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To  
The Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi  
South Block, Raisina Hill,  
New Delhi – 110001  
March 27, 2020

**Subject:** Engagement with the Civil Society to fight Covid-19

Dear Mr Prime Minister,

We write to you with the resolve and commitment to join hands with you and the entire country in fighting one of the biggest battles of our lifetimes and to defeat the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Covid-19 pandemic has created an unprecedented, once in a century, public health and social and economic emergency. Your government's response including the announcement of the 21-day lockdown, the launch of the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan scheme and the package for public health shows you have been willing to make tough decisions in people's interest.

In your March 19 address to the nation, you urged the civil society to play an active role in this fight against Covid-19. India has a large and vibrant civil society that works on issues ranging from social justice, livelihood, health, to humanitarian responses during the time of earthquake, floods, and drought. I urge you to engage the civil society organisations and add more power to the response your government has mounted.

The financial package announced on March 26 is welcome, particularly the decision to prioritize unorganized workers and women and the announcement of health insurance cover for frontline providers. However, many challenges remain. Based on our experience and that of our partners in the preceding days, our contacts on the ground and our experience, we would like to make eight recommendations to strengthen India's response and reconstruction.

#### **1. Ramp up free testing and ensure samples are collecting**

India should aggressively ramp up testing to include all those with symptoms or even loosely matching the criteria to curtail community spread and release district level information on Covid-19 cases. Testing should be made free in both public and private sector in line with the recommendations made by the ICMR; current private sector rates capped at 4500 INR are too expensive given that 74.25% of households earn less than 5000 INR per month (SECC, 2011). Mechanisms need to be put in place to encourage collection of samples from homes or collection centres closer to the communities to minimise crowding at health facilities.

## **2. Ensure humane enforcement of the lockdown**

The decision of the lockdown was an important public health measure. However, urgent steps are needed to orient those tasked with its enforcement to allow movement of essential workers and respect dignity of those suspected or infected or needing to travel for unavoidable reasons. Specific steps are needed to ensure physical distancing and testing of the elderly, children under the age of five and chronically ill and ensure home delivery of groceries, food and other essentials, particularly to those medically vulnerable. A decentralized quarantine network also needs to be set up across the country. While health insurance for frontline responders announced yesterday is welcome, additional steps like hazard/incentive pay, reimbursement of all expenses, ensure testing and provision of protective gear and enhanced ex-gratia compensation would be important. Ensure safety equipment for all scavengers and sanitation workers. Lastly, resuming free public transport for transportation of essential personnel would be important to improve the effectiveness of the response.

## **3. Enhance public health provision in advance of the spread**

India needs to do more to ensure safety of health workers and those on the frontlines of the response by making available personal protective equipment to minimize the risk of their infection and monitor and prevent any discrimination or attacks on health workers. Temporary health infrastructure needs to be ramped up by creating temporary hospitals to cope with upcoming demand. The number of beds must be enhanced, and volunteer doctors and nurses called in among retired doctors and paramedical professions and undergraduate medical and nursing students. Aggressive steps are needed to address shortage of ventilators, oxygen and personal protective equipment through any means including ordering industry to switch to production of essential equipment. Ambulance facilities and other measures for transportation of patients to hospitals amidst the lockdown must be enhanced. Steps to distribute supplies of soap, sanitizers and enforce price controls for essential equipment which continue to be sold on high prices should be taken.

Healthcare should be free and violations of patients' rights and overcharging by private hospitals must be taken seriously. If necessary, the government can consider requisitioning private hospitals, while also surging state capacity. Uttarakhand has taken over private hospitals having 100+ beds, a practice that could be taken to other states. The MoH&FW advisory for public and private hospitals to not turn away suspected patients, must be made binding given reports of denial of care.

## **4. Protect informal workers, the poor and the vulnerable**

The raft of measures taken as part of the recovery package announced yesterday are welcome. However, more could be done. Urgent support is needed for migrant informal sector workers including food, temporary housing (for those stranded) and cash transfer. The government should explicitly ban reduction in workforce of MSMEs and other enterprises and put a freeze on evictions and demolitions in all low-income settlements for the duration of the pandemic.

We regret that despite the package, some of India's most marginalized, like unregistered construction workers and those without Jan Dhan accounts, will remain outside social protection during the pandemic. According to the World Bank's Global Findex Database 2017, 20% of Indian adults lack a bank account; 54% of women's Jan Dhan accounts are inactive. Overall, compensation for workdays lost for daily wage and informal sector workers must be in line with the minimum wage. Given that MNREGA work is suspended in view of distancing requirements, days of closure should be considered as days worked without waiting for the local administration to find work that is safe and make personal protective equipment available. Free ration under the PDS should be available for everyone in need and without biometric verification on PoS machines. Home delivery of PDS and mid-day meals/dry ration/nutrition supplements under the ICDS programme must be undertaken and a network of community kitchens expanded to ensure that the homeless, destitute, and those left outside the ambit of PDS and other cash transfer benefits do not remain hungry. In the formal sector, the government should pay EPF contribution to all employees earning under 15,000 per month, not just those employed by companies where they constitute 90% of the workforce or having under 100 workers.

## **5. Put in place a package to revive the economy, but for the people and not corporations**

We welcome the decision to prioritize people over the corporate sector in yesterday's package. Any eventual rescue packages for the industry must be conditional on them committing to no layoffs, enhanced workplace public health measures and introduction of paid sick leave. Corporate bonuses should be frozen. Your personal

intervention may be needed for the corporate sector to step up, particularly address shortage of critical equipment. The government may also consider postponing payment of the proposed dearness allowance to government officials, enhance tax of large farmers, religious institutions and wealth taxes, using the funds to meet the needs of the vulnerable. Affordable credit may be extended to SMEs and woman run home-based enterprises through nationalized and private sources to enable them to survive the crisis. You could personally reiterate your request to states to direct employers against laying off workers, particularly in the informal sector and MSMEs. Wage subsidy may be explored to enable companies to continue employment.

#### **6. Ensure that the response is gender and socially inclusive**

The Covid-19 response needs to address the specific needs of women, the LGBTQ community, persons with disability and marginalized communities. With good WASH facilities critical for a victory over Covid-19, it is critical that water by tankers is reached to slums and rural areas with poor access to water to minimize burden on women. It is critical that helplines are available, working and publicised for information and psycho-social support for women facing domestic violence. Special police units to be charged with rescuing women who complain of domestic violence and take them to their natal families, relatives of their choice or functioning shelter homes. Steps need to be taken to address racial discrimination against people from the northeast.

#### **7. Address the needs of India's children**

In these difficult times it is important to ensure child safety, protection and counselling. Teachers or other personnel must remain in touch with children in families with history of domestic violence to minimize chances of their abuse. In case of prolonged closure, stringent mechanisms are needed to monitor and prevent child labour. The country needs to plan for early re-opening of schools given international evidence of risks for the vulnerable; use of schools as quarantine centres should be avoided. In case of prolonged closure, schools must be readied by preparing accelerated learning programs to compensate for instructional time loss, providing counselling and disinfecting school buildings and other facilities to ensure child safety. Timely availability of textbooks, uniforms, scholarships and other entitlements should be prioritized.

#### **8. Enable Civil society to join the fight against Covid-19**

Civil society is ready to step up and respond to this biggest crisis that India has faced this generation. The third sector can help by humanitarian response, pooling resources, running awareness campaigns and addressing issues of livelihood, among others. To make this happen, the government needs to come up with an enabling framework for the civil society organisations so that they can start working on the ground. Permissions for the movement of workers involved in COVID-19 programme are needed to enable all organisations with credible experience.

The world into which we would emerge at the end of the pandemic would fundamentally be a different one. It is a historic moment to enhance allocations for the public health and education sectors and enhance universal social security measures, particularly for the informal sector.

We would be keen to follow up to set up a coordination mechanism for civil society action in these times of crisis. We would look forward to your guidance to take it forward.

Regards,



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Chief Executive Officer  
Oxfam India