

Proceedings of the Webinar to discuss Governmental response to COVID-19 and brainstorming on interventions to make the implementation of PM Garib Kalyan Yojana Relief Package more Transparent

Date: 10 April, 2020 (Friday)

Time: 2.00 to 4.30pm

17 participants joined the Webinar representing ten States and two Union Territories (UT) to discuss the possibilities of monitoring governmental response to COVID-19 epidemic, particularly the relief package announced by the Finance Minister (PM Garib Kalyan Yojana). The webinar was organised by Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI), New Delhi.

The following documents were shared as preparatory reading material with all the participants to go through before the webinar:

- 1) the PIB release containing details of the PMGKY relief package in English and Hindi;
- 2) the PIB release about bank transfer and withdrawals for women's PM Jan Dhan Yojana bank accounts in English and Hindi;
- 3) the PIB release regarding the manner of implementation of the PM Ujjwala Yojana relating to LPG cylinders in English and Hindi;
- 4) the Union Home Ministry's notification regarding the 11 Empowered Group of Officers through which all government efforts to combat COVID will be channelised, in English; and
- 5) the PIB release containing data about the movement of food grains across the country since the lockdown's announcement, as on date, in English.

The following renowned RTI practitioners, transparency advocates and grassroots level activists joined the webinar from across the country:

State/UT	Participant	Background
Arunachal Pradesh	Bamang Tago	Arunachal RTI forum
Assam	Debojit Goswami	Assam RTI Forum, noted RTI activist
Bihar	Ajay Balajee	Janadesh, Madhubani, noted RTI activist
Chhattisgarh	Rajkumar Mishra	Noted RTI activist and PI Litigant
Delhi	Shameer Rishad	Javed Abidi Foundation
Delhi	Wajahat Habibullah	Former Chief Information Commissioner and Chairperson, CHRI India-Executive Committee
Delhi	Sanjoy Hazarika	International Director, CHRI
Delhi	Shikha Chhibbar	Programme Officer, CHRI
Delhi	Aditya Sharma	Media & Communications Officer, CHRI
Delhi	Sudhasri Y.	Student of OP Jindal Global Law School and Intern, CHRI
Jammu	Raman Sharma	Noted RTI activist

State/UT	Participant	Background
Karnataka	Pradeep Bhat	Founder, RTI Online, Bengaluru
Maharashtra	Bhaskar Prabhu	Mahiti Adhikar Manch
Manipur	Joykumar Wahengbam	Human Rights Initiative
Odisha	Pradip Pradhan	Odisha Suchana Adhikar Manch
Tamil Nadu	Henri Tiphagne	People's Watch Tamil Nadu, Human Rights Defenders Network and noted Human Rights Advocate
Uttar Pradesh	Naveen Tewari	Noted RTI activist, Lucknow
Resource Person	Dr. Devidas Tuljapurkar	Senior leader, All India Bank Employees Association
Moderator	Venkatesh Nayak	Head, Access to Information Programme, CHRI
Comments received via email		
AP & Telangana	Rakesh Reddy	United RTI Forum

Transparency advocates and grassroots activists from Kashmir, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand and West Bengal could not join the webinar due to technical difficulties.

A matrix summarising the problems that people are experiencing due to the lockdown and in accessing their entitlements under the PM Garib Kalyan Yojana as observed at the ground level and solutions suggested by the participants is given below followed by a detailed report of the webinar's proceedings.

PM Garib Kalyan Yojana

Matrix of implementation problems at the ground level and suggested solutions

#	Implementation problems at the ground level	Solutions suggested by webinar participants
1.	An estimated 23% of the PM Jan Dhan Yojana accounts are inoperative making it difficult for women and other beneficiaries to access them to withdraw the monthly ex gratia amounts	RBI must issue a circular for hassle-free reactivation of inoperative PMJDY bank accounts particularly, for beneficiaries eligible for ex gratia at their doorstep through post office employees and turning fixed location Banking Correspondents into itinerant Bank Mitras for the period of ex gratia distribution. They may be directed to strictly adhere to COVID-19 related precautionary measures while moving about
2.	No clarity on access to free LPG cylinders under PM Ujjwala Yojana announced under the PM Garib Kalyan Yojana package. Due to lockdown enforcement, beneficiaries will not be able to withdraw	Govt must issue circular clarifying how the free gas cylinders benefit may be availed by beneficiaries. Itinerant Bank Mitras may be roped in to disburse DBT benefit to beneficiaries at their doorstep, with due

	monies from their bank accounts to pay the LPG supplier agency	regard to COVID-19 related precautionary measures
3.	Due to lockdown enforcement, LPG supplier agencies are insisting that consumers visit their establishments to collect cylinder refills, in many places in rural areas	OMCs must issue strict instructions to their supplier agencies to deliver gas cylinders at the doorstep upon receiving bookings, with due regard to COVID-19 related precautionary measures
4.	While macro level information about movement of food grains and other items supplied through the public distribution systems, there is very little transparency about movement or sale and purchase of stocks at the district, sub-district and ward levels	District administration must be directed to make PDS supply and distribution related information available to beneficiaries on a weekly basis through the various methods of dissemination mentioned under the "Explanation" to Section 4 of the RTI Act, 2005 (disclosure through internet, radio, TV, newspapers, notice boards, other kinds of announcements using public address system and beat of drums etc.) <u>Doordarshan's country-wide outreach must be used for disseminating information about the manner and status of implementation of the PM Garib Kalyan Yojana package</u>
5.	Access to crucial health related information at the district and sub-district level is becoming difficult. Most State Information Commissions have shut down and submitting RTI applications has become next to the impossible due to the lockdown and refusal of post offices to accept surface mail to be delivered outside the local towns and cities	Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT) must issue advisories to all State Governments to urge the respective State Information Commissions to restart work along the modalities adopted by the Central Information Commission
6.	There are several instances of corruption coming to light in the context of the implementation of the PM Garib Kalyan Relief Package in the States	DoPT may issue advisories to the State Governments to urge the respective Lokayuktas and Anti-Corruption Bureaus to restart accepting and inquiring into complaints of corruption from the general public. A toll-free helpline may be established in every State to receive and forward complaints of corruption from the public to the respective anti-corruption bodies. These numbers must be advertised widely
7.	In Odisha and other places civil society activists and anti-corruption crusaders are being beaten up for exposing corruption in relief distribution	The Whistleblowers Protection Act, 2014 must be enforced immediately across all States by notifying competent authorities to receive and inquire into complaints of attacks and harassment of whistleblowers.

		The State Police must be issued advisories to lodge FIRs in all such cases of attacks without delay and conduct speedy investigations to book the culprits
8.	There is very little coordination between the State Governments and local NGOs in the matter of relief distribution – whether routed through PM Garib Kalyan Yojana or the State Government’s own relief package or private initiatives launched by local NGOs	Empowered groups of officers must be set up at the State, district and sub-district level to coordinate relief and rehabilitation efforts to between the public sector and private sector players
9.	Migrant workers stranded in cities, towns and other places are unable to access benefits due to them under the PM Garib Kalyan Yojana and other State welfare measures because they may not be carrying their Voter IDs or Aadhaar cards	Government agencies must not insist on production of identity proof for migrant workers for accessing benefits under the relief and rehabilitation measures. Mere self-declaration of identity and domicile status should be treated as adequate for accessing such benefits. Circulars may be issued to all State and district level authorities for this purpose
10.	Persons with disabilities (PwDs) are among the worst affected by the lockdown. Constituting between 8-10% of the total population many of them are not able to avail the services of their caregivers, access essential items like, food, milk, medicines and ex gratia amounts due to them under the PM Garib Kalyan Yojana and other relief measures. People with hearing disabilities are not able to understand the Hon’ble PM’s speeches and press conferences held by various officials as sign language interpretation is not available	Lockdown passes must be issued on a priority basis to caregivers for PwDs to provide services to them on a daily basis. Audio-visual training modules must be developed and disseminated for them to explain the social distancing and other precautionary measures to ensure that PwDs do not contract the corona virus. All telecasts of important speeches including that of the Hon’ble PM and daily press conferences that are televised must be accompanied in real time by sign language interpretation visible adequately on the TV screens
11.	May remote parts of Arunachal Pradesh and other States are not adequately covered by Internet connectivity and mobile telephony. They are unable to access services and apps launched through mobile phones	Alternative arrangements must be made for ensuring that people living in areas without mobile phones or internet connectivity are able to access their entitlements under the Pm Garib Kalyan Yojana without any delay
12.	Households in several remote rural areas particularly in border States like Arunachal Pradesh are not covered by the PM Ujjwala Yojana. Women venturing out to collect firewood are often prevented from so doing or beaten up by local police	Households in remote hamlets and settlements not covered by PM Ujjwala Yojana must be supplied with adequate fuel sources including firewood for daily use at their doorstep. Officials of the concerned departments including the Forest Department may be engaged to supply fuel

		to such households at least twice a week at their doorstep with due regard to COVID-19 related precautionary measures
13.	With most of the courts at the district and tahsil level and statutory human rights institutions having halted work due to the lockdown, people are unable to access the justice delivery systems for redressing their grievances	There is an urgent need to reactivate lower courts in order to provide justice delivery services to the people. The statutory Legal Services Authorities at the National, State, district and tahsil levels must also be reactivated. Their contact numbers as well as those of lawyers empanelled to provide legal aid must be widely advertised through various mass media and other offline methods so that people may contact them for getting redress for their grievances against the administration's actions and omissions
14.	COVID-19 has demonstrated the dismal state and the lack of preparedness of the public health care systems across the country. They are not equipped to handle public health emergencies. Budgetary support for health, education, welfare of women and children and migrant workers are not adequate	Governments must increase budgetary allocation for the health and education sectors. Increasing public spending on the welfare of women, children and vulnerable groups like migrant workers must become a priority

Detailed report of the proceedings of the webinar

The webinar started with opening remarks from the moderator, Mr. Venkatesh Nayak. He greeted everyone on behalf of CHRI and thanked them for joining the webinar despite having to deal with work on their own ends on a holiday. Then he discussed how the webinar would play out, the aim was to discuss the importance of Right to information in the time of COVID-19 crisis with voices from around the country. He mentioned that there is no set agenda and we shall brainstorm to identify the broad areas of the transparency-related interventions through consensus. He said that CHRI intends to organise further discussions on this basis in the coming weeks.

Translations were provided by the moderator in both English and Hindi after every speaker's contribution in the first round. The proceedings below record the contributions made by participants in their order of speaking.

Mr. Wajahat Habibullah, Former Chief Information Commissioner and Chairperson, CHRI India-EC:

- He said that he attended a meeting with the Central Information Commissioners and few former CICs earlier in the day regarding the current lockdown situation and discussed challenges being faced by the Commission to continue its mandated task of hearing cases and helping people to access information. The main issues that were discussed in the meeting were: how should they connect and provide assistance to people in this time, how to regulate staff movement, how to ensure sanitisation of the premises, how to issue notices and conduct hearings and the like.
- Most important discussion point was that what can be done in relation to transparent implementation of the scheme propounded by the government. Such relief schemes are important in the given circumstances. However, the government needs to ensure that it provides aid to the poorest and the needy and the information about the relief and rehabilitation package reaches out to them through proper communication. He said that government officers will report a good picture of the implementation of the schemes on the ground, so top officers may not even know what is happening in reality. Thus, Right to Information plays a major role in the process of communication of government's decisions and actions. Civil society can also help the government by monitoring whether supplies are reaching and relay other ground information to it.
- CHRI in the present situation has worked with the government by writing to them on crucial issues. We should also offer to collaborate with the government in its efforts to reach out to the people who need relief and rehabilitation the most.

The moderator added that NITI Aayog has written letters to NGOs including foreign funded NGOs about what they have been doing during the epidemic and what assistance they can offer to the Government to handle the situation more efficiently.

Mr. Sanjoy Hazarika, International Director, CHRI:

- He mentioned that there was a conference of the UN Human Rights Council attended by ambassadors and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights on

2nd April 2020 regarding the COVID19 pandemic. In his remarks the Human Rights Commissioner highlighted the fact that that crackdown on human rights was taking place in several countries in the times of COVID lockdown. According to him, some governments were using this situation to gain more power and get back at their opponents, including cracking down on people's freedom of information and expression.

- He said that internet must not be shut down even in a crisis situation but such steps were being taken in several places.
- He pointed out that there has been a rise in instances of racial discrimination and abuse of people from the North East in several parts of the country which is totally unacceptable. He urged that we must mobilize people and fight against discrimination of any kind in this crisis situation.
- He said that we also need to realise that the understanding of the concept of national security is changing worldwide. It is no longer about protecting borders or having nuclear weapons, because they do not protect us from an invisible enemy like the corona virus. Borders become invisible in such times. Animosity becomes meaningless during such times.
- One suggestion for dealing with such circumstances is to cut the budgets of military/security institutions and put that money into health, education, women and children's safety, welfare of migrant workers and their families. He said providing safety nets for the marginalised is most crucial during the time of crisis.
- We should capture stories of resilience, hardships and even abuse of power that people have faced and will continue to face in these times and disseminate them widely, he added.
- He said that the world will drastically change after we emerge from this lockdown. The governments will have much more power than they used to have earlier. He emphasised on reclaiming civil society spaces post-lockdown- this will be an immediate challenge before us, he said.

Dr. Devidas Tuljapurkar, Senior Leader, All India Bank Employees Association

- He started by explaining that the some of the questions that are relevant for the banking sector right now are: how will poor people access bank accounts? How will they gain access to information about the same? Under section 4 of the RTI Act government has the important duty of providing information to people. However, not many people have adequate information about the relief schemes that the Government has launched for them.
- He said out of the 20.50 crore PM Jan Dhan Yojana accounts opened for women nearly 23% are inoperative. At the rate of ex gratia payment of Rs. 500 per month per account Rs. 30,000 crores will be deposited in these accounts. This work is already being done. However more than one in every five such bank accounts is inoperative.

- Given the millions of inoperative accounts, how will women be able to get them reactivated using their Aadhaar numbers or other identity documents during the time of lockdown, he asked. Another problem is that the millions of migrant workers do not always carry their passbook and other id proofs with them as most of them leave such documents in their homes while migrating to or from their workplaces. These workers stand alienated from the relief schemes. They will have urgent need of cash as they have lost their jobs. Most of them may not have received their salaries either. So ensuring cash flows for such people, including those dependent on pensions is a big and serious challenge during the lockdown, he said.
- He said that the interest rate payable on people's savings bank accounts has recently been reduced by 0.25%. This amounts to an estimated Rs. 9,000 crores that people will not get from their savings. Also, during the last one year the savings account interest rate has been reduced progressively by more than 1%. Cumulatively, this amounts to a deduction of Rs. 30,000 crores from the pockets of people who save money in banks. This is not an inconsequential amount. The Government has a duty to plough back more and more funds for the welfare of people during such times of crisis.
- The announcement of ex gratia payment into the PMJDY accounts has resulted in a major rush to banks for withdrawing the money. As a result of the crowding of customers at Banks, social distancing which is the guiding principle to prevent contagion from spreading has been ignored. Such situations may be avoided by identifying alternative methods of making monetary disbursements to people. As happened during the Demonetisation exercise of 2016, the banking system was not prepared to handle the current crisis. Bank Mitras and the rural post office network which cover large parts of rural India may be employed to ensure delivery of monetary assistance at the doorstep of households.

RTI activists from States & UTs

Bihar -Ajay Balajee, Janadesh:

- He said that the government's planning for corona is not adequate. People in villages are very confused about the situation. For example, under Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana, BPL persons are entitled to receive 3 cylinders free. However, when the poor from Mr. Balaji's village went to gas agencies, they were told to pay the full amount on the spot for collecting cylinders and informed that the government will remunerate the money to their accounts later on. He said this is most likely not the case. Hence, there seems to be lack of communication about the manner of implementation of relief schemes from the government's side as far as the people who need it the most are concerned.
- He said, post offices would be the best method to ensure that money reaches the people intended in such situations. Instead of sending money through banks, the government can ensure that money is delivered through post offices and postal employees to people at their doorstep in rural areas while observing all necessary precautions. This will ensure door-step delivery of essential commodities like gas-cylinders while ensuring social distancing, he added.

Chhattisgarh- Rajkumar Mishra, prominent RTI activist and PIL petitioner:

- He said that he is in agreement with the point that the general public has to stand in long queues to collect cash from banks. Funds transfer through Post offices is a good suggestion, he said.
- Another suggestion for this situation is to use technological solutions. Smartphones have been distributed across Chhattisgarh by the Government and are available across many villages. Using these, the government can transfer money to them through Google Pay and other android apps. In the past, beneficiaries of welfare schemes and programmes did not receive full benefits of the funds spent on them by the central government due to corruption. This has been solved to a large extent over past few years by the use of technology. He gave an example that people can use phones for making and receiving payments at sabzi mandis, etc. Lots of organisations in our country are already using technology to dispense their services. If technology is used to the optimum by all organisations around the country, it would greatly aid transparency, he added.

Arunachal Pradesh –Bamang Tago, Arunachal Citizens’ Rights:

- He said that Arunachal doesn’t have many COVID19 cases as of now, but the state faces several other problems; much like the rest of the country.
- Use of technology might be a good suggestion, but it will not work in the state of Arunachal Pradesh since only 3 out of 25 districts are connected to the Internet. As several districts lie right next to the border with China, for security reasons, they have not been connected to mobile telephone services- how will they receive money online and get access to essential supplies, he asked? Despite the claims about the coverage of people living in rural areas under the PM Ujwala Yojana, many parts of Arunachal remain uncovered. People still depend on firewood for fuel. But when the lockdown is implemented strictly, how will they go out to gather firewood? They will be worse off, he said.
- There is a lack of clarity on how Garib Kalyan Yojana package announced by government will help Arunachal. Few others and himself are offering their voluntary help in this area, but the government should take quick steps in this regard, he added.

Uttar Pradesh -Naveen Tiwari, well known RTI advocate:

- He said that this is not the time to ask the government to change policies or bring about big reforms in its working. This will be a humongous task for a government working to solve the current COVID19 situation. Government is already working with civil society organisations to provide aid to the people and we should work as a catalyst for such initiatives and engage with the government, he added.

- He said civil society organisations are also thinking about helping the government and providing information to the people. They have also identified problems in government's functioning and are collaborating with them to solve the problems.
- One problem than can be resolved is inadequacy in communicating how to access government welfare and relief schemes to the poor. Just like the Central Government had set up Empowered Groups of Officers to manage the lockdown process on various fronts, similar groups must be established at the level of the States also.
- He suggested that government must communicate schemes through their existing media networks like Doordarshan. He mentioned that in the PM Ujjwala Yojana case the communication gap is that people have not been informed that the money for the cylinders has already been transferred by the government to their bank accounts.
- We also need to get in touch with nodal agencies of the government and offer them our help. There are problems of using technology, especially by the poor or elderly who are not well versed with it, he added after narrating one bad experience of his own where he lost some money while attempting a digital transaction.
- He supported Mr. Habibullah's idea of engaging with the government to ensure that the relief measures are implemented properly. He drew attention to the problems faced by safai karamcharis who have been covered by the insurance programme under the Garib Kalyan Yojana. He suspected that many of them might not even be aware of such an entitlement even as they go about their business of maintaining sanitation every day.
- He said that the situation regarding implementation of the RTI Act across the country is disappointing. One way of solving this problem is to invoke the urgent request provision in the RTI Act related to life and liberty for getting information without delay.
- Lastly, he mentioned that the process of receiving information and appeals are either time taking or problematic and should be improved, till then the status of RTI Act implementation will remain bad.

The moderator made an interjection here about the futility of depositing money in Bank accounts of the beneficiaries of PM Ujjwala Yojana when access to banks during lockdown and the problems posed by social distancing are so acute. The problem of inoperative accounts would also exacerbate the situation.

Maharashtra- Bhaskar Prabhu, Mahiti Adhika Manch

- He said that the Empowered Groups have been constituted by the Central government. They have been given the task of supervising the supply of essential commodities and relaying information to the public. However, there is little information about them among the public who are eligible for these benefits. We should work with the Officers' Groups in-charge of ensuring adequate

communication to reach out the information to people who are entitled to support like access to essential supplies etc. He expressed worry at the state of confusion about the manner of implementation of the PM Ujjwala Yojana. The government must clarify whether the gas cylinders will be delivered free of cost as mentioned in the notification. It does not mention anything about receiving payments in bank accounts by the beneficiaries who will then draw the sums and make payments to their suppliers, he said. Further, he said that as per the rules relating to the supply of gas cylinders, they must be delivered at the doorstep of the consumers instead of they being required to visit the agency to collect their cylinders.

- Regarding accessing ex gratia payments deposited in bank accounts, he said that a plan of action is required whereby people are not put to misery while drawing their entitlements and social distancing is also maintained. .If the government doesn't remain transparent in these times, civil society organisations will not be able to reach out to people according to the needs of the time, he added.
- Moreover, if transparency does not happen automatically as required, we have a duty to inform and question the government about its performance, he said. He suggested that civil society actors must demand the plan of action for implementing the COVID relief package at the State and the district levels.

UT of Jammu & Kashmir-Raman Sharma, prominent RTI activist and mediaperson:

- He said that technology is a major controversial issue in J&K which continues to be provided with only 2G connection speeds for mobile services. We should appeal to the government to restore 4G services across the country, which J&K has been deprived of since August 2019.
- He suggested that communication of schemes launched by the government should be done on a daily basis on TV. This is particularly important because due to social distancing, not many people in Jammu are buying newspapers. So their access to information must be ensured through alternative methods.
- Through Daily Bulletins on Health, the Government has been disseminating information about the spread of and action taken to control COVID-19. Similar bulletins must be issued on a daily basis to inform people entitled to receive ex-gratia and other kinds of DBT support through the Relief Package about the manner of accessing them.
- Oil marketing companies and related agencies should also start issuing Daily bulletins at the State and district levels about supply and off take of gas cylinders to ensure greater transparency in the manner of implementation of PM Ujjwala Yojana. Similar bulletins may be issued on a daily basis about the working and outputs of industries manufacturing essential goods. He also suggested that information about the supplies and off take of essential items under the Public Distribution System may also be shared through Daily Bulletins to prevent hoarding and black-marketing.

Karnataka- Pradeep Bhat, RTIOnline.com:

- He explained that his team has been working to relay the data released by government and the Indian Council for Medical Research on their RTI Online website. However, this is a difficult task as the government often gives poor quality or inadequate amounts of data which are hard to break up and share with people on a real time basis.
- If the Government does not furnish data proactively, it can also affect other organisations working on the ground in these times. These are the times when communication of real time data should be ensured as much as possible including proactive disclosure under RTI.
- One suggestion is to adopt the work from home model in government departments. The Government should start supporting such facilities for all its institutions, including the Information Commissions. This will help people in asking and receiving information even during the lockdown.
- Another suggestion for the government is that it should take help from RTI activists, experts and other organisations for disposing off information requests in the current times, he added.

Delhi-Shameer Rishad, Javed Abidi Foundation:

- He mentioned that in a recent meeting organised by his NGO-Javed Abidi Foundation, people with disabilities (PwDs) of different kinds shared the challenges they are facing during lockdown.
- He said that the main issue for the disabled is accessibility, which was ignored even before the corona virus had begun spreading. He explained that people with blindness or locomotor disabilities not go out of their homes for getting food items on their own due to the nature of their disabilities. The shop owners who used to provide food items and other consumables are refusing to go to their doorstep to deliver on account of the requirement of social distancing..
- He mentioned that they also face other problems due to the norm of social distancing. PwD often require caregivers to assist them in their day to day life. We need to ensure these caregivers are reaching the PwD on a daily basis. It has been found that the government did create an option of curfew passes for these caretakers, but they have not been issue to caregivers in the past few days. The travel of these caregivers is also important; not all of them are residents of the area where PwDs whom they care for live. They are required to travel to their homes and back and the absence of any public transport during lockdown makes any kind of travel difficult. The Government has the duty to mitigate all these problems by making arrangements that are best suited to the requirements of PwDs.
- The deaf people also face problem in accessing information, as it is often not translated into sign language simultaneously. For example: the PM's speech was not fully accessible to them in the absence of a sign language interpreter after the first round of address to the nation. A sign language version of the speech was played only by DD news and that too after the speech was finished. In order to solve this

problem, simultaneous sign language interpretation must be arranged for these speeches telecast.

- Another issue is with the Garib Kalyan Yojna. This scheme divides money into three categories and PwD is one of them. PwD gets Rs 1000 only, which is insufficient for surviving in the current circumstances as it does not cover their medical expenses adequately.
- Moreover, Only 30% of PwDs have disability certificates, which will be required for availing the benefit of the relief scheme. This is the biggest challenge, he added.
- According to a recent RTI intervention in Delhi, only 13 hospitals have been made accessible for PwDs. This raises the question of how many quarantine shelters will be accessible for PwDs in the future.
- Access to banks is a problem for PwDs because their circumstances often prevent them from visiting the banks in person. So, they cannot access the money that the government is transferring for the time being into their accounts. To solve all of the above-mentioned difficulties, we should come up with a standard operating procedure which will address these problems and work with the government to implement them he added. The National Disaster Management Authority has issued guidelines for PwDs, and these should be strictly implemented, he said.

Tamil Nadu – Henri Tiphagne, People’s Watch Tamil Nadu, Human Rights Defenders Network:

- He said that matters related to people’s access to information are being taken up by the Central Information Commission despite the imposition of the lockdown, which should be commended. He said other Information Commissions must be prevailed upon to open up and restart their mandated work.
- The National Legal Services Authority and the State Legal Services Authorities SALSAs have worked during times of disasters to reach out to the people in the past with help to redress their grievances about the functioning of authorities responsible for providing relief and rehabilitation. However, they are not equipped at all to respond to pandemics like the one that has affected our country currently. People should have their grievances redressed, especially those regarding difficulties in accessing relief measures. People should have access to lawyers of the District and Taluk Legal Services Authority who have stopped working because the courts are not functional during the lockdown. He called for the advertising of the contact numbers of such legal aid lawyers in order to make them work for the people in need during the lockdown. It is also necessary to reactivate the courts by making the judges attend to work.
- The National Human Rights Commission which has also shut down must be reactivated to address issues of the people. It has stopped doing so in the current times when it is most needed. We should shame these human rights institutions who are refusing help to those in need. He suggested that civil society form a parallel people’s human rights commission to collect stories of deprivation, difficulty, suffering, atrocities and discrimination they face and publicise this through the

media in order to shame the existing statutory human rights bodies to wake up and address the grievances faced by people during these times of crisis.

Odisha -Pradip Pradhan, Odisha Suchana Adhikar Abhiyan:

- He mentioned that in the past few days, the government in Odisha has declared relief packages for residents of the State, of whom migrant labourers form a sizeable section. The most important declaration of the State government has been to order construction of quarantine houses at panchayat level, for which it has allocated Rs. 5 lakhs each. Three months ration of food grains like rice has also been put aside for people. The government also plans to provide Rs. 1500 to every migrant labourer. He and his team are monitoring these programmes at the panchayat level across several districts.
- Some of his findings are that dal and rice are not being supplied adequately in Odisha. Their team has also questioned the Central government about this issue. He also pointed out that, two of their RTI activists were beaten up in their village while they were collecting information about the manner of implementation of the relief measures. This matter has also been raised with the local government by his group, he added. We should note how anti-social elements in the society harass Human Rights defenders trying to engage with the government, even in the crisis times, he lamented.
- He said that they will be writing to the Special Relief Commissioner as labourers are suffering in urban areas every day.

Assam- Debojit Goswami, prominent RTI activist-

- He said, with regard to people's access to PM Jan Dhan accounts, the problem is with reactivation of inoperative accounts which requires completion of Know Your Customer (KYC) procedures. This is a huge problem in the north east specifically, he pointed out. Assam is one of the States where Aadhaar enrolment has not even been attempted as it is one of the States designated for enrolment of residents under the National Population Register process. The North East states also have a significant migrant workers population. For them, access to bank accounts is difficult because of the physical distance between their houses and the respective branches. Hence, they have to travel very long distances often through difficult terrain to reach their bank branches. It has also been found that services like ATMs are not functional even in cities like Guwahati as they do not have cash these days during the lockdown. A lot of people are being forced to work without money in the present circumstances, which is not a desirable situation.
- The district level welfare funds also have a possibility of being misused. Assam has received loads of donations in light of the COVID19 pandemic. The Health Dept. collected several crores of voluntary donations within the span of a few days. However, there are no guidelines on how this money should be used and there is little transparency about actual spending.

- The State Information Commissions are also not working; a situation that is not very different from normal times, he added.

Manipur- Joykumar Wahengbam, Human Rights Initiative-

He shared some of the activities taken up by the State Government of Manipur in response to Covid 19 over the email as he was not able to join the meeting due to technical problems.

- He explained that the CM of Manipur has announced a scheme of providing 4 kg rice per head free of cost for non-ration cardholders and 5 kg per head for ration cardholders. However, there are numerous scandals involving corruption and malpractices. 2 to 5 kg of rice have been provided only to voters who voted for the present government in many constituencies. MLAs involved in the implementation of the National Food Security Act (NFS Act) along with a nominee appointed the Deputy Chief Minister who is himself said to be under cloud, are engaging in gross violation of the provisions of the NFS Act.
- The State Government has taken up sanitization of the public places with poor service delivery, he added.
- He highlighted that some of the students who are studying outside the state have been provided with Rs.2000/- in their bank accounts through RTGS. The JanDhan account holders have been paid Rs.500/- each for now through their bank accounts.
- He mentioned that there is no clarity about the manner of utilization of the Relief Fund collected by the Chief Minister and that sanctioned by the Central Government. Manipur is far away from Delhi and all sanctioned funds of relief package may not be used during lock-down. Instead they may be misused by the State Government. So, he suggested that RTI users of Manipur would like to join CHRI's partnership initiative to monitor the response of the government to COVID-19 epidemic and the related relief measures by using RTI Act.

Andhra Pradesh & Telangana- Rakesh Reddy Dubbudu, United RTI Forum:

He shared some of the challenges from across the State in response to Covid 19 over the email as he was not able to join the webinar due to technical problems.

- He mentioned that identification of migrant workers and disbursement of benefits to them is a challenge. The numbers need close monitoring along with pushing to spend the BoCW amount.
- He highlighted that it is important to get real-time data & information on ration supply & monetary benefits being distributed under the PM Garib Kalyan Yojana.
- He mentioned that effectiveness of the banking system in disbursement of the monetary benefit by the government is very crucial for ensuring that the ex gratia payments reach the impoverished when they need it the most.

CHRI staff-

Shikha Chhibbar, Access to Information Programme:

She said that she has tried making calls to 24 State Information Commissions, she found that they are not working during the lockdown. Many of the state ICs have the technology and resources to contact the public and conduct hearings through video conferencing, but they are not utilising them in the current times. In light of this shutdown of State information Commissions, they should be asked by the local RTI activist groups to wake up and start conducting hearings in urgent matters by utilising their resources properly.

Aditya Sharma-Media an Communications:

He said that there should be technological review of the State's capacity to put information online. This review should be an assessment of our infrastructural capacity and what we need to do more; all of which will help the government(s) to identify information gaps and improve their online facilities.

Sudhasri Y. - Intern:

She said that technology shall be used to monitor whether daily wagers and migrant labourers have received the promised rations or not. Feedback must be collected from States through field level workers and shared with the government. Social media must be used to spread awareness about the relief measures, she added.

Next steps during the lockdown and afterwards-

Mr. Wajahat Habibullah's suggestions:

He said that using the life and liberty clause in relation to implementation of the Garib Kalyan Yojana was his suggestion in the earlier meeting with the CIC as well. They have to now decide on which important cases that must be taken up on an urgent basis by the Commission. One category of such cases could be those that are related to Garib Kalyan Yojana.

In relation to the problem of the non-functioning of the State Information Commissions, he said that we need to ensure that they work in times of need and start responding to the public's demand for information. He suggested that he is happy to write to all state ICs urging to start the work immediately.

Mr. Naveen Tiwari's suggestions:

He questioned whether it is prudent to take on a huge task to survey the state of RTI and people's access to information in the current times. In such circumstances, some might become excited and would like to create parallel systems for already-existing institutions. However, there is no need for such steps. The government's orders should be read more closely in order to resolve all interpretational problems. An example of this is, if we would have understood the word "transferring" in the Ujjwala scheme notification of the government, our interpretation would have led us to believe that the government has already paid for them in the bank accounts for 3 months and agencies should be providing the gas-cylinders by now as soon as customers pay them the stipulated charges.

He suggested that we should not do the job of the Empowered Groups, like supplying essentials and information. However, we should do everything to help them perform these activities themselves. He highlighted Empowered Group No. 6 mentioned in the notification (notification which the Moderator had circulated to all participants before the webinar) which has been given the task of coordinating action with NGOs. Mr. Amitabh Kant is the Head of this Group and we must approach him with any discrepancies we may encounter with the implementation of the Garib Kalyan Yojana at the ground level.

He suggested that the Government should keep sharing information with people through platforms like Door Darshan because it has the widest network.

He opined that State Information Commissions might not be able to help in these circumstances, so we should not depend on them. We should resort to working with civil society organisations and fill in gaps by engaging with the government where they are unable to deliver effectively.

Mr. Raman Sharma's suggestions:

He said that banking has been declared by the Government as an essential service, because they continue to function today. The same is true for Jammu. It is also known that J&K panchayats and sarpanches have considerable financial resources at their disposal. People in Jammu area want money to be released for relief work; this suggestion can be raised with the Government, he said.

Mr. Raj Kumar Mishra's suggestions:

He pointed out that there are even more serious problems in some States. For example, he explained that some companies are diluting and adulterating sanitisers and selling them in the market at exorbitant prices. In order to tackle this problem RTI activists must use the law to collect samples officially, have them tested for quality and file complaints against the culprit companies.

He mentioned that he has advocated for the use of technology several times before the Chhattisgarh Information Commission, but they have failed to take up this issue. This problem should be addressed now at the earliest.

Mr. Bhaskar Prabhu's suggestions:

He said that public grievance should be routed to the State level empowered groups of officers. Organisations at state level should work for communicating such schemes to the people, down to the taluka or even lower at the field level. The State Governments should be inquired about their plans for implementing the ideas discussed at this webinar. Information should be put up on state government and district level websites for establishing people's access to government services in efficient manner.

He mentioned that the Maharashtra Information Commission is not functioning at present. They are trying to work online but the non-availability of staff and other issues have emerged as roadblocks.

Mr. Sanjoy Hazarika's remarks:

- He said that this conference call has resulted in the expression of diverse voices from across the country, for which he is grateful. Our situation is similar to billions in other parts of the world, but we cannot stop trying to hold the government accountable for providing information to its citizens.
- He said that the way the police is behaving with migrant workers, is reason enough to hold the government accountable for its wrongful actions.
- Our health care is at a critical stage currently. It requires more efficiency and it is not prepared for a disaster like these- especially with regard to the availability of doctors and other health infrastructure. He spoke about his organisation in Assam which runs Boat Clinics which reach out to around 3-4 lakh people every year for providing health care in the most remote areas of the country. They continue to work even during the lockdown period by providing essential services to people.
- Access to health care is a basic human rights issue that needs to be talked about, because without health there will be nothing, he added.

The webinar ended with the moderator expressing his gratitude to all participants. He said that a report of the proceedings would be prepared and circulated. The problems and solutions highlighted will be shared with the concerned government agencies for further action.

For more information please contact:

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