

BACKGROUND

India moved to a country wide lockdown since the mid-night of 24 March 2020 for a period of 21 days. The government asserted that this was the only way to enforce social distancing for preventing transmission of COVID-19 or popularly known as coronavirus pandemic. Overnight, all economic activities were shut down, as people were asked to stay at or work from home. The union government and all state governments agreed to weigh in health security over economic security. It did not require much imagination that this decision is going to hit the Indian economy hard. However, the informal economy which employs more than 85 percent of country's workforce is evidently going to be hurt disproportionately. These workers without any insurance or savings are going to be the worst affected.

The informal settlements across Indian cities which characterise high population density, lack of access to basic public services like water, sanitation, health, excessive vulnerability due to lack of information or misinformation and other deficits that support human survival. The people living in these informal settlements are facing unprecedented misery added to their already precarious survival. The women, children, elderly and sick people may incur irreversible losses. A massive number of migrants who chose to go back to their rural roots, are stuck in transit, as the state and district borders are sealed and public transportation systems comes to complete halt. Those who chose to stay back in cities, have hardly any meaningful means to support the survival of themselves and their families.

PRIA International Academy (PIA) organised a webinar "**Impact of COVID-19 Lockdown on Urban Informals in India**" on **3 April 2020**. Prof Amitabh Kundu (Distinguished Fellow at Research and Information System for Developing Countries – RIS, New Delhi), Ms Sheela Patel (Founder-Director of Society for Promotion of Area Resource Centres – SPARC, Mumbai), Dr Gautam Bhan (Senior Lead - Academics and Research at Indian Institute for Human Settlements – IIHS, Bangalore) and Dr Rajesh Tandon (Founder-President of Society for Participatory Research in Asia – PRIA, New Delhi) participated as panellists. Moderated by Dr Kaustuv Kanti Bandyopadhyay (Director, Society for Participatory Research in Asia – PRIA, New Delhi), the webinar was attended by 100 participants and focussed on the following questions:

- What are the added vulnerabilities of urban informals during and after the COVID-19 lockdown?
- What the central, state and local governments can do to address these vulnerabilities of the urban informals?
- What support the civil society groups, philanthropic institutions, and international organisations can provide to mitigate the long-term effect?



Prof Amitabh Kundu



Ms Sheela Patel



Dr Gautam Bhan



Dr Rajesh Tandon



Dr Kaustuv Bandyopadhyay

Key Takeaways



- ➔ The penetration of formal public policy and programmes to deal with informality in India has been historically low. It is, therefore, essential that the outreach to informal workers needs to happen both through formal and informal channels. The relief packages and entitlements should be delivered by both formal and informal community-based institutions.
- ➔ It is evident that the community organisations such as self-help groups (as formed under National Urban Livelihood Mission or Kudumbasree programmes), settlement improvement committees (as catalysed by PRIA), federation of slum dwellers (as nurtured by SPARC and National Slum Dwellers Federation), are better able to cope up the effects of lockdown by providing mutual support.
- ➔ It is important to harvest community level socio-demographic and economic data collected by the organised communities. This data along with strong local organisations can immediately reach out to community members who need immediate assistance. Similarly, the informal workers associations must be enabled to harvest and provide information about the informal workers which the governmental agencies lacking.
- ➔ The local governance institutions (panchayats and urban local bodies) and their elected representatives must be at the fore front in a crisis like this. The Mayor, as the first citizen of a city, should be leading from the front. This would require substantive capacity building and empowerment on one hand and ensuring accountability of the local governance institutions on the other hand.

PANEL DISCUSSION

What is the purpose and nature of the lockdown?

Prof Amitabh Kundu in his introductory remark said, “this webinar is being held at an interesting time, when the distinction between precaution and panic is getting blurred, not just in people’s perceptions, but also in executive administrative orders. There is no clarity on what a lockdown precisely means. On

one hand, we were supposed to stay within our houses, but on the other hand, we are also required to look after our neighbourhoods and communities. At the community or neighbourhood level, there is often inappropriate use of authority. Policemen beat up people those who are out and medical information is being sourced from social media. Therefore, there is no clarity on how this lockdown is perceived at the grassroots level. On a positive note, the level of infection in India is relatively lower compared to other Asian and European countries. This can be attributed to different reasons, such as climatic conditions, potency of virus, etc.”

Ms. Sheela Patel explained, why the number of cases in India is low as compared to other countries. Tourism is attributed as one of the reasons. India’s tourism industry is much smaller and in the period of Covid-19 pandemic spreading across the world, the number of people entering the country is significantly lower than other countries. However, cases are now being detected in informal settlements as well. In Mumbai for instance, they have made a map where localities have boundaries and stepping outside the boundary to get anything is not permitted.

Dr Gautam Bhan thought that the aim of the lockdown was to prevent death. Therefore, when the ultimate goal is to prevent mortality then one should also be considering the health-related mortality as well as the economy-related mortality that the response to Covid pandemic will generate. He emphasised that it was important to realise that for these informal workers, the proximity to mortality was equivalent from an economic constraint as it is from a health constraint.

Prof Kundu said that an important thing that created social distancing even before it was endorsed by the governments is the fragmentation of the labour market. The unorganised sector — including the places that they visit, eat, and live — are somewhat fragmented. For instance, the virus has reached countries largely due to imports, but in India, expats are less likely to use public transport. In India, the great disparity between the formal and informal sector, the fragmentation of the labour market and less interaction has been responsible for slow spreading at the initial stages.

How large is the migrant population and workers?

Responding to this question, Prof Kundu said that as per the Census and Migration Survey Data about 68 million people migrate from one state to another. About 22 million of them are workers. About 7.5 million casual workers have daily or weekly wage arrangements. Another seven million workers receive their salary on a monthly basis but are still part of the informal sector. These groups are going to be badly affected. Out of 15-17 million people who are interstate migrants, 24 percent are from Uttar Pradesh, 15 percent are from Bihar, 5-6 percent are from Madhya Pradesh and Jharkhand. Had there been a prior announcement regarding the lockdown, many of them would have had the chance to travel back to their home states. Approximately 15 percent of these migrants have managed to travel back under difficult conditions. However, once they go back to their towns, it will be very difficult to control the spread of infection. Therefore, an important measure that must take place (as in the case of Delhi and Kerala) is the provision of accommodation and food for these migrants.

Will social distancing impact differently for people those who live in informal settlements and those who live in organised colonies in cities?

Reflecting on this question, Prof Kundu said that this lockdown in the cities certainly means quarantining of people, at least in urban areas. However, this rests on the assumption that other external systems will

function, which indicates that some people will have to step out. Therefore, the impact of the lockdown will be very different in the unorganised and organised colonies. The middle and upper classes can certainly create an atmosphere of isolation, but as per the statistics of the living conditions in large cities (such as Maharashtra, Delhi, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka) the lockdown would increase the social proximity for at least 30 percent of people who primarily live in informal settlements. This is because many people live in one room housing. In such an environment, the density factor gets increased by a lockdown. In informal settlements, the density and level of interaction is reduced when people move out for work. Middle and upper classes can also depend on their savings during a lockdown and do not need to step out to work, but close to 33 percent of urban households in Maharashtra and West Bengal are dependent on work that exists outside the premises of their households. The virus has not reached this extent in low income areas, but once it does, the rate of the spread would be significant, suspects, Prof Kundu.

Dr Bhan extended the discussion on provisioning the essential needs to these informal workers. He suggested that the consequence of lockdown needs to be understood by what these workers are facing due to the lockdown to avoid starvation death. The workers are looking at very hard choices – as there are three choices that they have to look at in times like these - What will happen in five days with no income? What will happen in two weeks with no income? And what will happen in 30 days with no income? In five days, the most vulnerable workers will face hunger but in 30 days all workers will have to pay the rent. There is a need to think about a lockdown strategy that enables the workers to be physically distant but not the one that requires them to physically distant and make choices that they cannot make. He advocated to reframe the lockdown as an economic and health lockdown and urged to ask what we need to give to the workers at 5 days, 15 days and 30 days cycle that will enable them to actually engage in a behaviour that they want to engage in to protect themselves and not what is being imposed on them. The core things that are important for these workers, at this hour are income, food, and shelter to survive a crisis situation

On the issue of migrants, Ms. Patel shared that most of the migrant workers or informal sector workers live in sublet accommodation in informal settlement. There are many civil society members who want to help but there is a need to consider the number of migrants and the lack of infrastructure to support such large numbers. State infrastructure and state involvement is required to address the volume of people in such situations but, unfortunately, these people have no trust and faith in what the state can do for them. The migrant workers are worse-off than other informal sector workers because they do not have ration or identity cards, issued by the state where they are working. This crisis has demonstrated the immediate need to address this. There is a need to understand the implications of the volume of migration that is occurring.

Ms. Patel also elaborated on the point made by Dr Bhan on the being not just of surviving Covid-19 pandemic but also of hunger. What was found is that in neighbourhoods and settlements that had community organisations and had some delivery and aid systems, they immediately came up with a list of families that require assistance urgently, and waited for others to come later. However, in settlements where people were not organised, there were collection riots. So, when those offering relief aid went to distribute food and grains, their workers were picked up by the law enforcement agencies because they felt that these people were creating law and order problems in the area.

Dr Bhan points out that the states with a stronger social protection infrastructure have been able to reach a lot of their workers rather quickly as compared to the states that did not have such infrastructure. The

states those who did not have stronger infrastructure in place had to actually innovate and create new delivery mechanisms.

There are very few states explicitly talking about the impact of the lockdown on informal workers. Wage compensation has been announced in different parts of the country; the Government of India ordered a waiver on rent for the month of April and a moratorium on evictions. The tension in these waivers and announcements was that the informal worlds are places where instruments of policy and regulation find it difficult to reach because a lot of these informal worlds are exactly in tension with the regulation and lockdown, said Dr Bhan.

Ms Patel points out that in times like these, a lot of money is being mobilised and spent. In Maharashtra, all the MPs and MLAs have been told that MPLADS and MLALADS funds can be used to support the communities. However, there is no tracking of who is doing what. The role of elective representatives is also not being discussed. Further, a major challenge is that there is no handshake in most cases between what government is doing and what civil society can and should do.

How do we then address this situation in short- and long-term?

Some important questions that we should pay attention to: what are the ways in which we can actually deliver a thousand rupees to a daily wage worker as promised by the state governments; who are daily wage workers and if they actually do have bank accounts; would the direct benefit transfer scheme work?

Dr Bhan outlined a few ways to think about how to actually deliver the benefits and protections on rent, on hunger and on income support to different types of workers.

The first was, to think about the distinction between whether we can do universal transfers or we work through the sectors of informal workers. There seems to be a deep appeal to universal approaches but based on our country's previous experiences, there tends to be particular kinds of gaps in who does not get access to these benefits and informal employment is one of the key determinants of that gap. He suggested that it is better for us to look at sector-based approaches. For example, organisation of workers are sector specific for most of the informal economy workers such as construction workers are organised in their own way, so are domestic workers, waste pickers, street vendors, etc.

Mass membership groups of informal workers should be the government's ideal delivery partners more than the universal announcements and pronouncements. This is because our country does not have the penetration for a universal mechanism or grant system. In a country like ours, we should not be asking what entitlement informal workers get, we should be equally asking who will be delivering the benefits, find the workers and get the entitlements so that they can survive, precisely in times of a lockdown.

Dr Bhan proposed that one way to counter this universal mechanism was to work through the sectors - one by one and his second proposition included not just state institutions but also informal worker organisations, he said that they need to exist but they do not, nearly at the scales that we expect them to be. He further emphasised on the importance of informal workers' organisations being our best bet in combination with government delivery in times like these.

So, the question that one should be asking is, for instance, if we have a Construction Workers Welfare Board with registered construction workers, what percentage of these universe of workers does one think that includes and what percentage of construction workers that are not registered with the welfare

board but are members of other associations of workers and together, what is the total number of workers that are getting covered. To ensure this, a multi institutional strategy is needed to identify and track and deliver the entitlements to the workers.

The second approach that could be implemented is to use spatial proxies. This brings us to the question of how much does the spatial informality of living in low income neighbourhoods like urban slums and urban villages, an authorised colony and neighbourhoods overlap. The more the overlap exists, the more efforts should be put on allowing them to be universal within a certain spatial kind of targeting. Thus, it could be assumed that one is covering a large number of informal workers by moving quickly and covering all these areas and delivering them the benefits and entitlements.

The third approach was to think about small loop interventions. It means thinking about a localised solution where a cash transfer, for example, for rent can be made from a small local fund to a landlord in order for there not be an eviction or rent based displacement. This method could be implemented in the case of the workers who were found walking to their home towns and villages at the Uttar Pradesh- Delhi border as all of them faced the same fear of eviction and not being able to pay rent.

The last point for large macroeconomic responses that are being practiced was that the Government of India really needs to think about some of the surplus and stimulus packages that they announce. They are going to target formal enterprises but for the informal service providers who also have buyers that themselves are informal service providers would not be able to benefit from these stimulus packages. For this we need to know what the division is at the macroscale level.

He concluded by saying that if we end up protecting the spread of Covid but see a large number of people being pushed into malnutrition and death due to economic lockdown then we have to ask ourselves if our ultimate goal of Covid related mortality prevention has been achieved. We should also be thinking and questioning the delivery of the excellent stimulus packages announced by the government and how the majority of the informal workers would not be getting it if experimentation and implementation is done.

Ms Patel pointed out that the fact one kind of informal workers would benefit from the current stimulus packages whereas others would not. She emphasised the need to recognise the long-term inadequacies of these packages. For instance, everybody talked about soap and water, everybody talked about hygiene in toilets. These are impossible solutions in informal settlements. There is a need to consider the special ways of dealing with things which can deal with densities and mixed nature of the settlements. This refers to creating the basis of information gathering at the neighbourhood level at a regular level, which allows the understanding of who has the resources to sustain and who does not. This brings the focus very starkly toward the need for local organisations and associations with good quality data about the demographics and needs of those living in their communities, to be able to demand solutions based on who they are and what their needs are.

Dr Rajesh Tandon also emphasised the issues related to local data. Local data, granular data, community owned data, is the only way to acknowledge and recognise informality. Informality in our urban spaces, informality in India's economy, informality in India's agriculture is here to stay, whether we like it or not and if it is not acknowledged in policy making, India will never come to terms with it.

Ms Patel also points out that the migrants who are moving back to rural area from different states or from within the state are facing hostility which also required a response. A strategy is also needed for those

who are dealing with the migrants coming in and this required an urban-rural networking capability amongst not only civil society organisations but also amongst the governmental institutions.

She added, that this deep divide within cities is also creating problems in terms of people with small farms, growing produce, are not allowed to enter the cities resulting in not only food not entering the cities but also the farmers suffering due to not having access to markets to sell their produce. This crisis is going beyond boundaries of cities and therefore, this constant debate of whether it is urban or rural has to stop in today's world where everything is interconnected. It is important to develop protocols of how different state and central ministries have to play a role. The shortages are not because there is nothing available but because there is no delivery system, no mechanism for supplying things. While all the states are planning different ways to deliver essentials, there is a need to have an agreement of how to do things in a collaborative and effective manner.

Dr Rajesh Tandon emphasised how across the world, the mayors are seen talking about the efforts in their states but this is not the case in India. This indicates that the local governance institutions must be in the front line of our work, both prevention of pandemic and developing long-term solutions. Unfortunately, though our rural panchayats have not been adequately empowered, our urban local bodies have been substantially disempowered. Every scheme of the government from the national level, the shining example being smart city, continues to disempower them. If several thousand elected representatives of our local governance institutions are not at the front end of this moment then we can never think of dealing with or even preventing such crisis.

Dr Tandon shared, what the disaster has shown to us is that India's systems of planning and policy making are focused on the formal and one cannot reach informality through the frameworks and logics of formal that have been inherited and are being practiced. To reach informal communities, informal inhabitations and informal sector workers, one has to use informal channels. Informal channels are informal associations of the urban poor, informal community-based organizations, informal channels of local civil society groups, informal channels of local kinara stores. If one wants to reach them, even in this crisis today, one has to reach them through the informal. One cannot reach them through only formally designed institutions, which by definition are incompetent to deal with informality because they don't understand it.

In 2013, PRIA did a study about the contribution of informal sector, of informal habitation and settlement, to the city's economy. At that time, it was almost 10-12% and if we don't see the economy contribution of the urban poor, then we don't trust them and if we don't trust them, we will never be able to support them. The takeaway is not about the problem of migration or problem of density -- in a country of our size, those are not problems but realities. And if we trust them, if we use informal channels to address informal workers, the trade unions. The labour ministry of this country has been completely defunct. The trade unions have become weak, so, the associations of the workers in the informal sector, themselves by definition invisible, small and informal, where ministry of labour doesn't actually exist anymore. So, if one wants to talk about informal workers, one will have to look at these mechanisms. Trust them, use informal channels, focus on local government-strengthen them. This is not only for three months; this is for years to come.

How this lockdown effects are different from other crises situations?

Many people have compared the current situation with the post-demonetisation situation. Is this comparable? In comparing demonetisation with the current situation, we find that the former situation did create problems for the unorganised sector, but there was more of an atmosphere of cooperation, since it was a limited and predictable situation. But now, the civil vigilante is doing much damage to the unorganised sector. This has also increased incidents of racism against north-eastern people. This indicates a need to institutionalise and formalise civil society activism, because such civil society involvement is crucial, thinks, Prof Kundu.

Ms. Petal explained the key reason why this lockdown has resulted in such crises which is different from other curfews related to riots and natural disasters such as floods. The difference this time is that the movement of organised communities who have ways of managing relief distribution systems is now severely restricted and hence they are no longer able to go to other neighbourhoods to help those in need. Organisations are restricted by the physical locality within which they work.

OPEN DISCUSSION

There are more than 40 lakh Self Help Groups (SHGs) formed under National Urban Livelihoods Mission (NULM). Does one see a role for them, since they can be helpful but often face difficulties in working with the city administration? On this question Dr Bhan pointed out that unfortunately this question of the suitability of specific groups cannot be answered theoretically during an emergency pandemic situation. This is the time where a lot of capacity is going to be built in the groups right as they are working. Therefore, we need to work with city and state institutions and groups that already have a map of the area and understand the nature of community organisation. Where the groups are strong, we let them take the lead in working. We must recognise the importance of the mapping of existing community organisations, and understanding their nature (for instance, work organisations, settlement-based organisations, and federated organisations) in order to activate all these organisations. For that to effectively take place, we need a strong signal from the government, at every level (city, state, and centre) to indicate that the governments want partnerships with communities.

One of the biggest things that are not being addressed at the moment is that across informal settlements in Indian cities, there is a deep fear that should anybody declare any symptoms of the virus, the entire community will be sealed off, barricaded, and isolated. There needs to be assurance that the voluntary disclosure of any symptoms will be met with dignified quarantine and economic compensation. Therefore, governments need to signal that communities are considered equal partners in tackling the pandemic, because community groups have the right information regarding the functioning solutions in their localities. Therefore, there needs to be a shift in approach regarding such communities, since they need to be directive forces in tackling the pandemic. For instance, the Ebola response in African settlements must guide us, since they focused heavily on community centred organising and voluntary disclosure. Trusting and working with local communities is essential, and must take place at all times, not just during the current pandemic.

Regarding helping people working in the field at the moment, there is nothing that is more neglected at the moment. There is not enough Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) for hospital workers, let alone PPE for frontlines workers in sanitation and delivery. The central government has decided in large part,

to control the manufacturing of PPE. As citizens, we must raise our voices in order to open up and decentralise manufacturing and distribution of PPE.

Ms Patel points out that one of the real failures in cities has been the lack of ownership by the elected representatives, Civic Administrators, and Mayors. In all the work we are doing currently, we are trying to encourage the Mayors to champion the needs of vulnerable people. There has to be signal from an institution of the state that people can recognise, that puts out information, support, and works in tandem with CBOs. We have a functional system of elected representatives, but we do not hold them accountable for their lack of action, knowledge, and ability to pressurise legislature and corporations to take action. This concept of organisation to make noise, writing to MPs and MLAs, advocating on local radio stations is not taking place. This kind of crisis also tells us that we must deal with people who are different, or members of other organisations, but it has proved to be hard to co-operate with the vast number of urban and rural networks. For instance, on the issue of data, there have been extensive efforts to enable access to data for informal communities, but this has barely mobilised. This data now has huge implications for the next two stages of recovery in the pandemic.

Reflecting on the point question that whether this will not be a god opportunity to create jobs in the home states, so that the migrants do not need to travel for work, Ms Patel added that how much we do not understand the way in which migration in today's economic order is going to grow regardless of all our aspirations. The real crisis regarding this is the lack of economists and demographers talking about how economies and economic investments are moving people. Keeping people in the rural areas in which they were born has not worked successfully for the past 40 years, so it is important to give migrant workers some legitimacy and status in the states in which they work. There will be areas in which good quality farming and improved water supply will change migratory practices. But the reality is that urbanisation is transforming where people are living.

Usually when we think about unorganised labour, we think about casual labour, but the issue of child labour and trafficking can also become quite urgent in this scenario, since elders in the family do not earn enough and face financial crises, leading to pushing children to work. Trafficking also increases in such times. How can we prevent such incidents during this time? Ms Patel pointed out that these are hidden aspects of the pandemic that are not being discussed, and need to work upon. We are also hearing from a lot of women's groups that domestic violence has already spiked up in homes where women were the main workers and are now sitting at home without any assured income. We have seen this in many locations where we are working, but we do not have any clear data on how widespread this is currently. The issue of accessing data is critical, and we must ensure that places and communities that are unable to organize also have access to data, since NGOs have a limited capacity in terms of the populations that can be mobilised.

It is really the state that has to learn a lot in terms of the information and communication that it passes on to citizens, to create more trust between the citizens and the government. Who will do that, and how will this get triggered? Additionally, how will we encourage the state to work with CBOs?

There is a policy gap in addressing disaster risk management, because when we analyse the national and state level policies — there is no specific role given to the local governments and CBOs.

There is a great amount of invisibility of informal workers. The current estimates of workers are quite rough, so how will we reach out to these workers in times of need? Is there any estimate of job losses that have occurred or will occur in the days to come, or any way of estimating this?

Dr Anshuman Karol presented his insights from 250 informal settlements in mid-tier cities like Muzaffarpur, Jhansi, and Ajmer where PRIA is working with the urban informal communities. A number of these settlements consist of informal workers, and 40-50 percent of them are daily wage earners. There is a lot of uncertainty regarding the future. We have created a mechanism of Settlement Improvement Committees (SICs) and city level SIC Federation and Citizen Forum. They are trying to work hand in hand, and are working to provide aid to vulnerable groups in the city. However, the larger question is about the availability of information around data. Fortunately, we conducted a survey while working in these settlements. We covered almost 28,000 households. About 60-70 percent of these settlements have APL cards, rather than BPL cards. The main question is also that of ration and its availability. We also have CBOs working with the elected representatives, but engagement of civil societies and municipalities is quite important. The most important question is that of informality, and how we can reduce it in terms of linking such communities to various provisions and welfare programmes, as well as workers unions. Unless we maintain proper data regarding informal workers and work in tandem with civil societies and municipalities, it becomes very difficult to provide them with a support system.

We should see CBOs of informal settlements as sources of data, but also channels for directing funds and targeting interventions. It is really important to highlight that these workers provide essential goods and services. For instance, garment makers have already been deployed for making masks, and sanitation workers and vegetable vendors should be seen as essential to the process of containing the virus. Additionally, there should be a focus on the food chain, including the informal producers of food. We need to think of food vendors as frontline workers.

People in roadside and non-notified settlements are facing a serious crisis with regard to accessing water supply. How the lockdown might affect them, since public service delivery to these people is a huge challenge.

Prof Kundu pointed out that for this lockdown to function, we are relying on informal workers. On one hand, we have seen the police being brutal with the workers attempting to work or move around in the city; on the other hand, we have seen thousands of migrants attempting to move back to their hometowns. There has to be some significant engagement of the community-based groups and civil society, because the state on its own cannot function in such a crisis. The basic problem is organising the delivery system, as well as the delivery capacity. Instead of having a special approach that would be overlapping and residing in the non-poor areas of the city, it is important to have a sectoral approach, so that the relationship of the workers with the employers do not get broken in this period, and we can ensure that some part of the funds provided to informal workers come from their employers. Regarding the question of civic participation, it is essential to work out a framework for the participation of the civil society. I do not agree with the closure of complete movement in cities. This is because the informal sector is bearing the brunt of this measure. The state can also organise transport for workers from the large cities with high rates of infection, to the places of their origin. Data regarding migrants must also feature in the national level policy addressing the economic downslide resulting from this pandemic, but the engagement of civil society in the area of health and provision of cooked food can seriously be considered, while also taking into consideration health concerns.

How can we have some activities to contain the economic downslide? If such a situation continues for three more months, then even low income and middle-income families are at risk of poverty. Reflecting on this point, Dr Bhan added that we must acknowledge that many essential services that we rely upon are serviced by informal workers. So, one of the things that we can do to make this lockdown sustainable is to support and encourage these workers, and to use that as a system of income and livelihood protection. I think Prof Kundu is right about interstate transport, since there is no way of getting around in a certain amount of regulated movement. One quick way to assess the current lockdown conditions is to compare these conditions with the conditions in each of the leading countries in the world that are currently in lockdown. India's lockdown conditions are by far the harshest. This is something we should think about that it comes from not trusting our fellow citizens to behave, and from employing the most punitive measures to ensure this cooperation. It is important to reverse the total shutdown of essential services, and to choose the services we want, and then begin closing everything else. By the end of this lockdown, we must re-analyse the services that are essential for urban management and for a degree of economic and employment support services for the most vulnerable. Those are important emergency services, not just healthcare. We cannot continue this way for the entire duration of the pandemic; I am quite convinced that our infection rates are much higher than indicated, because we have some of the lowest testing rates in the world.

Ms Patel emphasised that one of the reasons why these lockdowns are so punitive is because of the curfew culture that is pervasive in India. The imagery of what city governments do, what the police does, and what the army does is not seen as supportive, proactive, and trustworthy; these institutions are seen as institutions to be feared. It is important to keep these bigger general questions in mind while considering the current measures. Comparisons with other countries are quite important. One of the biggest challenges in informal settlements has been to combat fake news, and fake solutions to combat the virus.

Dr Tandon concluded that the need to trust the informal workers. He said, at this moment of the crisis, we are in it for not just one or two months, we are in it for the long haul and therefore, there is a need to figure out how informality needs to be adjusted. We have to trust the urban poor, we have to trust informal workers, we have to trust their associations, and we have to trust local civil society. We have to give them the feeling that they can lead and we have to give them the resources and support. One non-performing asset worth 50,000 crores can at least be allocated to the not so trustworthy urban poor, to deal with this crisis. We only look at formal systems; we trust formal systems which fail us all the time. The key take away is that we must trust urban poor, their associations, howsoever informal they may be and we must trust informal channels and put resources in their hands. Let them deal with it. The poor themselves know who can benefit more than the rest. The 11 groups that have been formed by the central government, all of them comprise of IAS officers. They are not equipped to understand or deal with informality, crisis or not.