The online dialogues were organised as part of a joint effort by a committed and concerned civil society, along with the PRIA International Academy (PIA), to apprehend the ignored demands of reverse migrant workers and possible actions to ease their distress. It was organised on 26th May and 03rd June 2020 and the national-level dialogue had around 60 participants. The dialogue comprised of a panel consisting of civil society organisations (CSOs), academicians and policy makers to from various parts of the country.

**KEY RECOMMENDATIONS**

- District Planning Committees (DPCs) should do long-term rural economic planning to rebuild the rural equilibrium.
- Link between political parties, policymakers, and CSOs on ground for collecting more realistic data.
- Nationwide social security measures for every migrant worker.
- Incorporation of existing rural development schemes and policies for better housing facility, livelihood, working conditions, etc.
- Re-collate all available recommendations in the research domain for the development of migrant workers.
- Long-term investment for ensuring dignified living conditions in rural area.
- A direct relationship between migrant workers and their employers.
- Comprehensive legislation on minimum conditions of work based on Arjun Sen Gupta commission report.
- Comprehensive changes in the Social Security Code and OSH Code as it doesn’t meet the post pandemic requirements of the migrants.
- MGNREGA finance should be enhanced to 4000 crores more and each worker should be allowed to work at least 150 days a year, the condition of 100 days of work should be removed.
- Rural and industrial regeneration.
- The state and central government should focus on dignity, rights and equality among all types of workers.
- Government support for migrant workers in registering with the welfare registration board.
- Skill upgradation of migrant workers.
- Ensuring hygienic and safety of migrant workers.

The overall objective of the dialogue was to generate policy recommendations based on ground realities and practicalities in implementing the economic stimulus and to identify areas which have remained unattended in the stimulus package or other announcements made, so far. The online dialogue discussed the following questions;

1. Are the provisions, announced under stimulus package for migrants, working on the ground? What has been the experience, so far?
2. What lessons can be drawn from the current situation for robust data management of migrant workers? How can it be included in the policy and planning?
3. How can service provisions under the programmes related to maternal and child health, primary health care, education and social security be aligned to the needs of migrant population?
4. What issues are women facing, being reverse migrants, as most of them have now become financially dependent?
5. How can a safety net, in terms of housing and insurance, be tailor made to meet the needs of migrants with a long term vision?

On 26th May the panellists include

1. Ms. Sheela Patel, Director, society for the promotion of area resource centres (SPARC), Mumbai
2. Dr Rajesh Tandon, Founder President Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), UNESCO Chair, New Delhi
3. Sh. Binoy Acharya, UNNATI, Ahmedabad, Gujrat
4. Mr. Jagadananda, Centre for Youth and Social Development (CYSD), Odisha
5. Sh. Ved Arya, Founder Self-reliant Initiatives through Joint Action (SRIJAN), New Delhi
6. Dr. Yogesh Kumar, Executive Director, Samarthan, Bhopal
7. Prof Amitabh Kundu, chairperson of the Technical Advisory Committee on Housing Start up index at RBI
8. Prof. Ravi Srivastava, Professor and Director Center for Employment Studies, Institute for Human Development, New Delhi
9. Sh Devidas Nimje, Programme Manager, Samarthan, Raipur, Chhattisgarh
10. Sh. Anand MohanTiwari (Retd. IAS), Adjunct Professor, IRMA, Anand, Gujarat

On 3rd June the panellists include

1. Prof. Ravi Srivastava, Professor and Director Center for Employment Studies, Institute for Human Development, New Delhi
2. Ms Deepika Rao, Program Director, CIVIDEP India, Workers’ Rights & Corporate Accountability, Bangalore, Karnataka
3. Sh. Ram Esteves, Agricultural Development and Training Society (ADATS), Bagepalli, Karnataka
4. Prof. Irudaya Rajan, Centre for Development Studies (CDS), Trivandrum
5. Sh. Chelliah Nambi, Centre for Social Education and Development (CSED), Tirupur

INITIAL COMMENTS

The discussion began with primary comments by Dr Rajesh Tandon and Sh. Binoy Acharya. Dr Tandon highlighted several themes that emerged, as follows:

- Distress of migrants on their journey home
- Distress when migrants reach home
- Distress if migrants are quarantined or if they are not
- Distress if migrants have to cross the border into other states
- Distress when migrants are asked to show medical certificates
- Distress when migrants have to arrange their own transport and if their money gets stolen
- Distress when migrants are asked to travel by train for which they have to pay the fare

Sh. Acharya stated four broad issues on which immediate work needs to be undertaken;

- Migrant workers who are still on the road need to reach their homes. To ensure their safe return, they require, food, shelter, travel support, health care and quarantine facilities upon reaching their location.
- Migrant workers who have reached back home need to be meaningfully and economically engaged. They also require psychosocial care.
- Migrant workers who have stayed back require shelter, food, employment, health care etc.
- There is a need to rebuild the rural equilibrium.

The discussions were organised to summarise these deliberations and reach out to public domain, targeting policy makers, and to find solutions for generating dignified working and living conditions for reverse migrants in the country.

PANEL DISCUSSION

Elaborating on the issue above, the panel, comprising of civil society members, academicians and policy makers, put forward their experience and very insistent recommendations in this regard.

Sh. Jagadananda, from Centre for Youth and Social Development (CYSD), Odisha, proposed that the Odisha model of migrant’s management can be adopted in all states. This model entails lifting the migrants from the state border and dropping them at the borders of their home state, so that they don’t have to walk long distances or starve. Due to a fear of quarantine centres, people are leaving these centres without informing anyone. The quarantine facilities need to function based on a daily schedule, and help prepare the residents to go back home. Apart from this, the quarantine centres should disseminate information on various schemes and help migrants become economically engaged. From his experience, Mr. Jagadananda shared that 65% of retuned migrants in Odisha would like to stay in their homes and a research conducted by CYSD says that most of the migrant workers are likely to be skilled in agriculture. But agricultural activities (both farm and non-farm) are not part of the Skill India scheme or Skilling Odisha programmes.

Ms. Sheela Patel, director, SPARC, shared her experiences of working with migrant workers in Mumbai. She emphasized that in the second week of the lockdown, there were more than 40 thousand migrant workers who were sub-renters in the informal settlements struggled to leave for home. They wanted to leave because they couldn’t afford to pay rent anymore. Thus, there is a need for the government to mainstream the provision of social housing facilities for the migrants in urban areas so that they can be spared from eviction and harassment by the landlords. The migrant workers need to have access to safe living, which will in turn create safe working spaces. This will help lay a solid foundation for creating healthy, sustainable and safe cities. However, it would be wrong to assume that the migrant workers want to stay in the social housing facilities as most of them move from place to place based on their temporary jobs.

Prof Amitabha Kundu, chairperson of the Technical Advisory Committee on Housing Start up index at RBI, highlighted that there is no origin-destination data of the inter-state migrants available. The census of 2011 should have collected district specific data on the number of
migrants leaving and reaching other districts. He underlined that there is a risk in sending people back to their villages. However, keeping them in the cities, in crowded slums, unemployed, without paying for their rent, is even riskier. Concern should not be inter-state migrants as a whole but rather the 60% of inter-state migrants who don’t have social security. This is the vulnerable group that needs support. Out of the casual workers, 80% do not have social security and are vulnerable. Thus, it has been estimated that 20 million people among the migrants are vulnerable (those who have lost their jobs). Employment opportunities in states like Bihar, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh, etc. have to be improved for people who stay back. He concluded that there need to be institutional mechanisms to bring them back to the urban areas and rehabilitate them.

Sh. Devidas Nimje, Samarthan, shared that the survey conducted by Samarthan among 2204 migrants in the 155 gram panchayats in Chhattisgarh found that migrants do not want to be in quarantine as they have no money and require jobs immediately. Further, most of them do not have job cards, which makes it difficult for them to gain employment through MNREGA. 89% of the returned migrant are not registered with the labour department and therefore, can’t benefit from the government schemes.

Prof. Ravi Srivastava, Professor and Director, Center for Employment Studies, Institute for Human Development, New Delhi shared that the migrants have been differentiated into two; long-term and short-term circular migrants. The most vulnerable migrant workforce in the country are the short-term circular migrants (seasonal migrants). The migrant workers, especially the short-term circular migrants working in bitter labour settings with low wages, are unable to refuse their contractors due to high liability. Short-term migrant workers are not part of any records in the country, neither the Census 2011 nor the NSSO data. Prof. Srivastava, in 2011, estimated India’s internal migration to be very extensive. There were around 44 crores long-term and 4 crore short-term circular migrants counted in both interstate and intrastate migration. Particularly in interstate migration, 3 crores were short-term and 2 were long-term circular migrants. As the amount of short-term migrants is higher, the pandemic affected economy distressed them immensely. Life, already difficult for them due to low wages and problematic working environments, has become harder for them due to the pandemic. Hence, 40-50 million inter-state migrants have moved in both directions, most of them on foot. Govt. data says 11 million have moved using their own resources. This means that 3 out of 4 migrant ultimately journeyed using their own resources and 60% of them journeyed in pathetic conditions. The majority of short-term migrants are recruited through informal sector contractors, and these contractors became unavailable as soon as the worksite closed as a result of the nationwide lockdown. Due to COVID-19, the workers have had to fill registration forms, submit a medical certificate, and wait for the government consent from the home state as well as the host state. Hundreds or thousands couldn’t afford the expenses of the waiting period. They started on foot to escape low wages and the nation-wide lockdown. Hundreds of migrant labourers have died on the road while returning to their villages, from starvation, heat, exhaustion, and a number of terrible accidents. Prof. Srivastava proposed that, circular migrant workers’ distress should be categorised in three aspects: informal labour market, discrimination and non-citizenship. This social hierarchy and discrimination in informality and circular migration is deeply entrenched. Although the workers would like to continue living in their villages, the economic state might force them to return to cities in search of work. Prof. Srivastava noted that interstate migration and interstate quarantine is a responsibility of central government, but the centre has left it to the state. The state governments have made a pathetic system for migrants. As a result of this unorganised system, 20 to 30% of migrants are still scattered across the country. Speaking on the behalf of Rapid Community Response to C19 (RCRC network)
Sh. Ved Arya, Founder of SRIJAN, discussed the nine recommendations submitted to the Ministry of Rural Development (MoPR), Government of India (GOI) regarding the migrant workers’ distress. The RCRC network is committed to securing the rural livelihood of the returning migrants. The recommendations from the network focused on understanding the needs from the migrant’s perspective, rebuilding lives, supporting livelihood opportunities, ensuring social security and the role of government.

Sh. Anand Mohan Tiwari, Adjunct Professor, IRMA, Anand spoke about the situation of reverse migrants when they reach back home. He noted, “rural economic space is difficult for them, urban economic space is more attractive”. The District Planning Committees (DPCs) should make stronger long-term plans in rural areas. The 350 million Jan Dhan (PMJDY) accounts are opened by the government of India but meaningful transactions in the accounts are limited. The government needs to prioritize financial and digital literacy in rural areas so that the PMJDY accounts can serve their full purpose and contribute to building the financial resilience of low-income people. The state and central governments should implement a design which incorporates the existing schemes so it can satisfy the requirements of returning migrants without any additional financial burden to the government. He also shared an example of “Seamaul Undong”¹ the rural development program for sharing knowledge on community-driven development of South Korea in the 1970s.

Sh. Ram Esteves, ADATS, Bagepalli, Karnataka, shared the experience of returning migrants at the Andhra-Karnataka boarder. He discussed the major needs of the returning migrants: safe transportation facilities and to get rid of eligibility screening and medical check-ups. He also said that migrants have the fundamental right to move and go home. Perhaps poverty will force them to come back when this is all over, and nobody can interfere with that.

We have learnt from them that there are three measures that the government needs to urgently take:

1. Free Travel on Buses and Trains

   Every single Migrant, irrespective of what job they held and how much salary they earned 2-3 months back, has been levelled to pauperisation. Only those whose families reverse-remit moneys from their home States may possibly be able to afford bus and train fares.

   This first was perfunctorily met by a few State governments for a few days when trains and buses ferried Migrants free of cost. Then, with the excuse that there were no takers, trains were cancelled. This may well be true since, unless the second and third requirements are simultaneously met, Migrants simply cannot board the trains.

2. Stop Eligibility Screening of Migrants

   Secondly, eligibility screening of Migrants should immediately be done away with. We have all seen visuals of 2-3 officials sitting behind their desks to “register” fifty thousand Migrants. Renowned economists have proved that it is cheaper to make a benefit universal than to try and determine who is eligible and who is not. It doesn’t require any great application of mind to realise that no one in their right senses wants to go to a village in Chhattisgarh unless they came from there and want to return home.

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Time and time again, Eligibility Screening has turned out to be an extremely expensive exercise that merely causes inordinate delays and gives poor results. All it does is provide a cheap thrill, a headrush of power, to petty officials and provide them with a perfect excuse for non-performance.

3. Pragmatic Physical Distancing Measures

Thirdly, physical distancing measures need to become more pragmatic. A huge train can surely carry more than a thousand passengers. While medical screening may certainly be needed, merely checking temperature is a mindless exercise.

Maintaining physical distance on trains and buses is ludicrous when thousands are corralled by the dozens into unhygienic holding centres, crammed together outside registration offices, and once again stampede at railway stations and bus stands. Contrast these chaotic scenes with that at airports that have recently reopened. It’s high time this absurd pretence is done away with and physical distancing norms re-examined for pragmatic practicality.

We know that governments do not have the elegance and grace to revisit protocols that are not working. So the best thing would be to simply open up the roads and led the devastated Migrants walk on, unhindered, any which way they can.

Ms Deepika Rao, Program Director, CIVIDEP India, Workers' Rights & Corporate Accountability, Bangalore, Karnataka, explained the experience of CIVIDEP when working with migrant workers in various parts of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. She explained a number of challenges and difficulties faced by migrant workers in ration, transportation, monopoly of local labours, wage, employment, health, and police brutality. She also highlighted that workers don’t want to go back even though they are facing a shortage of food and wage. They want to stay back in cities and work in their respective sectors.

Sh. Chelliah Nambi, CSED, Tiruppur, Tamil Nadu, discussed the situation of migrant workers in textile industries. He mentioned that 7 to 8 lakh migrant workers are at Tiruppur, out of which 60% are from North and Northeast India, as well as Tamil Nadu. Particularly, 30% is from North and Northeast India. About 30-40% workers have already gone back to their native. He highlighted that political pressure limited the district authority to proactively support the migrant workers, as a majority of the textile units are run by political leaders. The authority doesn’t have proper data on the total number of migrants in the district. Prof. Irudaya Rajan, Centre for Development Studies, Trivandum, shared his experiences from Kerala. He said that India has failed its migrants- policymakers, politicians, etc. have all failed to protect the migrants in the times of a pandemic. According to Prof. Rajan, 140 million Indians are interstate and inter-district migrants in 2020. He proposed that the employers should be mandated to take care of the migrant labourers as migrant workers are the responsibility of the employer and migrant workers movement should be treated as an emergency in this time of lockdown. The migrants are not beggars and should never go back with empty hands. He warned that retuned migrants’ suicide would become a big challenge in the future.

FINAL COMMENTS

Prof. Ravi Srivastava, in his closing remarks, pointed out that civil society has an important role in advocating for rural regeneration and for industrial regeneration for returned migrants. He also summarised the points highlighted by the panel members, as mentioned below:
- A nation-wide social security system for each and every migrant worker
- A direct relationship between the employer and his or her employee
- Comprehensive legislation of minimum conditions of work as proposed in the Arjun Sen Gupta commission.
- Inclusive changes in the two labour codes which are already there before parliament: the social security code and the OSH code. They don’t meet the post pandemic requirements of the migrants
- Provide greater job security, greater food security and greater safety to all types of workers
- Enhancement in MGNREGA money and every worker should be allowed to work at least 150 days a year, condition of 100 days’ work should be removed to overcome today’s joblessness

And finally he ended by saying that the state and central government should focus on dignity, rights and equality among all types of workers.

**Dr. Yogesh Kumar**, Samarthan, recapitulated the views of panel members, especially the the words of Prof. Kundu and Prof. Srivastava on the informal nature of the economy. Dr. Kumar summarised the discussion in the following points:

- It is important for the political parties, policymakers, and CSOs to connect with on ground realities for collecting more realistic data on migrants through the RCRC network.
- The rural economic space is difficult for migrants. Urban economic space is more attractive and hence migrants will go back. District Planning Committees should make stronger long-term plans in rural areas. Social security measures have to be taken: better housing facility, better working conditions, etc. It is extremely important to involve the government in these efforts
- A number of recommendations exist in the research domain. There is a need to re-collate all these recommendations for the betterment of migrant workers.
- It is essential to stay invested in the long term, as shared by Ms. Sheela Patel. There is a need to collectively work together for national development. Dignified living in the rural areas and dignified working environment in the urban area are essential.

**Dr. Rajesh Tandon, Founder-President**, PRIA, emphasized that the nature of work, the dignity of labour, the security of employment, the safety at workplaces, and the treatment to migrant workers should be improved. The caste system in the so-called modern workplaces is forcing the migrant workers to perform at the lowest level of the job. He highlighted how the global economic model has developed capital more important than labour over the last 20 years, even though without the workers, nothing can be achieved. Social protection is only available for very few organised sector workers in the country. Advocacy will be needed for the improvement of migrant workers. Dr. Tandon concluded, from a series of dialogues on migrant workers, that the ministry of labour/department of labour, Government of India, decapitated, demotivated and not funded adequately during Covid situation.

In conclusion, Prof. Srivastava requested the participants to share data, case studies, reports etc. on the scattered migrant labourers for use by lawyers for the Supreme Court’s second hearing on migrant workers.
We hope to take these dialogues forward on a larger scale in the coming time and we believe that there is no better time for civil society to use their vitalities and capacities to make the world of migrant workers better.