



Enabling Migrant Workers and Communities Survive COVID 19 Lockdown

Updates of Relief and Rehabilitation Operations

(March to July 2020)

The year 2020 continues to be an unprecedented one the world over.

India has witnessed four unprecedented nationwide lockdowns in an attempt to curb the spread of the COVID19. The country has had to fight two battles during the pandemic: one, to contain the spread of the virus, and the other, in protecting the well-being of its most marginalized citizens; namely India's internal migrant workers, who have had to bear the harshest brunt. From being stranded in cities without food and wages, to being forced into crammed shelters; from trying to get home on foot to being beaten by the police; from standing in long queues for *shramik* trains to finally reach homes to families in hunger - the predicament of millions of India's migrants in the shadow of the lockdown will remain unparalleled in India's modern history. These lockdowns have been the fiercest reminders yet, that our cities and systems are by default, exclusionary.

And yet, the overwhelming support our work received during this time in helping us provide relief to this population, has been deeply inspiring. Over the last 4 months, from providing direct relief to the population, to running health centres and anchoring campaigns to leverage government response, from producing real-time reports to putting out content on public platforms, from building long term assets and livelihoods for communities to facilitating work related campaigns, we've been involved on multiple

fronts. With time, the nature of the ongoing crisis has changed, and so have our relief interventions.

Our relief work has been made possible by the very prompt and thoughtful contributions of dozens of individuals and institutions who donated us money and material to help us extend this to migrants and their families who needed it most. For this we are extremely grateful and enthused.

Just as a significant phase of more immediate relief comes to a close, we are presenting a summary of all our relief efforts since the lockdown burst upon our communities. The work is far from over - COVID shows no signs of abating especially in cities and millions of informal workers are faced with unemployment and hunger. We will continue our partnership with communities trying to recover from the multiple fractures to the economy, employment, and well-being.



Food Relief to Daily Wagers and Migrants

Providing food and ration to migrants without any means of income or to those stranded in cities has been the most urgent and crucial component of our relief work. We distributed ration kits and/or cooked meals to migrant workers in cities and to migrant returnees in rural areas. Additionally, to several workers we also made direct cash transfers for them to be able to buy food and supplies themselves. Wherever possible, we have also tried to

register migrant workers under schemes and programmes announced by the government for the provision of ration kits, cash relief and food grain.

In **rural South Rajasthan** we have:

- Mobilized **ration support for about 7,000 migrants** including daily wagers and informally employed workers **covering a population of nearly 42,000** across four districts. Our ration kits included sufficient dry ration for at least two weeks during the lockdown and it became available before the government assistance started to trickle for rural families.
- Made available special food and ration kits for stone carving workers in Pindwara block, suffering from the debilitating silicosis disease. Our **kits reached a thousand such families facing complete shutdown of work** and near starvation conditions.
- Made direct cash transfers to about 150 individuals helping them with the most urgent expenses of food and health care.

In **Mumbai** we have:

- Distributed about **29,600 kgs of ration in the form of kits to 3300 migrant workers** in the areas of MIDC, Malad, Kherwadi and Sakinaka
- Made **direct cash transfers** amounting to Rs 332,000 to nearly 600 stranded workers to buy food and supplies themselves

In **Ahmedabad**, we have:

- Directly **distributed 1161 ration kits** to as many stranded migrant families (about 4,644 persons)
- Facilitated the distribution of cooked meals and food packets in partnership with other organizations to 3900 migrant workers
- Facilitated ration distribution and cash transfers through other organizations to an additional 1800 migrant workers
- Made **direct cash transfers** to 146 workers
- Linked 209 migrant families: about 1254 persons to the **Atmanirbhar Bharat Scheme**
- Provided **nutritious meals consisting of sattu and khichdi to 280 migrant children** at our childcare centres across 8 construction sites in Ahmedabad.

In **Surat** we have:

- Distributed ration kits to 120 migrant workers
- Facilitated the **distribution of cooked meals to 24,000 migrant workers**
- Linked 600 migrant workers to the Atmanirbhar Bharat Scheme and the Anna Brahma Yojana of the Government of Gujarat.
- Facilitated the registration of 350 migrant workers under **Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana**



Emergency Helpline for Workers in Distress

(Labour Line 1800 1800 999)

For over 8 years we have run a phone-based helpline - **Labour Line** – that provides information to workers and counsels those in distress and emergency. Ever since the first lockdown was announced, our Labour Line has received thousands of calls from migrant workers reaching out with horrors of sudden food shortage, loss of jobs, forced evacuation, police excess and absence of transportation. It is through our Labour Line that thousands of workers calling in for help have been provided with information and assistance.

While the number of relief and emergency support related calls have now reduced in number, the Labour Line continues to play an important role in assisting workers facing wrongful loss of wages, forced retrenchments and difficulty in accessing their social benefits. **Till end May Labour Line was receiving between 700 to 1000 calls every day** – the number is still upwards of 300 calls and there is much follow up to be done.

Between March and July, Labour Line:

- **Received nearly 30,000 calls from all over India** since the start of the lockdown.
- Facilitated distribution of food and ration to 100,000 workers, across the country, in locations where they were stranded.
- Facilitated direct cash transfers of nearly Rs. 120,000 to 1500 workers in distress
- Facilitated **1667 cases** involving more than 17,000 individual **workers pertaining to arbitrary wage deduction, non-payment of wages** and illegal retrenchments.

Labour Line played a key relief role in not only providing immediate help to workers but also in gathering relevant data on the needs and movement of migrant across the country. It collaborated with dozens of citizen groups everywhere and also remained the most important interface of workers with the Government, especially in Rajasthan.

Helping Workers Get Back Home

Perhaps the most heart wrenching images during the migrant crisis have been of stranded workers trying to get back to their villages on foot, walking hundreds of kilometres without food and water. After the government introduced *shramik* trains and interstate borders were (conditionally) opened up, several migrant workers had to push past a torrent of paperwork and procedures to get travel clearance. In order to help workers get back home we:

- **Facilitated travel documentation for 1920 migrant workers** in Surat. This involved helping them submit copies of their IDs and avail COVID clearance certificates.

- **Assisted travel for 4000 workers in Mumbai**; helping them avail medical certification, clearance as well as police verification

We are now ready to support return travel of workers who are keen to come back to their work in cities. In this we are collaborating with a group of volunteers who have raised funds to buy tickets for migrants who wish to return to work.



Ensuring Continuing Health and Nutrition during COVID 19 Lockdown

In south Rajasthan, the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown has severely affected the health and nutrition status of tribal communities. Many migrant men returned to rural Rajasthan from March through May.

Since all public transport was halted, and there was severe restriction on movement, many people were not able to reach their nearest health facilities for treatment. This was further accentuated by the fact that many health facilities, private or public had curtailed all non-COVID health care services. As a result, those suffering from severe health burdens (such as TB and HIV) either succumbed to their illnesses or got worse. With little to no money or employment, most of these families were unable to buy adequate amount of food.

In response, our primary health care clinics (**AMRIT clinics**) in remote villages continued to provide quality services throughout the lockdown period. This ensured that rural populations including the thousands of returnee migrants do not slide into further hardship on account of delayed health care. While ensuring personal protection for the clinic staff, **the clinics have ensured that much needed emergency and clinical care continues to be**

provided to a population of nearly 25000 families. For patients with chronic diseases and conditions (such as TB, HIV, Hypertension and Diabetes), who could not come to our clinics on their own were treated and medicated at their homes. Several TB patients in particular who had thus far sought treatment from other places, started reaching out to us.

Specifically, during the March – July period:

- AMRIT clinics provided **direct services to nearly 10000 patients.** This included treatment and regular follow up of 100 tuberculosis affected patients.
- A network of 13 *Phulwaris* (day care centres for children), continue to provide one **hot cooked meal a day at doorstep to children** of nearly 250 impoverished families. In view of prevailing food scarcity, we expanded the reach to all children in the villages (about 500) as well. In addition, we are providing ready-to-eat food to an additional 1000 children below 5 years of age.
- At the PHC that we run in partnership with the Government, over 1500 migrant returnees were screened for COVID19 symptoms and advised home isolation or treatment.
- Misinformation about COVID 19 has led to irrational behaviour and anxieties in rural communities. There is also serious stigmatization of migrants who returned home. Through our volunteers and health workers we have attempted to reach correct and scientific information to communities' help reduce rumours and stigma associated with the disease.



Building Long Term Assets and Livelihoods through Relief in Rural Rajasthan

While food and ration distribution were integral part of our relief intervention, we simultaneously found more sustainable and viable ways of reviving local livelihoods, such that communities become more self-reliant. **We worked closely with migrant returnees and their communities to identify long standing problems in their villages and we offered them with material and wage support to address these gaps.** Everywhere this was undertaken, large number of migrant returnees contributed their labour and came together work on complete local projects.

One of the highest impacts and innovative use of **our relief funds helped renew and recharge over 30 dry community wells that are now providing drinking water to over 600 thirsty families.** The well deepening and recharge work was mainly led by returnee migrants who joined hands during a period of unemployment and lockdown to bring precious water to their homes and fields. A small amount of relief assistance witnessed several multiple of people's own contribution through their labour. [Here](#) is a short film we have made to capture these efforts and their impact.



Getting Back to Work – with just a little help!

Many migrants are keen to not return to cities in a hurry and are in fact looking for opportunities closer home. However, they require reskilling and also need assistance in finding new employment opportunities in or around their villages

Just as the restrictions began to ease a bit our STEP Academy started to organise On Job Training (OJTs) for youth on rural construction sites especially targeting such youth who were back at home from cities on account of the lockdown. Between March till date we have **enrolled 539 youth in OJTs in skills** such as house wiring, marble and tile polishing and plumbing. Of this overall number nearly 350 youth are migrant returnees who are anxious to join skilled work at home thereby avoiding the need to migrate to Gujarat. Again from this group of 350 migrant youth who've been trained there is a sub-set of 60 youth who have been skilled to start their own enterprises in motor winding, cell phone repair, electric equipment repair etc.

The STEP Academy has also been actively sourcing local jobs for those long-distance migrants who are looking for work while their usual destinations continue to remain shut down. While several opportunities have been explored **one rather successful instance has been the placement of a group of 32 returnee migrants** – all construction workers – on a long-term institutional construction site in Udaipur. These are all migrants to Bangalore and have now found reasonably paid work for at least a year ahead.

As soon as STEP Academy's residential programmes open up, **we will begin enrolling migrant youth to help them acquire skills more intensively to enter new markets closer home.**

Financial Support for Restarting Small Businesses and Livelihoods

We extended urgent financial support to over 40 entrepreneurs (31 women and 11 men), all of whom run small provision stores in villages and were facing stock outs or inability to procure additional inventory because of problems of liquidity and transportation. With money now to transport stock to their shops, these entrepreneurs were able to restart their businesses, avoiding expensive loans from private money lenders. The assistance to these entrepreneurs was conditional on fair pricing to their customers who were facing extreme hardship in procuring basic needs during the lockdown.

Over the last many years, **we have built a cadre of paralegal volunteers from within the communities.** These volunteers have, played a crucial role in our legal aid interventions; assisting several people in availing all of our services and support: be it in wage dispute resolution, legal aid, or in facilitating access to entitlements. Since these volunteers are from within the community, they have a much stronger and extensive outreach than our field staff. Given their importance in our work and that the lockdown period has been a setback in their livelihoods, **we extended financial assistance to 22 long serving paralegal volunteers, to help them renew their earnings.** This assistance has been used by them to procure equipment, stock, cattle, seeds, and infrastructure improvement for stabilizing their affected enterprises.

Cash and debt relief to protect credit histories of migrants and daily wagers

Aajeevika Bureau and Shram Sarathi have collaborated in the implementation of an innovative initiative named '*Sambal*'. This is in essence a dignified form of support to build the economic resilience of migrant households. The two main objectives under the interventions are to provide income replacement and to improve economic resilience of highly impoverished households. Sambal included the following measures.

- **Unconditional cash transfers of Rs. 1500** were made to each migrant household

- **Cash coupons worth 1500 rupees** were given to each migrant household for them to use to repay a Shram Sarathi loan. This helped each family have Rs.3000 for their expenses.
- Further, 250 ultra-poor or vulnerable families within this cohort will receive an additional cash transfers of 1500 rupees each for two additional months.

A total of **6577 migrant families have been identified** to receive support under the *Sambal* initiative, which is well underway, with the aim to conclude by mid-August.

Sambal has been designed based on our intensive inquiries and interactions with migrants through the lockdown period. In a survey we conducted, they were asked how their households managed their finances during the lockdown.

An overwhelming **85.4%, admitted to experiencing serious stress attributed to non-availability of work and large unpaid debt**. This enquiry reinforced our conviction to provide a one-time cash relief to bail out such households. Accordingly, we extended, an average cash relief of Rs.1500 per household together with a Rs.1500 worth loan repayment voucher. The cash relief has helped in bringing immediate support for consumption expenses while the loan repayment voucher is helping the households to retire their debt instalments which in turn will help them protect their credit histories with lending institutions.

Simplifying cash withdrawals during the lockdown

After the lockdown, thousands of families in the region received various forms of cash transfers from the state government under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana (PMGKY). Once the government's cash transfers were credited, banks were flooded with people waiting to withdraw. In many instances, in the absence of public transport, people (mostly women) walked lengthy miles to reach a bank branch, queuing up for hours in the scorching sun to make their withdrawals.

In order to minimize crowding at banks and also to prevent families from walking long distances, **we deployed the network of banking agents appointed by Shram Sarathi who offer doorstep financial services at the doorstep**. We also partnered with local banking correspondents and connected them to remote hamlets where banking services were limited. These agents assisted families with cash withdrawals closer to their homes. Between April and July 2020, we **helped families withdraw over Rs 1.55 crore** (Rs 2500 per withdrawal on an average) that they received in their bank accounts the form of government cash relief or due NREGA wages.

Linkages to NFS and NREGA

Linkage with National Food Security Act: The National Food Security Act, is arguably the most important legislations in India for addressing hunger and poverty. The Act legally entitles nearly 75% of the rural population and 50% of the urban population to receive subsidized food grains under the Public Distribution System (PDS). About two thirds of the country's population, therefore, is covered under the Act to receive highly subsidised food grains. We **assisted 130 migrant families, who were previously excluded, to be linked with the National Food Security (NFS) Scheme** therefore making them eligible for subsidized food grain.

Ensuring Employment through NREGA: The National Rural Employment Guarantee is the strongest wage alternative for rural households at a time when travelling anywhere else for work is extremely difficult. As soon as NREGA re-opened after the lockdown we began to facilitate linkages of workers to employment programme – **we helped nearly 4400 rural individuals find work under the employment scheme**. This has involved helping them with applications and following up with panchayats through leaders of women's groups and collectives to ensure that work begins in time. Our teams have also carried out regular visits to as many as 30 NREGA sites to constantly pressurize and advocate for higher wages and the provision of facilities at the work site.

Addressing Domestic Violence

With the increase of returnee men in villages cases of violence against women have gone up considerably. Our teams at the AMRIT clinics began to report several cases of women suffering injuries only to find that these injuries were arising at home. Through our local women's solidarity groups, **we responded to 30 cases of domestic violence against women and were able to suitably resolve 20 cases**. We have also mobilised and trained our community leaders and volunteers to play their part in preventing these incidents from occurring. In nearly 15 cases, the leaders of the village and women solidarity groups have intervened by extending their support.

Communication and Campaigns

While relief occupied much of our time between March and July, the imperative always remained to create public consciousness and to contribute to favourable policy for migrants. Here is what we did during the lockdown:

Unlocking the Urban: On the 1st of May we launched our report **Unlocking the Urban: Reimagining Migrant Lives in Cities Post-COVID 19** on video followed by a panel discussion on the report's theme. The report sets out an agenda for urban governance to ensure that migrants workers have a more dignified and stable experience while at work in cities.

Mere Sheher Mein: We have launched a 3-part series on our YouTube channel titled **Mere Sheher Mein**. These were conversations with celebrities, artists, academics, activists and public figures on the pandemic, the migrant crisis, and the need for our cities to be more inclusive.

Humari Maang Humare Adhikar (Our demand, our rights): Similar to Abhi Nahin to Kabhi Nahin in rural Rajasthan, we have facilitated another campaign amongst power loom workers in Surat; a majority of whom are from the Ganjam district in Odisha. Over 12,000 power loom workers have come forward to endorse this campaign.

Abhi Nahin To Kabhi Nahin (If not now then never): Starting June, we facilitated a community campaign called Abhi Nahin to Kabhi Nahin calling upon workers to demand minimum wages, 8 hour work day and written contracts from their employers as a point of negotiation before they start to return to work. Workers from construction, textile manufacturing and hotel/ restaurant and food service industry in Gujarat, have rallied around in large numbers behind this campaign. **More than 20,000 workers endorsed the campaign.**

For both of these campaigns we have partnered with Delhi based social enterprise and IVR service provider **Gram Vaani** to disseminate the campaign agenda via voice messages. We have been actively promoting the campaign on social media as well.

Why no Exit: In May, we anchored an important campaign around an appeal to the PMO, the Minister of Defence and the National Disaster Management Authority, demanding that India's Central Forces and the facilities be deployed for safely transportation of migrant workers back home. **The petition was endorsed by over 4500 signatories, including several eminent personalities.** The petition received excellent **coverage** across several reputed media platforms.

Moving Forward

In the post Covid world, whenever it may commence, the lockdowns in India will be remembered for the horror they brought to the country's poor. While the lockdowns lasted a few months, their impact on India's migrants is likely to last a whole lot longer. As the entire predicament of the migrant worker gradually withers away from public discourse, we will continue to find ways to rebuild migrant lives.

We remain deeply grateful to all those who have come forward to support us through funds, solidarity and their active participation.

For Further Information please Contact Anhad Imaan : +91 9818818284 or log on to our [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) pages