

Covid-19 & its impact on social life.....the new normals.....

In the early hours of 7th of March 2020 the scene of screening health desk and health personnel in protection suits and masked passengers at Delhi airport while returning from the UK was an interesting start of my day. By the time I crossed the screening desk, I had started getting goose bumps of Covid-19 and a sense of suspicion and dilemma among other passengers. I reached home, not much to speak with family and self- isolated myself in a room and started to maintain a safe social distance of at least 1.5 metre across the next two weeks. This was something unusual for me and for my family. Days were progressing and being a humanitarian professional, the work pressure was mounting to respond to the Covid-19 crisis for the people who are worst affected by its impact.

Then came the 'pilot' lockdown in Delhi on 22nd of April "Janata Curfew" for 24 hours which was the trigger for a longer lockdown from 24th of April for another 3 weeks but it extended 4 times until end of May. Honestly, I am used to "lockdown" due to the nature of my job which requires me to travel to the countries with complex emergencies and there "lockdown" is a norm. But here at home, this lockdown had a different dimension which is to stay with kids and wife for 24x7 and to make them feel comfortable. My two boys had started complaining and uttering word "bored" due to the forced holidays and I had to invent interesting opportunities to keep them engaged and happy. I took out all my collections of currencies and coins asked them to wash, clean, disinfect and arrange them in a coin album. With this, I could engage them for 5 days and in the meantime I was exploring for some innovative tasks for my boys. My wife was continuing her panic buying and I kept assuring her that we have stocks of essentials for at least 4-6 weeks, market would function for the essentials but it didn't sound very sweet to her ears.

Impact of Covid-19

Globally, the deaths due to covid-19 had crossed 400,000 and the infected were about 7.5 million resulting in a complete meltdown of global economy leaving the most vulnerable and marginalised to be the worst affected and the informal sector. I could see the domestic migrants from other states in Delhi and metro cities in India started to walk and cycle for thousands of kilometres with several deaths en-route to their native places due to the lack of access to basic needs in the metro cities. There has been huge impact on the large, medium and small entrepreneurs thereby impacting the Gross Development Product negatively



Source: Indian Express

For example in India, we do not have data on migrant workers. This is unacceptable in the context of digital advancement in the country.

How this crisis can be addressed to meet the basic needs

Cash transfers are one of the most effective ways to support people during a crisis. In addition to replacing lost income from the health and economic impacts of COVID-19, they can reduce the financial burden of social distancing and enable families to purchase both health and Menstrual Health

Management supplies. I, being a student of cash and voucher programming have had evidence of close to 22 years to see how cash bring smiles in the faces of women and girls. As a thumb rule in the current context, cash transfers without any condition should be the preferred mode of assistance to the most vulnerable population that provides choice and dignity and the greatest flexibility for women to resume economic activities when it is safe for them to do so. Globally, combinations of cash and in-kind, service delivery through awareness-raising community-level activities, savings and lending groups, have been the most promising for lasting impact. When working to build women's economic resilience, men must be involved in the process as agents of change.

Nobel laureate Abhijit Banerjee says “the *Government of India should look at providing cash transfer to the bottom 60 percent of India's population to help revive the economy*” and especially in the *Covid-19 context*. Injecting cash is the priority solution to revive the economy. Cash transfers in humanitarian context have a critical, complementary role to play in the response to COVID19, supporting continuity and safety in the delivery of humanitarian assistance.

Globally, governments are introducing, leveraging and expanding social protection programmes through cash transfers in response to COVID-19. A wider discourse and realizations are currently underway at the global level. There is a need to integrate the humanitarian cash with the social protection programming of the government. Already more than 175 countries have activated/reinforced their social protection measures. Of this, majority of the social transfers are being undertaken through cash. Thus, the scope and importance of cash transfers are now envisioned beyond the response and recovery.

Evidence from the global financial crisis, previous epidemics, conflicts, forced displacement and a range of natural emergencies indicate that cash transfers help to maintain access to healthcare, protect consumption, support protection and recovery of livelihoods, and sustain investments in human capital.

Considering the scenario of lack of availability of non-registered data of the migrants in India, it is an apt situation for the government to expand its social protection programmes “horizontally” by including new beneficiaries. This is something several governments can consider globally.

Why cash instead of materials?

In-kind / material distribution is generally time-taking and a logistical challenge (ex. quotation, tender, arrangements of transportation, warehousing etc). Cash distribution is generally cost efficient (about 25-30 %) than in-kind. If done through mobile transfers, it is about 90% cheaper.

The importance of cash distribution could be understood by the stimulus package that the US government released in light of this crisis. The U.S. government passed a \$2 trillion stimulus package, part of which will provide cash transfers to a significant portion of the population. India similarly announced it would provide \$1.7 trillion rupees (US \$22.5 billion) to support its citizens, with cash transfers to vulnerable families making up a share of the funds.

The New Normals.....are they pragmatic?

The intensity of COVID-19-19 was increasing and to avoid the threat of fomites¹, I stopped entry of any external person including home-helps to my home and no exit of any family member since 20th of March which meant sharing of household chores with my wife. I have been happily doing several

¹ objects or materials which are likely to carry infection, such as clothes, utensils, furniture, currency notes.

roles so far such as of a painter, cloth dryer & folder, bed maker, hair dresser, short daily needs purchaser from the balcony through hanging bag. Work hours were getting intense beyond 10-14 hours day with mounting conference calls on phone and computer. I was also observing the challenges of my office colleagues based in India who were the beginners on “*work from home*” compared to my seven odd years of work from home experience. The colleagues were monitored through their daily “logins” by their managers and some of them were too smart who remained “*logged in*” for more than 12 hours. A funny scenario to observe.

My boys remained confined to the four walls and their patience was tested with freedom at risk. No option for playing outdoors but somehow we discovered 220 yards of our apartment terrace. Everyday different games were experimented which varied from cricket, football, cycling, marbles, kite flying but they started to complain when I was on my conference calls during their play hours—something unavoidable due to the global nature of my job. When the boys were at home, most of the time was consumed by screen time on phones and laptops. My options to keep them engaged was running out when God heard my wish and the school reached us with “*online learning*” courses. This created a new routine for them and thus resulted in early to bed and early the “*new normal*” list goes adding on such as the stigma for someone contracting with COVID-19 has increased by manifold, the assumption of “*all my blood relation are COVID-19 negative and the rest are potentially Covid positive*”; dilemma of going out; some say nothing to worry; the art of living with Corona virus; how are we going to celebrate Ramadan, Eid, Holi and other festivals when we cannot go out or meet friends and relatives. Parents and families keep waiting for each other though you are few hours away by road or flight. But the most painful experience of my life on new normal was a loss of my family member where I could not even share proper condolences, console family or even complete final rituals with dignity. Everything was leading to virtual and to me personally it is not acceptable. It doesn’t end there, even though the restrictions have been relaxed post 1 June but the states have the authority to exercise restrictions and this includes 1-2 weeks of quarantine and when one returns back to the place of origin has to undergo the same quarantine exercise. This is proving to be a huge challenge.

The boys have again started to question “when would we go back to school? Personally I do not have an answer. While on the positive side it was amazing to see the whole community in my colony decided this year not to purchase new clothes for Eid including my family. We tried our best to cover the most vulnerable women and men with cash or purchase food and non-food materials of their choice to cover their basic needs. I am still hopeful that our small support to the affected population will bring a glimpse of smile in the faces of girls, boys, women and men. Indeed we need to learn the art of living with Corona virus with WHO guidelines until each and every individual is covered by a vaccine or the disease just disappears eventually by nature.

This reminds me of famous lines by Robert Frost:

*The woods are lovely, dark and deep
But I have promises to keep.
And miles to go before I sleep
And miles to go before I sleep.*

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