

Lessons for social protection from COVID-19 lockdowns

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Abstract

In this panel we seek to use COVID-19 and its attendant lockdowns in India as a crucial moment of flux to assess social protection. Policy and scholarship both recognise that social protection plays an important role in alleviating poverty, improving standards of living, mitigating risks and shocks, and reducing episodes of financial adversities (Conway & Norton, 2002). We understand social protection as 'all public and private initiatives that provide income or consumption transfers to the poor, protect the vulnerable against livelihood risks and enhance the social status and rights of the marginalized; with the overall objective of reducing the economic and social vulnerability of poor, vulnerable and marginalized groups' (Devereux & Sabates-Wheeler, 2004). Given our focus on relief measures, we are particularly interested in the protective aspect of social protection. We ask three inter-related questions: First, what do the immediate relief measures put into place to cope with the impact of COVID-19 and the lockdowns tell us about the current state of social protection systems? Second, how did these measures effectively target and deliver relief in complex and constrained situations such as the lockdowns? Third, going forward, what lessons does this set of immediate relief measures offer not just for medium-term recovery but for designing, building and improving social protection systems?

Informal workers imply a challenge to the entitlement framework since, by definition, many informal work arrangements are characterised precisely by the lack of access to social security benefits (NCEUS, 2009). Yet it also presents a particular set of delivery challenges. The conditions of informal employment do not just create and shape the nature of need, but they also confound processes of delivery. Entitlements struggle to reach informal workers precisely because the nature of their work makes them hard to reach if: (a) they are mobile across regions; (b) beyond regulatory frameworks; (c) outside accessible or appropriately scaled databases; (d) in workplaces and residences that are hard to reach such as landfills, streets, construction sites and private homes; and (e) beyond the reach of usual delivery channels such as employers, fair price shops, Anganwadis or through direct bank transfers. Using an archive of relief measures announced during the COVID-19 pandemic, we analyse the effectiveness of design and delivery of the imagination and practices around state-sponsored social protection to identify their limitations and offer insights on possible ways to overcome them.

We chose to focus on three kinds of relief that are closely related to social protection: food, cash transfer and labour protections. The first is thus about ensuring provisioning of commodities directly; the second is a direct financial transfer; and third, regulatory and protective measures. Across them, we employ three key analytical frames. The first is identification, looking closely at the eligibility criteria enforced by the state to be part of a relief scheme, verification processes, as well as the use of databases to direct relief. The second is defining entitlements, where we assess what was given by the state as relief and consider the factors that led to this determination. The third is delivery mechanisms looking at the modes, processes, and actors responsible for

ensuring that the promised entitlement actually reached the right person within an appropriate time frame. These three elements—identification, definition of the entitlement, and design of the delivery are key components of the actually existing practice of any social protection system. Relief measures implemented by the state during the COVID-19 lockdown are a rich archive against which to assess each. These measures both continued, used and expanded existing systems of design and delivery but also innovated with ‘temporary’ measures that created new categories of recipients, new forms of entitlements and new mechanisms of delivery. Such analysis is particularly needed since the gaps in India’s state-sponsored social protection systems are well known. Yet, often, assessment of those gaps focuses on missing entitlements and not equally on the challenges in delivering existing entitlements effectively. We believe such analysis to be crucial to link poverty more precisely with vulnerability in thinking about and implementing social protection.

Following the framing of the first half of the panel, the second part looks at the relief measures provided by non-state actors (NSAs) during the COVID-19 lockdowns and draws lessons that can be learnt for social protection policies from their work. In 2020, NSAs were widely applauded for their role in providing relief during the lockdowns, particularly in reaching migrants. To cite just one example, in hearings on relief to large-scale reverse migration by migrant workers who walked back to their villages, the Supreme Court observed that NSAs deserve ‘all appreciation’ for their efforts in relief. Beyond appreciation, we argue that the work of NSAs also forms a critical archive to learn about relief—its identification, form, and delivery—and to draw broader lessons about social protection systems in a post-COVID world. It also sheds light on some of the gaps left by the state actors in relief work that NSAs stepped in to fill.

The presentation will take the attendees through the processes deployed by the NSAs, first to identify beneficiaries, which was done through multiple channels such as existing databases of union members, to rapid survey of potential beneficiaries. Other criteria were spatial, social, occupational and negative categories. Second was what forms entitlements took, their customisation, layering and modification. The third was the design of delivery of these entitlements and especially how NSAs worked under state sanctioned lockdowns.

To assess relief by NSAs, we assessed the work of 42 actors that covered individuals, individuals in support with organisations, non-profit organisations, citizen collectives, labour unions, volunteer organisations, social impact organisations, housing rights advocacy groups and citizen technology platforms. The archive does so across multiple geographies in India, covering organisations in six states with a focus on urban relief efforts. All the NSAs assessed were active in providing relief between 16 March 2020 and 16 June 2020, covering all four lockdowns in the first wave of COVID-19 in 2020. We conclude with implications and lessons that this relief work offers for social protection systems before, during or post crisis.