

Reimagining Lockdowns For Urban Informal Settlements During COVID-19

In April, this year, a much-dreaded headline popped up on news feeds across India. Dharavi – Asia’s largest slum – reported its first COVID-19 related death. The narrow lanes of Dharavi – where close to a million live in a 2.1 square kilometre area – have now been barricaded using makeshift materials like criss-crossed sticks tightly wound with twine. This severely restricts the movement of people living in these lanes. And in an urban informal settlement where movement is equal to survival – people who live here have to move for work, to access water, public toilets, and food supplies – a lockdown that does not take into account their needs can spell doom.

A Matter of Survival

Dharavi is a microcosm of urban informal settlements across India. And COVID-19 has merely brought to the fore and magnified the shortcomings of government delivery systems. The survival of low-income communities and the success of preventative measures, in the face of COVID-19, including, lockdowns, will depend on the reimagination of urban, informal settlements and delivery systems.

Fatima Sheikh, a home-based worker and the President of LEARN Mahila Kamgaar Sanghtana, a trade union that works with the informal workers in Maharashtra, says that she does not see the lockdown being successful for long. A resident of Dharavi’s Kasturi Bai Chawl, Sheikh is sure that people will venture out in full force because there is simply no food or money to survive on.

In the days following the announcement of the nation-wide lockdown, Central and State Governments extended relief packages and measures – many of which are meant for low-income groups. But many of these relief efforts lack promise and implementation remains a challenge.

Measures Fall Short

For low-income communities, income generation and access to food supplies are two main reasons why they need to leave their homes. Urban informal settlements are home to many kinds of informal workers. There are construction workers, for whom, the Central Government has announced an income support package. But is it accessible for those it is intended for?

Trade Unions on the ground are quick to point out the Construction Workers Welfare Boards have existed for more than two decades. However, registering construction workers is a laborious task that includes the submission of an attestation by employers that states that the worker has worked continuously for 90 days. This means that many construction workers will simply not be able to access the income support promised to them.

Apart from construction workers, slums are occupied by home-based workers, domestic workers, street vendors and waste-pickers too. The advent of the global economic slowdown – a damaging byproduct of the COVID-19 crisis – was first felt by home-based workers in supply chains. Work, for them, has dried up months ago and pending payments seem out of reach in many cases. Domestic workers too find themselves without work. Many of them have simply been laid off without compensation.

With COVID-19 becoming a reality, street vendors and waste pickers, who have been harassed and vilified by authorities and the public, have been bestowed with new-found importance. They are now seen as essential workers. Yet, governments seem to not realise that they are imparting these services at the cost of their own health and while facing physical danger thanks to the very apparent upsurge in police harassment.

So, depositing a mere INR 500 in Jan Dhan Accounts (many workers do not have these accounts and many others have inactive accounts) is in no way an adequate relief measure. Even if they do receive the INR 500, how are beneficiaries who have been barricaded inside supposed to access this money? Without access to income, Fatima Sheikh's words are likely to ring true sooner rather than later. Workers will be forced to leave their homes, risking the spread of the disease, to keep their families afloat.

Universal cash and food delivery to all

In this scenario, cash handouts are the answer. Each family needs to be given the minimum wage prescribed by the State. These communities can also be engaged in income-generating activities. For example, home-based workers can be given orders to make much-needed protective masks and gowns.

Food security is another grave concern that needs immediate redressal. Governments, across the board, have announced free rations or subsidised food supplies for families, for the next two to three months. This is a welcome move that has the potential to alleviate the threat of starvation that millions face during this crisis.

Currently, rations are being distributed through India's wide network of public distribution shops. But, often, these shops are low on supplies and are unable to provide food grains to the 80 crore Indians that have been assured of this relief measure. Furthermore, many low-income families, especially migrants, do not have the necessary ration cards to procure food supplies. Many of these families are now forced to rely on food donations from humanitarian and religious organisations. Food distribution systems also need to be tweaked further for informal settlements. Families that have been barricaded in need to be supplied with essentials at doorsteps.

Both these measures, cash handouts and a targeted delivery of food supplies will only work if they are universal. It needs to reach out to all families, all categories of workers, residents and non-residents.

Social Distancing A Distant Dream

Lockdowns and social distancing are nearly impossible to implement in informal settlements where inadequate resources are shared by many. Women have to queue up for water, public toilets are accessed by all, and common taps dispense limited water.

A much-needed overhaul of basic infrastructure services should, of course, be a long-term goal but for now, local governments should mobilise to provide an increased number of free-to-use mobile toilets and mobile wash-basins, equipped with clean water and soaps. Drinking water too needs to be provided at doorsteps so that people don't have to venture out.

Houses in crowded settlements also need to be fitted in with simple designs interventions that help families cope with the Indian summer. It is also important to provide round-the-clock electricity and to waive off fees so that homes are comfortable enough for people to stay in.

Innovative community trainings will go a long way in educating those who live in informal settlements in maintaining social distance while using public toilets and other spaces. At these trainings, soaps and basic protective gear should be distributed free of cost. Targeted trainings to, say, street vendors will help them put down markings in front of their stalls or carts so that their customers can maintain distance and will help them protect themselves with masks and gloves. The police too need sensitised to not harass people from informal settlements for simply doing their work or trying to access toilets.

Women at the Forefront

Nirmala Sugnain Bussapnoor or Nirmala *Tai*, as she is known in the community, has immense experience organising workers from Dharavi and is the treasurer of LEARN Mahila Kamgaar Sanghtana. She says that the people of Dharavi know that the lockdown is a necessary measure but the Government too needs to understand their needs. If the Government does not engage with the community, she says, the lockdown will not be successful.

Indeed, during the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, the urban poor have not been supported by governments, employers or billionaire philanthropists but by their fellow community members.

Women community leaders – who are part of trade unions and community-based organisations – have especially played a critical role. In Dharavi, women like Fatima Sheikh and Nirmala *Tai* have taken upon themselves to ensure that families get their share of stipulated rations, that cooked food is delivered to

families without a ration card, and awareness on COVID-19 is built among community members.

For the lockdown to sustain and be successful, governments will need to engage with communities to design, deliver and monitor interventions. And this engagement can be achieved through mobile phone technology and apps like Whatsapp that women community leaders are comfortable using.

India has the potential to show the world that it can protect its most vulnerable in the direst of situations. All it needs to do is ensure inclusivity and use a bit of imagination.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Photo Credit: Fatima Sheikh, President, LMKS, Mumbai.