

# **How to ease the Lockdown Phase wise in India**

## **Introduction:**

After a 60-day lockdown, what will be the shape of things to come? How should one strike a balance between ensuring livelihoods, minimising strife, and maintaining social distancing?

We should start planning ahead of time as the economy can't stay closed forever.

## **Reason:**

We need to keep our socioeconomic conditions firmly in focus while deciding on a health strategy to deal with the epidemic. Only 17% of the employed have salaried jobs; one-third are casual labourers. According to the World Bank, 76% are in 'vulnerable employment' in India. There is no provision for unemployment doles. Overall, what we should try to minimise is hardship and deaths from the pandemic. In the past few weeks, we have seen reports of hunger, homelessness, vagrancy — even deaths — from the lockdown, coupled with government apathy to these issues. We, therefore, need to ensure that the poor are not forgotten or abandoned as we protect ourselves, roughly the top 30%, from the viral infection. For the poor, an extended lockdown poses a health risk because they live in cramped spaces and may not have running water to wash their hands; it is also economically disastrous, because they do not have savings or an assured monthly income to keep themselves going. Greater sensitivity and better planning are urgently required.

## **Implementations:**

I do not see any conflict in continuing physical distancing and measures to prevent large congregations in the near future. In most circumstances, such as in the IT sector, work from home options should be made mandatory for the next few months. Similarly, annual fair, marathon events, and all such events which require large gatherings for non-essential purposes should be postponed until we have a drug or a vaccine. When it comes to essential activities such as public transport, ensuring physical distancing, face mask use, and enforcing respiratory hygiene such as cough etiquette is essential.

There is a view that the lockdown cannot be lifted completely. Can governments plan welfare and public health measures under uncertainty? What happens to the self-employed and migrant labourers?

Reetika Khera: The lockdown will probably be partially lifted allowing some activities and [then] gradually phased out, red zones remaining locked. But it must be accompanied by a massive increase in the relief budget, currently at about 0.5% of GDP, for the most vulnerable. Existing programmes of social support, such as the Public Distribution System (PDS), the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), and pensions need more financial allocations. The PDS today only covers about 60% of the population, even though the legally mandated coverage under the National Food Security Act (NFSA) is two-thirds of the population. This is because the government is using population figures from the 2011 census to determine coverage. Due to the lockdown, a significant portion of those who would not have been covered anyway — the one-third outside the NFSA — now need support; workers in the gig economy, taxi drivers, delivery boys, etc., for instance. This under-coverage is especially criminal today because at the moment, the government is hoarding grains on an unprecedented scale: three-and-a-half times the buffer stock norms, before wheat procurement has even started. The first step should be to universalise the PDS, for up to a year, by allowing anyone from the 40% without ration card the opportunity to apply for a temporary card. The Centre needs to make grain available to the States and they can do the rest.

As far as the NREGA is concerned, there are two issues. One, whether such works can be opened without increasing the risk of community transmission at worksites. Two, how to make payments in a convenient manner? Density of bank branches is very low in rural areas and, even in normal circumstances, they are very crowded and far from people. Banking correspondents, who could have eased these pressures, are unsafe at the moment because they use biometric authentication at the time of disbursement of wages. For this reason, the government needs to allow greater flexibility to States in deciding how to disburse cash. Several States have successfully disbursed cash in hand in the past, and have done so without much corruption. Odisha pays pensions through panchayat secretaries; Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu used to pay NREGA wages at the worksite before 2009.

For migrants, the government must provide transport, assisting them to return home, just as it flew back Indians stuck abroad and helped the students stuck in Kota. Those who are willing to stay, must be provided dignified shelter in schools, community halls, along with cooked food.

I feel that we must understand that we have been cheated for more than 70 years by the political class, that used every possible excuse to underspend on health. Today, public spending on health in India is barely 1% of GDP, compared with more than 10% in countries like France and Germany. There needs to be a serious discussion on resetting our priorities — not focusing on overall GDP growth only, but also on where GDP growth is coming from. Expenditure on health (nurses, doctors, hospital beds etc.) adds to GDP as much as roads and fighter jets do.

There also needs to be a serious rethink about the health system. At the very least, we should be regulating the (for-profit) private health sector, in a similar manner as Germany and Japan. These countries do not have socialised healthcare like the National Health Service of the U.K. But Germany has not-for-profit social insurance funds; in Japan, the government regulates what private practitioners can charge patients. In India, the private health providers seem to dictate terms to the government, as happened

recently with respect to pricing for the COVID-19 test. This must change right now.

### **Conclusion:**

The government( s) should continue to enforce social distancing measures and prohibit large public gatherings. Malls, cinemas and restaurants should remain closed, and big sporting events not permitted.

Wearing of masks, regular sanitisation of public places, disinfection of common surfaces and temperature-screening in public places should be mandatory. Testing should also be scaled up to include general public, especially asymptomatic cases.

Widespread antibody testing is a ..

Widespread antibody testing is a critical step towards determining onset of herd immunity. On the economic front, India needs coordinated fiscal and monetary policymaking to tide over the crisis and lay the foundation for a growth revival.

Some amount of ‘quantitative easing’ to enhance liquidity in the economy is needed. GoI will also have to provide a huge financial stimulus to boost industrial production, across small, medium and large enterprises.





