
- Residents should be encouraged to organized as localities federating several chawl or lane committees and the municipal ward offices should be encouraged to have a direct relationship with these locality committees. Their requirements should form the basis of disaster management efforts at the city level ranging from food distribution to health awareness to creating containment zones to bringing other grievances and issues to the attention of authorities with a certainty of action vis a vis the same.
- All knowledge of schemes, the distribution of forms, if any; evolving measures being undertaken should be shared with the locality committees.
- Locality committees should be asked to collect data about the areas, the needs and share the same with the local ward office. They should be educated about the disease, the basic principles of prevention, containment, quarantine and encouraged to develop feasible solutions ,based on the same.
- Local ward offices should be the Centre point of all COVID linked efforts in relation to settlements. Ward level Emergency Operation Centres (EOCs) need to be activated with short trainings. Efforts should be made to activate all local institutions- anganwadis, schools, dispensaries or health posts and create a common linkage to the ward office on one hand and the locality committee on the other.
- Markets in informal settlements are an important exchange point and since people cannot keep or afford large stocks; they need to buy at frequent intervals. This dimension needs to be recognized and regulated so that markets stay open but the presence of people is distributed across the day to maintain distancing. Regulations for the same can be evolved and enforced by locality committees.
- The nutritional status of several communities is poor. Thus, there are several preexisting morbidities.
- There is a need to begin health checkups through outreach in these settlements.

C. Migrants staying in workplace
- Several thousand workers stay in their workplace. Many of these migrants may be staying in close proximity of informal settlements but are viewed as outsiders.
- In several cases, such migrants have been abandoned by their owners and have no money, and hence, no food. Shelter may also be under threat. Strict action needs to be taken against defaulting primary employers and landlords. Besides legal measures, such defaulters need to be shamed into corrective action such as payment of dues to employees, taking total/partial responsibility for feeding their employees and foregoing the rent of a few months.
- Opportunity needs to be taken to register all such migrant workers and the enterprises for whom they work.
- Migrants need to be explained the risks in returning home in the current situation. At the same time, they need to be assured of the support from the employers/city rather than police action as a deterrent. (Involve NGOs)
- Post the lockdown, their decision to return home may be respected with suitable health checks.

D. Homeless
- The effort to move the homeless off the street and into shelters is often accompanied by highhandedness, violence and confiscation of all their belongings. This is not likely to inspire trust among the homeless. The approach needs to be humane.
- Shelters need to be identified in close proximity ie of less than 2-3 km of their refuge areas.
- Shelters so identified need to have all basic facilities, be habitable and arrangements for assured food need to be in place.

E. Other excluded groups
- There are multiple other excluded groups in cities. The local government should take special effort to identify such population groups and their needs through a proactive involvement of voluntary groups, journalists etc.
- It is likely that such needs are more dispersed than the informal settlements and hence, the involvement of NGOs, volunteers may be necessary.
- Requirements may range from cooked food to dry rations to health needs to needs for psychosocial intervention. Even though the numbers of such people in need may be low and the liability on finances and human resources high; these requirements should be paid close attention to and responded effectively.

F. Management of Camps
- The creation of camps, especially camps that house 250 or more homeless or migrants needs to be prevented as much as possible. Effort should be made to use local institutions and facilities with set infrastructure such as schools, hostels as much as possible. Only when these options are exhausted should idea of camps be resorted to (as of now they are very very poorly managed in terms of basic infrastructure and sanitation and provision of cooked food, which create further health hazards) .

- In establishment of camps, the residents of camps need to keep whole families together and not separate them.
- They should be considered as partners and contributors to the upkeep, maintenance of the camp and not as mere recipients of societal patronage. Imbibing this spirit is important.
- Protocols for space should keep in mind that these are not shelters but rather places where people will spend their entire 'days and nights' and hence some thought to their activity patterns also needs to be given in organizing these camps.
- No people should be shifted unless the camp is fully established to acceptable standards.
- Clear norms need to be developed about standard amenities, regulations and mode of management of camps. There should be a clear structure for grievance redressal.
- Health care in camps has to be given special attention as they can be harbingers of transmission.

G. Health care of the poor
- It has been observed in several countries that the health care system tends to favour the elite and neglect the poor.
- It is a given that the geographies in which the urban poor stay are often characterized by poor quality infrastructure, including health care infrastructure.
- A special effort has to be undertaken by city authorities to ensure that this unevenness does not translate into a denial of adequate and quality care to the poor.

H. Co-ordination and Synergies across departments
- It is observed that since this is seen as a public health crisis, the Health Dept along with the Police are the key institutions in the decision making process. The rest of the urban depts and staff are perhaps under utilized and need to be brought in to provide support to ameliorate the secondary crisis that is looming large (shortages of goods, absence of adequate communication regarding entitlements, poor response to grievances faced by people and so on). Engaging them in various ways to improve overall outreach is very critical to enhance state response in the context of the lockdown.
- The Disaster Management Dept and EOCs need to be activated and could assume responsibility for running help lines and collecting grievances and passing them on to relevant departments, and a team ensuring that these grievances are responded to.
- The NCC and Home Guards are a organized force available, besides those enrolled under the Apada Mitra scheme. They could be trained quickly and could work in close co-ordination with NGOs, local groups or community- based formations/ committees and the ward offices.

TISS CoVid Response Team
6.4.2020