



COVID-19: Impact on Home-Based Workers in South Asia

Charter of Demands

by HomeNet South Asia

March, 2020

The 2019-2020 Coronavirus pandemic has brought the world to a grinding halt. As of late March 2020, the disease has infected citizens from across the world and has resulted in the deaths of many.

South Asia, while not one of the first regions to be hit by the virus, has seen a steady climb in cases. The first case of coronavirus infection was reported as early as January, 2020, by Nepal. Since then, nations across the region have reported cases. Leading international organisations and health experts have recognised that South Asia is particularly vulnerable to the pandemic due to the large swathes of population that live in constricted spaces and the lack of widespread and competent medical facilities. However, it is to be noted, that governments of the region have, by large, been quick to respond to the pandemic and several nations are currently in lockdown in an effort to contain the spread of the disease.

Apart from the health epidemic, nations, from the South Asian region, are also staring at an economic epidemic. Within days of lockdown, industries – big and small – have come to a standstill. In this scenario, it is, again, the most vulnerable that face the most economic uncertainty. Without the backing of social security nets, informal workers are at the risk of slipping into a vicious cycle of poverty without access to income, food supplies, water and sanitation, efficient healthcare and reliable and feasible financial support.

Within the category of informal workers, home-based workers (HBWs) are some of the most vulnerable. Home-based workers are workers who produce good and/ or provide services from in and around their homes. It is estimated that South Asia is home to over 50 million home-based workers, a majority of whom are women. They contribute immensely to national economies and to their household incomes. HBWs are an invisible workforce and rarely feature in government policies and programmes.

In the days after coronavirus emerged as a real threat to global economies and businesses, the 60 home-based worker organisations affiliated to the HomeNet South Asia (HNSA) Network and represent over 800,000 home-based workers, have been assessing the situation and have found:

1. Home-based workers, across countries, have reported that they have received no new work orders and this has resulted in an acute loss of income. Home-based workers are concerned that the situation is only going to get worse from here.
2. Home-based workers are yet to be paid for previous orders. And, due to the lockdown, are unable to demand for and collect their payments from contractors and intermediaries.
3. Home-based workers have no access to raw material or markets and, therefore, have lost their only source of income.
4. Business undertaken by home-based worker-led cooperatives and producer companies has been disrupted. This has led to a shut down in operations. And, if the situation continues, these cooperatives and producer companies may cease to exist.
5. Migrant home-based workers have gone back to rural areas. However, many migrant workers who haven't been able to travel due to the lockdown are unable to pay rent and are unable to procure basic supplies and food.
6. Home-based workers have little access to reliable information on COVID-19, the emergency helplines, and to the process of accessing health services.
7. While social isolation is the only preventive measure towards checking the spread of COVID-19, social isolation is impossible in over-crowded, urban slums where many home-based workers reside.
8. Home-based workers and their families have little access to soap and clean water to wash their hands, let alone other protective gear.
9. With their meagre, daily incomes, home-based workers have not managed to store food grains and other supplies to last them through the lockdown or through the social isolation periods enforced by governments.
10. While paid work is scarce, home-based workers have reported an increased burden in care work.
11. Women who face domestic violence or harassment are unable to access helplines, access shelter homes or seek help from the police since they are largely engaged in the implementation of the lockdown.
12. The only source of empowerment for home-based workers is organising into collectives, however, due to COVID-19 and related lockdowns, home-based workers feel a sense of isolation and helplessness.

However, it is important to note that as the threat of COVID-19 loomed large over South Asia, governments have put in efforts to protect the marginalised and those who face the most uncertainty during this period. The two most-affected countries, at this time, Pakistan and India have announced preliminary economic bailouts, including cash transfers, tax breaks and the procurement of medical equipment. Other countries in the region too are expected to follow suit. Additionally, a SAARC Emergency Fund has been set up and member countries have already contributed \$18.8 million towards fighting COVID-19. These are all the credible first steps in the right direction. However, home-based workers have not yet featured in income support programmes. As a regional network, HNSA demands that South Asian country governments focus on the dismal situation of home-based workers and introduce the following interventions during the pandemic:

Short-Term, Immediate Interventions

1. Income support – including cash transfers and cash handouts (in cases where they do not have formal bank accounts) equal to the monthly minimum wage of the country/state to home-based workers for at least three months and then possibly extended upon review of the situation.
2. Free rations, distributed through a wide network of public distribution shops and also other focal points (considering restricted access), to all home-based workers for at least three months and then possibly extended upon review of the situation.
3. Door-to-door delivery of services, when needed, including rations, soaps, basic medicines and other protective gear.
4. Installation of mobile washbasins with water and soap in all low-income communities.
5. Training and counselling services offered at local clinics, schools and other community spaces to combat the virus.
6. Access to free-of-cost tests and healthcare facilities at public hospitals.
7. Disseminate reliable information on emergency numbers and nearby health points to communities. This can be done through newspapers, television, radio, and also at local healthcare facilities, municipality offices as well as other government agencies.
8. Access to dedicated emergency services in case of domestic violence or other legal emergencies.

Long-Term Sustained Interventions

1. Recognition of home-based workers, through policies and laws, will be key in protecting them during adverse situations like the coronavirus pandemic.
2. Setting up of a Recovery Fund for informal workers including women home-based workers.
3. Promote local economies through no interest loans and tax exemptions that are extended to home-based workers' cooperatives and producer companies.
4. Ensure employers (brands and large corporations) recognise home-based workers as part of their supply chains and that they extend minimum wages and social protection to home-based workers.
5. Improve access to housing, basic services, public health facilities and childcare for home-based workers.