TAKING STOCK: ASSESSING DISTRIBUTION AND DISTRESS IN GURUGRAM DURING THE COVID-19 LOCKDOWN

GURGAON NAGRIK EKTA MANCH
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A large number of diverse civil society interventions have been initiated to respond to the lockdown-induced hunger crisis amongst informal sector workers in Gurgaon. Their interventions have been quick to take off, and have also scaled rapidly and flexibly to meet the emerging and shifting food needs of the poor in the city.

Gurgaon Nagrik Ekta Manch (GNEM) has been providing an average of 350 ration kits per day since 27th March, the third day of the lockdown, and about 25,000 cooked meals every day since 4th April 2020. Additionally, it responds to SOS calls and requests telephonically, consolidating and sharing data about demand with the administration and other civil society groups on a daily basis.

Data analysis using time series data from Gurgaon Nagrik Ekta Manch's operations in an indicative manner reveals that despite the hard work of many organisations and individuals, the crisis of hunger has not abated. A number of early signs were missed and the government’s response has lagged behind the stark reality of distress. A much stronger, more transparent and coordinated response is required.

These numbers reflecting the hunger crisis will be much higher if we include data from organizations such as Agrasar and other members of a collaborative network of civil society organizations.
Findings from Food Distribution Efforts during COVID-19 Lockdown

Substantial gaps between demand and supply persist despite massive efforts

The rate of demand for dry rations and cooked food has consistently outstripped supply since the start of the lockdown. Even with nearly 10,100 ration kits delivered until 21 April, which provided food security for 40,400 people, GNEM has only been able to cater to 68% of those in need. GNEM has served close to 4 lakh cooked meals since the first week of April but is still only able to meet 74% of demand.

The story will be similar for other civil society groups involved in relief work.
The number of calls that GNEM had to verify on a daily basis spiked once the lockdown extension was announced. From an average of 8 calls per day in the first 21 days, calls went up to 60 a day post the 15th of April. While this is partially because news spread in certain dense clusters, the numbers clearly establish rising distress with the passage of time.

Qualitatively, the calls indicated that the anxiety over food increased in this period because:

- Most workers have little or no savings
- The extension of lockdown until 3rd of May created panic among the workers and insecurity about where the next round of rations would come from and when.
- The line of credit with the local kirana shops for many snapped, bringing a fresh set of people who were not asking for rations before also into the vulnerable and needy category.
- Those without a locally registered ration card had no support from the government, nor was there any cash support schemes in place.

"Ek maheene mein kum se kum 20 list mein naam daal diya hoon, phir bhi madad nahi hui hai. Sarkar ne form bhi bharwa liya hai. Sarkar form se bhi kuch nahi de rahi. Khichdi ke liye dhakke maar maar ke, teen teen ghante line mein lagna padhta hai aur phir ek chamach khichdi milti hai. Mar jayega toh ration ki sahayata se kya hoga."

- Sajid, Sarhol
Coronavirus hotspots meticulously mapped by administration, but hunger hotspots not in focus

The administration’s focus on mapping and intervening in coronavirus hotspots through establishment of containment zones and enhanced screening etc is duly announced and reported on a regular basis. However, hunger hotspots that emerged clearly in our data, especially in clusters around industrial pockets like Dundahera, Sarhaul, Manesar, Dharuhera, Khandsa and Naharpur do not find mention in any official announcement. Lists of high concentration areas verified by GNEM were also provided to the administrations’ food and hunger control room. However, hunger hotspots were not specifically and systematically targeted by the administration for food relief; had they done so, civil society efforts would have covered and addressed other needy clusters in the city.

“Papa ki dialysis ka chinta hai. Paisa bhi nahi hai ki hum dialysis kara sake aur ration bhi khatam hone wala hai.”

-Anita, Dundahera

Unpaid salaries, failed implementation of government orders are key drivers of food crisis

Despite the Ministry of Labour’s orders that all workers should be “deemed to be at work” during the lockdown period, a recently released report (SWAN April 15th) shows that more than 85% of workers employed as casual labour at construction sites, in factories as well as domestic help in Gurgaon have not been paid their wages or at best been paid partially. 89% of the workers that made SOS calls had not been paid by their employers. This report also found that no cash liquidity is a cause of tremendous mental anguish for daily wage workers as was evidenced by the tragic suicide of Mukesh in the city.

Of 50 formal sector workers surveyed on 15th April in Manesar by Safe in India, 37% had not received their salaries for the month of March! The distress, therefore, is not restricted to informal workers. The government’s lack of success in intervening with employers is adding additional pressure on the already fragile and fragmented relief ecosystem.

An order from the Chief Minister, Haryana has directed all districts to register daily wagers such as casual labor and street vendors to receive Rs 1000 as immediate cash relief. None of the workers we have interacted with so far have received this money, let alone know how to register. Upon calling the “financial assistance helpline” publicised by the CM, we were told that all new registrations were stopped on April 7th because verification of existing registrations was ongoing.
Distress ration announcement too little, too late

While civil society organizations are responding to the best of their capacities, they cannot fill the gap between demand and supply on their own; the government needs to step in urgently.

Despite early warning signals and adequate case studies of what other states are doing, the Government of Haryana dragged its feet in opening up its foodgrains to non ration card holders. It was only on the 14th of April, three weeks into the food crisis, that the state government announced its intent to distribute distress ration coupons to non ration card holders. However based on ground reports from our distribution teams and the calls we are receiving, people have not even received the coupons yet; getting rations seems distant and uncertain given that verification processes are also involved.
Distress Ration Coupons announced but procedures unclear, data not made public

While the government has announced that it has taken note of the extreme economic and food distress amongst the working poor in the state and proposed the distribution of distress ration coupons, the process remains unclear and entirely opaque.

Several questions are unanswered:

a) It is unclear who is part of these local committees and how its members can be contacted
b) What is the criteria for verification and how will this be done in the absence of a physical, door-to-door survey
c) Who are the “appropriate agencies”?
d) How long will this process take, especially given most of April is over?
e) How will the data coming in via these forms be used?
Make the entire system of ration coupon distribution public. Create an online portal where the application process, verification criteria and ward wide members of local committees with their contact details are made available. Data on distribution such as amounts, number of households and individuals covered, wards/clusters/locations covered must be updated everyday if not real-time for the public to verify. This will ensure public scrutiny and minimise any confusion and duplication. Moreover, this data could form a basis to understand the extent and nature of poverty in the city, and devise long-term measures for inclusion of vulnerable populations in schemes and services.

Re-open registration for Rs 1000 cash relief to daily wagers. In addition to ration, cash assistance is also critical at this time to meet other essential needs such as LPG and medicines. States like Bihar have already disbursed upto 90 crores and Gurgaon which benefits tremendously from migrant labour must also play its part.

We urge the district administration to work with large and small businesses and use town-halls and other public platforms to ensure employers pay wages and take action against those who do not comply.

Institute bi-weekly consultations with civil society groups engaged in relief efforts in Gurgaon. Use this platform to conduct joint reviews of ongoing efforts, identify bottlenecks and find quick resolution.

Set up a single helpline: to which people facing difficulties in accessing ration can call, register and track their request. The helpline can ensure direction of supplies to the complainant and also put in place an effective mechanism of registration, aggregation, direction and disposal of grievances.

Set up a public grievance portal in which the details of calls received on the helpline (above) can be logged and complaints registered and redressed within a stipulated time-frame. Ideally this module should be added to the existing grievance redress system of the state government.
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