

COVID-19 Response Newsletter



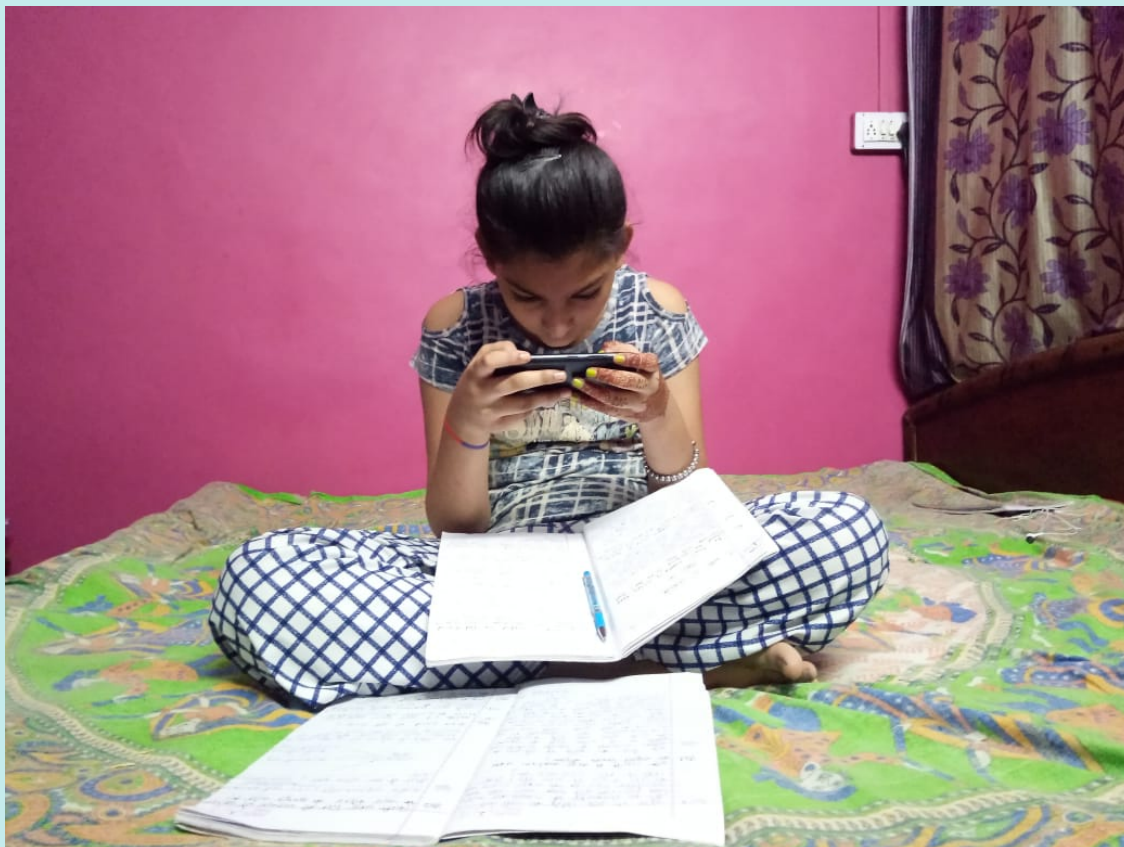
From the Executive Director's Desk

Nearly half a year after the COVID-19 pandemic threw life out of gear in India, it also held a mirror to society and showed its real picture. It is not a pleasant picture as it shows the vulnerability of our poor, their difficulty in meeting the most basic of their necessities even in the best of times, and the minimal and detached support of public systems that were created with them in mind. It is a good question to ask if people are being wilfully excluded, for whom were schemes like the Public Distribution System created for. While we still support the most vulnerable people of Indian cities in meeting their fundamental needs, we are also advocating with the government and other constituencies for the entitlements that were considered most crucial for them when the migrant crisis cast its shadow over India.

Our newsletter carries the voices of people – ordinary people – who were and remain on the edge of programs. If the new and old schemes start having widespread benefit, they should be the first to know. The newsletter presents their concerns – lack of food even now in their homes, the much-reduced livelihood opportunities, education of their children, among others. And all this along with the fear of the pandemic and the impact of changing seasons. We will bring their voices to you from a different part of the country very soon.

Akhila Sivadas

Education



Online education is just not working, say parents

New Delhi, Jaipur, Ajmer, Jodhpur: Children's education remains a big casualty of the pandemic, more so for poor communities. Families across the cities where CFAR works with poor and marginalised sections of society said that education was "just not happening" and that children and parents were both "struggling" without making headway.

Priya from Khichripur in East Delhi said that roughly around 70 per cent of children were students of government schools while the rest went to private schools. The problems faced by the people include charging of full fee by schools and, importantly, the switch to technology-based education.

"Private schools are charging full fee. People do not have jobs or adequate funds to pay," she said. At the same time, they do not have gadgets such as smartphones or tablets and

computers. “They are not able to support their children technically,” she added. This is echoed by Kaushalya from Mata ka Kund, Jodhpur. “There is next to no education. Families are too poor to afford gadget-based education,” she said. Community members from cities including Delhi and Jaipur added that many of the children’s parents were illiterate and that limited their understanding of technology. Parents of other school-going children in Delhi, Jaipur, Jodhpur and Ajmer responded similarly, citing lack of gadget ownership and internet connection to be a major reason, along with technical incapability of parents, to be the key reasons why online education was not working effectively. Many families reported having only one available smartphone, mostly owned by the children’s father, who had to be away from home all day. “The classes are held online, and in real time, so if the phone is not available in the morning, the child cannot study or even catch up in the evening when the father returns,” said Chanda from Ajmer.

In Delhi, schools have been trying to get parents to learn about technology so as to support their children, but that does not work for many families as parents are finding it difficult to pick up new skills. “We have very basic skills in using gadgets,” said Priya. The other difficulty is getting children to concentrate when they have a gadget in hand. Vijay Kanwar from Transport Nagar, Jaipur, says that children were easily distracted if they had a smartphone, and chose to play games or use applications instead of paying attention to the teacher. “Online classes do not work as well as on-site classes. It is impossible to monitor children all the time,” she said.

Another problem is getting assignment sheets printed. “School require homework and assignments to be done on paper, and they send electronic versions of documents which parents are required to print. In many cases, these sheets are then delivered to school after completion by students. Children from poorer families, living in slums and poor localities, do not have easy access to printing and internet facilities. The cost of printing is a deterrent too,” she said.

Livelihoods



‘Small businesses have collapsed’

New Delhi, Jaipur, Jodhpur, Ajmer: Traffic congestion in cities may have returned, but not jobs – not the jobs of domestic workers, drivers, casual workers, construction workers and all those whose terms of employment are precarious. Even when some jobs are available, the terms have changed. CFAR has been monitoring the situation on the ground and supporting families who are still in the shadow of the pandemic's impact. A number of people CFAR has been working across the cities North India reported living on very low income or borrowed money.

Vijay, one of CFAR's community management committee members in Jaipur's Amagarh Colony, Transport Nagar, says while some of the professions have partly resumed, some jobs such as those of a barber or a halwai (sweets-maker) have no demand at all. "The barbers and halwais in our area and all other area are at home, without work. They are not required anymore because the city's way of life has been interrupted – the halwais were always serving puris and mithai (sweets), while there would always be customers at barbers' shops. But now the fear of COVID-19 has made everyone afraid of eating out or visiting a barber," she said.

Jashoda from Delhi's Kalyanpuri says that availability of work has been hit in a big way, and men as well as women are at home. She says the women residents of her area worked mostly as domestic workers, who are no longer in demand. "People are not calling them in to work. Some are calling them two or three times in a week, and while piled up work waits for them, they are not being paid in full," she said.

Even the previous work arrangements have been revised to pay workers less. For instance, Priya used to get Rs 80 for assembling and packaging 7.5 kilograms of toys before the pandemic. Now, the wages have been reduced to Rs 60. So, how many kilos does she manage to assemble? "The family works all day together and manages to do one lot of 7.5 kilos," she says.

Rakesh, a car mechanic from Jaipur, said that 90 per cent of small businesses have been destroyed. "By small businesses, I mean very small trades such as people selling vegetables on a cart, running a small neighbourhood grocery store or selling small items which earned them a little money. Such people have exhausted their resources and don't have the money to ply small trades," he said. Rakesh, too, is not much in demand even though he is a skilled professional. "There is almost no work," he said. A CFAR volunteer said her husband had a taxi which had been used only twice in the past few months since the lockdown. "My husband took the car to Bihar to bring workers for construction work. A contractor here hired him for the job," she said. But weren't labour available in Rajasthan? "It was cheaper for the contractor to get workers from Bihar," she said. After the two trips, he has been at home. "We are living on our meagre savings and have also had to borrow," she added.

Even in the absence or depletion of incomes, the recurring expenses continue unabated. Food and groceries, children's education and rents are part of the regular expenses families

cannot avoid. Landlords have usually not waived rents in most cities. “Some of these landlords belong to the community. They may have agreed to grant tenants more time to pay, but they have not waived the rents,” said Priya. Even among the poor, the poorest have been the most badly affected. Harish, who sells fruit in Jodhpur, sells scrap and owns a three-wheeler, said his work was part of essential services, and he has managed to “earn something” through the pandemic. “But I know so many people who have earned nothing for the past few months. Even now, their work opportunities are limited and infrequent. It is a very difficult time,” he said.

Entitlements



New ration cards awaited, e-coupons are few and far between

New Delhi, Ajmer, Jodhpur: With the lockdown and following the pandemic, an immediate fallout was the loss of jobs for a large majority of unskilled and self-employed persons, forcing them to depend on ration provided by the government and community-based organisations. With the lifting of the lockdown, while government support has been withdrawn, people have continued to deal with loss of income. “They still need a lot of support so that they have enough to eat,” said Chanda from Ajmer’s Ganj area.

She said most of the people in the area have ration cards, but only half of them have ‘active’ ration cards. “These ration cards were made in 2013, but while half of them were activated, the other half were not,” she said. Ration was distributed by the government only once, in June, she said.

In Delhi’s Khichripur area, community workers said they had received ration from the government through e-coupons twice. “The first time we could use the e-coupons, as these were honoured by shopkeepers, but not the second time,” said Priya. The reason for this, she said, is that the first lot of e-coupons, which arrived on phones and were redeemed at specific shops, were fine but not the second lot. “The second e-coupons do not carry the name of the shop where they are to be redeemed. So, people have gone from one shop to another and have been told by shopkeepers that these will not work at their shop,” she said. The other issue is of families not getting ration cards despite efforts. Kaushalya, a

community worker from Jodhpur, said there were several families in her area who were without ration cards. “There was a lot of talk once that everyone will get ration cards, and we also interacted with the concerned government officer, but it has been a few months and they still do not have ration cards,” she said.

It seems following the migrant crisis, there was an expectation from local government officers to enrol poor people into entitlement programs such as the public distribution system, under which ration cards are provided. However, the urgency seems to have abated.

Consider the case of Jashoda, a resident of Khichripur in East Delhi. She applied for a ration card in 2015. Five years and several applications later, she still does not have it. “I am a poor woman who took up low-paid jobs which are no longer available. I do not have money to meet my daily requirements,” she said.

A number of people from different cities told this writer that while food availability was an issue with many families, the little support they received from the government had stopped. “Such people are everywhere. One has to just look around,” says Priya.

WASH



Rain enters homes, brings foul-smelling water to Jaipur slums

Jaipur: “We are scared of rain,” says Manju, a resident of Jaipur’s Baba Ramdev Nagar, a slum settlement. That may appear to be an improbable statement from a resident of India’s water-scarce desert state, Rajasthan, but she means it. Every time it rains, drains overflow, poorly built houses get torn apart and taps supply dirty water and make people sick and miserable. “People cry when dirty water enters their homes. This water has faecal waste and dirt from the streets. If it rains a lot, water comes gushing in waves, and all our belongings like clothes and mattresses get soaked. People break down and cry in despair when that happens,” she says.

CFAR recently conducted a survey on the status of water, sanitation and hygiene in the slums of Jaipur. The findings will be released later this year. While various areas have their own problems, there are a number of common issues residents have to deal with. Being slums with congested houses, these areas are largely unplanned. “There are a lot of kuchcha houses. Even the brick houses are poorly built,” says Vijay, another resident of the slums.

A video was shared with CFAR which shows a house that collapsed due to persistent rainfall. The house-owner, Sanjay, says, “My house has been washed away. All my belongings are gone. We do not have a single morsel to eat. We do not have a roof over our heads. What do we do? We need urgent help.”

Other visuals shared by residents show waist-high water on streets, water inside houses and household articles lying submerged in water. “This is common. People are miserable when it rains,” said Manju.

Rain also results in poor quality of water in areas. Residents reported water shortage in summer, but a severe decline in water quality in monsoon. Manju said that even tap water often smells of human faces. “Yesterday itself, people found the water looking and smelling dirty,” she says. Her friend Sanjana is currently suffering from diarrhoea and vomiting due to a water-borne illness. “There are scores of people who are sick – they have diarrhoea, fever, cold and cough, skin eruptions and eye infections,” she said. Residents are afraid of reporting their symptoms such as fever so that they are not suspected of having contracted COVID-19. “They go to local dispensaries, but sometimes hide their illnesses,” said Rajesh, resident of a slum settlement near Transport Nagar.

“It has been raining in Jaipur, and with every shower, we get a lot of water coming down the hill and collecting in a ditch right in the middle of the locality,” said Rajesh. Another resident added that water-logging had made it very difficult for residents to move around in the area. Garbage collection – which reportedly does not happen efficiently in usual times – becomes worse in monsoon months.

An engineer with the Public Health Engineering Department, requesting anonymity, said that the department was using water pumps in areas in the city which were prone to water-logging. “Water supply has not been affected in my area – Vidyadhar Nagar,” he said. A senior government official said that slums being unplanned, even unauthorised, had poorly constructed houses and inadequate civic facilities.

An officer from the Jaipur Municipal Corporation said that low-lying areas were prone to water-logging. Baba Ramdev Nagar, he said, had a few such areas. “There is a flood control room which has been set up to respond to complaints related to flooding,” he said.

CFAR has been working with communities to ensure they reach out to government agencies who are responsible for working in their areas.

Women unable to take up work due to commuting problem



New Delhi: Every day as she leaves her home, Seema, a resident of South Delhi's Badarpur area, makes a lonely journey to her work place. She leaves her home, goes to the bus stop, and waits for the bus. It may be a long wait, but she comes prepared for it. "During peak hours, I may end up waiting for a long, long time, maybe even more than an hour," she says.

When the wait stretches even longer, she tries to hire an auto-rickshaw, which cost around Rs 125 one way, overcharging included. "That means I pay Rs 250 for both ways just for commuting. I have to be earning way above this in order to afford the commuting cost," she says.

When the lockdown was lifted and work was permitted, men and women stepped out to work. However, with jobs becoming scarcer, it was a challenge for women (and men) to find employment. Many of them had to go further to seek work. With the current social distancing norms in public buses run by the Delhi Transport Corporation, the maximum permitted capacity of a bus is 20 persons, and there are no reservations for women. Initially, they would land up at the bus stop, stand for hours without finding a place in the bus. "Either the buses are full, or men ensure that they get to board the bus. Women struggle and try but often get left behind," she says.

Bhawna, a resident of South Delhi, says she is never able to find a seat in a bus and takes shared auto-rickshaws. "I get Rs 12,000 in hand, and spend Rs 3,000 on commuting. Sometimes, when I don't find any transport, I don't go to work," she said.

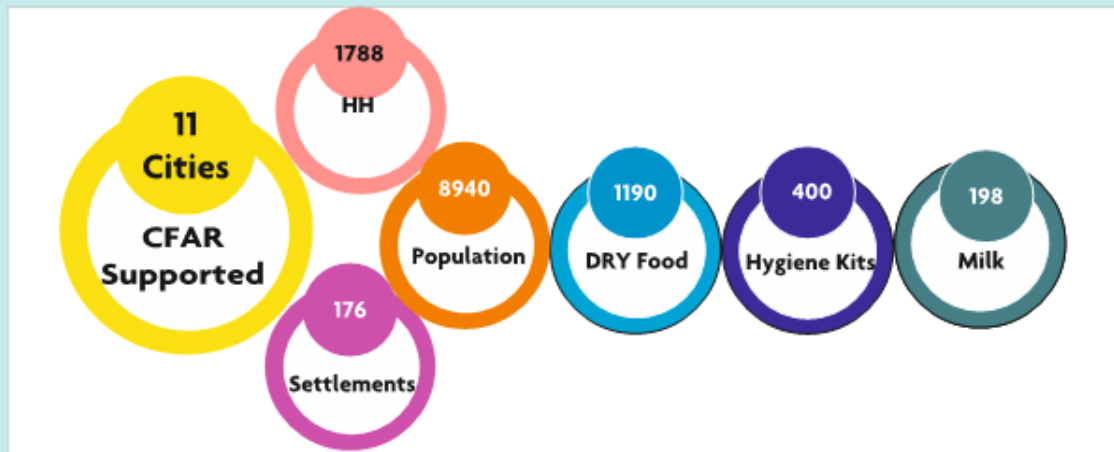
Many women are no longer working as they cannot get on a bus, or afford to pay for auto-rickshaws which cost much more. Saroj, a resident of Gautampuri, used to work as a domestic worker at Defence Colony. "I have tried many times to take a bus, but the buses are always full. I earn Rs 7,000 a month, so cannot afford auto-rickshaws. So, I am at home now," she said.

Seema said there were more women earlier at the bus stop, waiting to go to work, but the

number has dropped. “They are at home now,” she says.

Responding to this issue, a senior official of the Delhi government (not in charge of city buses) said while social distancing was a necessary measure to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic, if suggestions were made to the government it could consider reserving seats for women.

Relief Update- July -August 2020



Cities - 8	June 1-30	July 1-15	July 16-August 20	TOTAL
Dry food	11,457	1,715	12,581	25,753
Cooked food	8,360		11,824	20,184
Antodaya Ration	30,242	18,522	1,462	50,226
Grocery Kit	3,582	1,337	9,323	14,242
ART /Medicine	232	27	62	321
Nutrition Supplement	3,080	3,044	33,900	40,024
Financial assistance	250	102	50	402
Hygiene Kit	4,262		4,670	8,932
Ration Card			75	75
Settlement	242	171	219	632
HHs	61,465	24,747	74,667	1,60,879
Population	3,07,325	1,23,735	3,73,335	8,04,395

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