

Challenges of Livelihood and Employment for Rural Poor and Return Migrants in Uttar Pradesh

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Amid lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic in the country, the state of Uttar Pradesh (UP) has witnessed a large flow of migrant workers. Many of the migrant workers are walking on foot to reach their native places after the lockdown has been announced since they are left with botched up livelihood, less money in pockets and no food. This is both emotional and economic phenomenon. The state has highest population in India and most of the poor people live in the state. Hence, a large number of poor emigrate to other relatively developed or industrialized states such as Maharashtra, Gujarat, Delhi and Karnataka for better livelihood opportunities. Majority of these migrants at the destination places are engaged in low paid informal and casual daily jobs without any social security benefits. These workers are most likely to lose their jobs or livelihood in any adverse conditions like the ongoing COVID-19 lockdown. As a result, millions of migrants are returning to their homes in UP after losing their jobs or livelihood at the destination places.

State Government Initiatives

To reduce this fear, and anxiety and vacillating livelihood, the government of India introduced a relief package of Rs. 1.7 lakh crore to help the poor and vulnerable population. Accordingly, the wage under MGNREGA has been increased to Rs. 202 per day against Rs. 180 earlier. This scheme has targeted to benefit

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approximately 13.62 crore families. In the economic relief package, 8 crore migrant workers are promised to provide free food. In addition, the urban migrant workers are also assured to provide affordable rented accommodation through public-private partnership programmes.

To complement the efforts of central Government, Chief Minister (CM) Yogi Adityanath of Uttar Pradesh (UP) has released Rs. 611 crore directly in the bank accounts of 27.5 lakh MGNREGA workers. Besides the above, the State has provided Rs. 1000 to over 32 lakh construction workers, vendors, kulis, rikshaw puller and destitute families, and an amount of Rs. 320 crores has been disbursed to them. The State has also provide free ration to about 1 crore families for last two months and millions of food packets to the needy. The state is now responsible for the livelihood of those who have returned to their native places in addition to the existing ones. According to MIS database of MGNREGA 2019-20, 1.71 crore workers are registered under MGNREGA in the state of UP and it is expected that 25-30 lakh of migrant workers have returned to the state. The workers can use *Jan Sunwai* Portal where a migrant can register for returning to his/her home. The state government has decided to create 25 lakh jobs in rural area to provide gainful employment to immigrant unemployed workers.

The CM has made it very clear that all steps should be taken to provide direct and indirect employment to migrant using schemes like MGNREGA, MSME, ODOP (one district one product) and schemes of other departments. An action plan is under preparation to tackle this situation by a team led by Agriculture Production Commissioner. The MSME can provide jobs to nearly 1 crore people and MGNREGA can accommodate 50 lakh workers every day. The idea of creation of 1 crore jobs in MSMEs is based on the assumption that each of 90 lakh units registered with the government can provide job to one person.

However, the MSMEs are hard hit by the current lockdown, which are likely to resume its work shortly as government has provided a huge relief package for their revival and growth.

If the migrant worker is willing to work under MGNREGA he is being issued a job card immediately. So far 6.5 lakh new job cards have been made in the current year. State is focusing on providing 100 days' job to poorer sections of population in the villages like Mushhar, Kol, Sahariya, Vantangia, Tharu, widows, and poor migrants.

Irrigation and water conservation work are being given priority under MGNREGA. In Bundelkhand and Vindhya region works like community irrigation ponds, check dams and farm ponds, rain harvesting, and ground water conservation works, silt cleaning in ponds and canals and tree plantation are given priority. Works for creation of permanent assets will be taken under MGNREGA. The norms of social distancing are to be maintained while undertaking the work. Thus, the work sites are provided with enough supplies of precautionary measures such as masks and hand sanitizers to ensure their safety.

Way Forward

To effectively increase the employment under MGNREGA, the design and implementation of the scheme is to be altered. The Districts will have to open up big projects which has potential of employment generation, and also to keep one or more works ongoing in every Gram Panchayat. The attempt should be to have one ongoing work in every revenue village and finally in every hamlet. The work on individual beneficiary's field of eligible categories can provide such work opportunities. The difficulty of providing job under MGNREGA in Gram Panchayats will increase in rainy season. As the major projects under MGNREGA are related to water harvesting, deepening of ponds, and chak

roads, this will not be possible with start of rains and agricultural operations. It is important to think of projects other than plantation works which can continue in rainy season. This pandemic has led to steep rise in demand of work and worker's turnout at MGNREGA work sites. This calls for use of the provisions of Section 2 (g) of the Act-2005 which defines - "implementing agency" includes any department of the Central Government or a State' Government, a Zila Parishad, Panchayat at intermediate level, Gram Panchayat or any local authority or Government undertaking or non-governmental organization authorized by the Central Government or the State Government- to undertake the implementation of any work taken up under a Scheme. The agencies other than Gram Panchayats should also be brought in to provide more job avenues.

More schemes should be introduced in each village to promote the individual works to maintain the social distancing. Less schemes and more crowded worksites will violate the precautionary measure to be undertaken while working in the COVID environment. The work sites should not be loaded, and a minimum permissible limit of people should be ensured on the sites.

It is important to empower the delivery systems in the MGNREGA. The availability of engineers and supervisors are required on work sites to implement the work on the sites. Apart from this, Civil Society Organizations can be engaged in awareness programmes among the rural people and can help in capacity building.

The Self-Help Groups (SHGs) are also creating job opportunities in the rural regions of the state. The SHGs running in rural areas of the state have so far sold a total of three million masks. All the departments of the government like mandi, food department are buying masks made from the SHG of Rural Development for their employees. Apart from this, the Rural

Development Department is planning to create employment opportunities for people coming from outside by training them in new sectors like batteries recharge and repair, solar lights, and mobile repairing etc.

With the uncertainty posited by COVID-19 pandemic around the world including India, the rural areas of UP are ready to shoulder the responsibilities of maintaining appropriate hygiene, sanitization, social distancing, and creating enough job opportunities.

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