

Citizens' Action Group on Corona, Odisha¹

Civil Society Suggestions and Recommendations

We have been bringing to the attention of the government, several issues and recommendations regarding Return of Migrant Workers; Water & Sanitation at TMCs; Livelihoods of People; Compassionate handling of the returning migrants; and Civil Society Participation in the COVID Response efforts of the State. We are happy to note that some of those issues and recommendations have been addressed in the last week. We consider it our bounden duty to bring things to the notice of the government and to provide support to its efforts wherever it's within our competence and where the government is willing to forge partnerships. This memorandum is solely regarding the crisis being faced by the returning migrants.

Stop Demonization and Stigmatisation of the Returning Migrants:

In the last week, thousands of migrants have returned to Odisha through organised transportation with permission from the government of Odisha. It would have surely been better if the transport had been fully organised by the state government. But that apart, since the return of the migrants, two key crises have evolved.

First, several returnees were handled in a manner that led to the breakdown of law & order and social distancing norms. It is easy to lay the blame on the returnees who are coming back after one and half month of life under extremely difficult circumstances. The people of Odisha have fully supported the restrictions imposed by the Government on the return of people from outside the state. Citizen's Action Group fully supports the actions of the government to prevent unauthorised entry in to the state. At the same time, we emphasise that it is the responsibility of the government (both state as well as centre) to ensure that all those who want to come back in a legal manner are allowed to do so in a transparent and accountable manner. As a responsible formation, we are releasing an appeal to the returning migrants to maintain law and order. But we oppose the almost threatening attitude taken by the government towards them. The returning migrants cannot be treated like criminals being sent to prisons. There is also stigmatisation of the returnees in media, including mainstream media. Such reporting coupled with the fear of COVID-19 is creating a popular sentiment against the returning migrants. The government could do the following to ensure that the returning migrants have a stigma free return and stay in TMCs and a stigma free return to their communities at the end of their quarantine.

¹ The Citizens' Action Group on Corona, Odisha, is a collective of eminent citizens and professionals, civil society advocacy organizations and community & public action groups in the State. We have come together to support the people of Odisha in addressing the challenge posed by COVID-19 pandemic through acquiring a real-time grasp of the situation and developing an understanding of the impact of the crisis on different aspects of people's lives, especially that of the most poor and marginalized people.

Purpose:

- a. To offer help and relief to people affected by the global pandemic, with a focus on the most vulnerable sections of the society
- b. To mediate and facilitate effective implementation of policies and measures aimed at countering the social and economic fallout of COVID 19 fallout
- c. To provide real-time feedback on working of policies and state intervention on the ground.
- d. To identify and outline immediate policy tweaks, legal remedies and other such state action that are necessary to bridge the gaps being reported.
- e. To design a longer term social and economic blueprint for a post-COVID Odisha.
- f. To be a credible voice for people, communities and social groups in highlighting the challenges they face and the deprivation they fight.
- g. To facilitate participation and inclusion of all stakeholders in making of policy decisions and their implementation.

Recommendations

1. Government must ensure that there is no stigmatisation of the returning migrants in the media and work with social media companies (especially Facebook, WhatsApp and TikTok) to ensure that social media posts stigmatising returning migrants are blacklisted.
2. The reception and accommodation of the returning migrants must be handled by sensitive officials who are given proper orientation to
3. TMCs must be made resident friendly. The residents of the TMC must have a healthy, culturally appropriate daily schedule that includes physical and mental activity along with facilities for entertainment, recreational activities and Shramdaan to ensure that the residents remain in good morale. Opportunities for engaging in Socially Useful and Productive Work will help the residents cope with life away from their near and dear ones. A model protocol for the TMCs has been prepared by the Citizen's Action Group and is attached as an annexure to this memorandum.
4. The TMCs must be equipped and run in a manner that women, children and transgenders do not face any abuse.
5. HIV Screening and Testing requires complete confidentiality and proper counselling. The TMCs are unlikely to provide the proper environment for the same. Rather mandatory HIV screening at this stage will further stigmatise the returning migrants. It is understood that PLHIV are likely to be more vulnerable, and those migrants who test positive for COVID-19 need to be tested for HIV as well. However, that can happen once the Covid positive person has been moved out of the TMC.

The Migrants have a right to Return

As citizens of India and natives of Odisha, the migrants wanting to return have a right to return. It is important that the return is managed in a manner that reduces risk to both the returnees as well as the local communities where they want to return. The recent cancellation of trains by other states as well as by Odisha have affected their right to return. We understand that a significant number of returnees have tested positive. This is being used as a pretext for creating hurdles in the return of more migrants. The return of the migrants has not led to an increase in the number of Covid positive people of Odisha. Rather it is reducing further infection of Odia people. It is easy to see that these people were already infected when they had not yet returned to Odisha. We are thankful to the government of Odisha for helping them to come back and get tested. If these people had not come back, it is likely that they would have suffered even more in a place where they would have had less support than what they may expect from the government of their state and their own local communities.

We strongly urge the Government of Odisha for faster and more efficient return of the migrants. All migrants whether tested positive or untested have the right of being taken care by the Government of Odisha. Given the general shortage of testing facilities, all those who volunteer to come back to Odisha but cannot be tested immediately, must be brought back to Odisha. It is visible from the clamour of migrants wanting to return that they consider them to be less safe wherever they are compared to what they are likely to be in their home state.

Recommendations

1. All migrants who have registered to return must be allowed to return in the shortest possible time.
2. Government of Odisha must take legal recourse to ensure that it is able to help all migrants to return irrespective of their testing status.
3. Odia Migrants are Indian citizens. The Government of India has as much (if not greater) responsibility for taking care of them as it has for the migrants from any part of India who are stranded in foreign countries. The Government of Odisha must demand that the Government of India takes full responsibility of such migrant workers who have registered to return to Odisha till such time that the Government of Odisha is not able to receive them back.
4. The migrant workers have been stranded for close to two months on account of the sudden lockdown announced by the Government of India. They have run out of money and cannot be expected to take care of their travel costs. The Government of Odisha must cover the complete cost of return for all migrants willing to travel by government arranged transport.

5. There are reports of many migrants not having been able to register because they do not have Adhaar Card or do not have their Adhaar details with them. Most other states of India do not use Adhaar as a mandatory clause for registration of returning migrants. There is no reason why Odisha should continue to do so. We demand that the mandatory Adhaar clause is removed immediately.
6. There are several migrants who are not able to register on account of not having information. There are reports of hundreds of them walking back to Odisha. The Government of Odisha should ensure that there are mechanisms to ensure that such people are tracked and registered on the way and provided immediate transportation and provided food, medical care and other necessities.

Civil Society Participation

CSOs and volunteers have come out in large numbers to provide hand holding support to Panchayats and the distress communities through innovative programmes, despite lack of a supportive eco-system at various levels of the Government. Civil Society organizations of repute with substantive experience and expertise to deal with the situation have been completely bypassed even in Districts like Ganjam which has become an epicentre of the crisis now.

The recent disturbances in some TMCs point out to the limitations of what a purely administrative approach towards returnees and TMCs can achieve. Large numbers of CSO workers are trained and experienced in sensitive handling of people in distress. Bringing CSOs on board will make available to the government a large body of trained and competent volunteers as well as skilled leaders who can contribute greatly (among others) to:

- Better management of the return of the migrants and running of TMCs
- Preparing communities to address the challenge of receiving back the returning migrants with compassion and efficiency.
- Ensuring people's access to Entitlements designed to help them overcome the crisis created by COVID-19.
- Preparing local, regional and state level plans for addressing the short term, medium term and long term challenges created by the COVID-19 crisis.

Recommendations

1. Formulate a CSO Participation policy for the COVID-19 response with active participation of Citizen's Action Group and other CSO Platforms.
2. Institutionalise weekly dialogue/interface with CSOs at the State, District and Block levels as a feedback space and opportunity for mutual support.

In Solidarity with the efforts of the Government of Odisha

Achyut Das	Imran	Nityananda
Aditya Pattnaik	Jagadananda	Pradeep Brahma
Ajit Panda	Jagannath Raju	Pradeep Mohapatra
Amiya Bhusan Biswal	Jagdish Pradhan	Prasant Nayak
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Gourishyam Panda	Mangaraj Panda	Tara Prasad Dhal
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Annexure 1**An activity plan for Quarantine Centers (Ekaant Nivas)**

- Migrants are the backbone of Odisha's economy and ambassadors of our cultural heritage;
- Stranded in different parts of the country because of CORONA, they are now returning to their native place and being isolated in Quarantine Centers (QC) before actually joining their near and dear ones.
- Active adults sitting idle and workless for long hours and days without any constructive engagement makes life stressful for many after long painful travel.
- The Quarantine Centers has the potential to be developed as a resource center, as learning center and a pleasant and friendly place for inculcating awareness and life-skills;

Issues and Challenges:

- a. As thousands of migrant workers return home in the days to come, the number of centres to accommodate them will have to rise multifold creating new and often unforeseen challenges for their administration and management.
- b. Confining dozens of otherwise active adults sitting for weeks without work will create both physical and psychic problems including stress and depression. We can't even rule out law and order problems.
- c. A positive response would be to keep them creatively engaged for which a day to day activity chart need to be prepared which are both educative and entertaining-Edutainment.
- d. It will be helpful if the skill profile of all inmates of the centre is documented to be used as local resource.
- e. Management of adults by itself is a big challenge particularly in the area of attitude and behavior change;
- f. Since the inmates will finally move out to stay in the community, they can be oriented and used as corona communicators and educators.
- g. For persons suffering from stress and depression counseling services may be needed. Related resources may be available in local colleges/institutions.
- h. The objective should be to convert the challenge into an opportunity by developing it as a Learning and Reflection Centre.

CURRICULUM AND ACTIVITY CHART:

- A thoughtful and creative day to day activity plan with help of local resources would make the stay in Ekaant Ashram more educative, informative, entertaining and tolerable;
- The activities may include subject and areas like:
 - Prayer, Meditation and Yoga
 - Experience sharing by participants
 - Quiz competitions and FAQs on the subject
 - Discussion sessions on Corona, its impact
 - High-risk behavior issues
 - Orientation about welfare schemes including procurement, PDS, Entitlements and right to work and right to food, etc;
 - Brainstorming, counseling and interaction between themselves
 - Entrepreneurship exposure on issues likes agriculture, dairy, poultry, fisheries, etc.
 - Workers' rights, gender issues
 - Democracy and electoral participation, duties and responsibilities of a voter
 - Environment and climate change
 - Storytelling, newspaper reading, songs and music
 - Spiritual talks on social harmony

A MODEL DAY'S ACTIVITY PLAN (DEENACHARYA)

Divide the day into three parts—Forenoon, Afternoon and Evening activity sessions

Forenoon Sessions (07-11 am)

- Morning Prayer
- Welcome by QC Management
- Self-Introduction by Participants (only first day)
- Yoga, Pranayam & Meditation
- Briefing about day's activity
Followed by breakfast
- Fighting Corona-challenge and opportunity
- Discussion on prevention skills & risk management

12.00 to 02.00 pm

- Lunch and rest

Afternoon Sessions (03.30 - 5.30 pm)

- Corona Safety measures-protecting self, family and community
- Familiarization session on welfare schemes and entitlements
- Skill updating
- Leadership and communication games
- Brainstorming on health, hygiene, nutrition and family relationships

Evening Sessions

- Sarvadharm Prayer & Sangeet
- Purana, Bhagvat reciting
- Padyanta, Antakshari, song competition and solo acting
- Day's review and planning for the next day, working committee meeting convened by the Monitor;
- Dinner & rest

Attempt should be made to make the sessions interesting and joyful with lots of brainstorming, questions and answers, ice breakers, teasers, activities and games while maintaining the physical distance. The participants should be encouraged to involve in all the activities. At the end of the day there should be a self-evaluation by the participants initiated by the monitor. Noting the lessons learnt in order to improve the quality and content of the activities on the following day. The activity plan can be changed, modified, contextualized, and improved depending on the local situation and participants profile and needs.

CHANGING THE NAME OF QUARANTINE CENTERS

- Quarantine is a French word which literally means the number 40. Outside the public health domain, the term is not properly understood. Particularly in rural Odisha/India;
- The connotation is often intimidating and mysterious;
- A more familiar name akin to our own culture—like Ekaant Ashram, Sangarodha Kendra, Nirapad Niwas or Corona Subidha Kendra, etc. could be considered.

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