

Mitigating the Impacts of Covid-19 Lessons from the First Wave

Policy Brief

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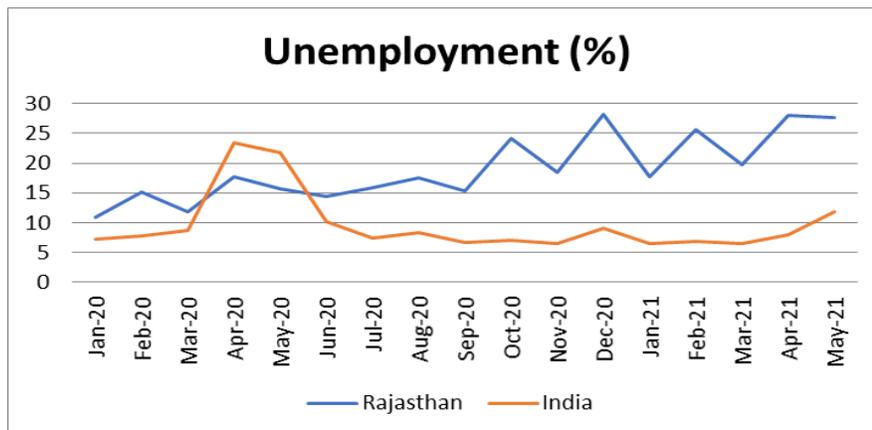
Introduction:

With the devastating second wave of the Covid-19 (2021) on the ease now, the state governments are slowly and cautiously lifting the restrictions on mobility and are allowing commercial and social activities. The second wave has ravaged the country, affecting each one of us directly or indirectly.

The second wave of the Covid-19 hit the country when the people were still struggling to recover from the various impacts of the lockdown which was imposed to control the first wave of the Covid-19 (2020). Various studies conducted to assess the myriad impacts of the first lockdown indicated that people suffered a great loss on several fronts, chief among them being the loss of their means of livelihood.

Even before the pandemic struck, the country's economy was on a slippery path with a continuous decline in economic growth¹ and rising unemployment levels².

In the wake of the pandemic, the data released by the union government and the state governments suggest that the country suffered from the worst kind of economic slowdown which resulted in negative economic growth and decline in per capita income. The recently released provisional data on the GDP and per capita income for the country show a contraction of 7.3% in the GDP (at constant prices) and a 4% decline in per capita net income compared to previous year.³ The Economic Review by the Rajasthan government also showed a negative growth of 6.6% in GSDP and a 5.29% decline in the per capita income in the state.⁴



Source: Centre for Monitoring of Indian Economy, (accessed on June 5, 2021)
https://unemploymentinindia.cmie.com/kommon/bin/sr.php?kall=wsttimeseries&index_code=050050000000&dtype=total

¹ <https://www.thehindu.com/business/Economy/indias-gdp-was-on-a-downward-slope-even-before-covid-19-wreaked-havoc/article32502173.ece>

² <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/unemployment-rate-rises-to-45-year-high-of-6-1-in-fy18-official-data-1559306879836.html>

³ <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseDetail.aspx?PRID=1723153>

⁴ http://plan.rajasthan.gov.in/content/dam/planning-portal/Directorate%20of%20Economics%20and%20Statistics/Publication/Regular%20Publications/economic%20review%20english/Economic_Review_English_2020-21.pdf

Similarly, in the post pandemic phase, unemployment has reached extremely high levels in the country and in the state as massive numbers of people lost their means of livelihood due to lockdown like shutting of industries, construction sites and other economic activities. The chart below shows the grim unemployment situation in Rajasthan for the period between January 2020 and May 2021.

Three Studies by BARC Trust

Three studies conducted by BARC Trust and Sajag Pahal also showed a very deep impact of the situations (lockdown, etc.) produced by the pandemic on people's livelihoods, food security and access to the government schemes and services.⁵ Here we have at the outcomes of the studies in brief:

1) Life conditions of returned migrant workers of Rajasthan:

To gain an understanding of the impact of covid-19 induced lockdown on the migrant workers of Rajasthan, BARC Trust and Sajag Pahal conducted a study on their status of income, health, their children's education and access to various welfare government schemes. This study was conducted in September – October 2020 interviewing migrant workers belonging to Rajasthan, who had returned to their homes due to the first lockdown and remained there by then. In total 502 migrant workers were interviewed telephonically.

Following are the main findings of the study:

- Ninety-five (95%) percent of the respondents reported a decline in their incomes even after the first lockdown was largely lifted.
- Before lockdown was imposed in the end of March 2020, 60% of the migrant workers used to financially support their homes in the state.
- One-fifth of the workers (20%) were not engaged into any paid employment at the time of the survey.
- Almost 80% of the workers' children had no access to online education. Two-thirds of all children were found studying in private schools.
- About 60% of the rural workers did not have MGNREGA job card.
- More than 20% did not have NFSA/ration card and more than 10% did not have Jan Aadhar card.
- Owing to the financial hardships in the post lockdown period, more than 40% of the workers expressed their willingness to return to their earlier workplace and half of the same wanted to return immediately.
- Majority of those respondents who expressed their willingness to stay at home did so as they feared unemployment and underemployment at the place to be migrated.
- Despite the unlocking process unfolding, services offered through schemes such as Mid-Day Meal (MDM) and Anganwadis were found to be severely affected in the period of August–October 2020.

⁵ <http://barctrust.org/sources/Report%20of%20Corona%20Relief%202020%20December.pdf>

2) Implementation of relief measures and other schemes in Rajasthan (2020)

In the light of the pandemic induced crises, BARC Trust also conducted a desk study on the implementation of relief measures and other government schemes. Major findings of the study can be summarized as below:

- **Ex-gratia assistance:** This first installment of **ex-gratia amount** of Rs 1,000 was released to 36.51 lakh beneficiaries of BPL, State BPL and Antyodaya scheme on March 25, 2020. This amount was also released to benefit 25 lakh construction workers, registered vendors and those not benefitting from pension schemes of the state.
- **Assistance under National Food Security Act (NFSA):** Percentage of NFSA beneficiaries who actually took ration was about 90% in March 2020 and remained at the same level till October 2020.
- **Pradhan Mantri Matra Vandana Yojna (PMMVY):** Number of registrations under the **PMMVY scheme** halved compared to the previous year. Even the target number of the beneficiaries has been halved by the government.
- **ICDS and MDM:** **ICDS** Directorate could not provide any data on the implementation of ICDS services during the lockdown and beyond. Similarly, there is no data available on the implementation of **MDM** during this period.
- **Palanhar Scheme:** 4,33,638 children benefitted from the Palanhar scheme in 2020-21 (up to October) compared to 3,88,353 children in 2019-20.
- **MGNREGS:** Increased number of individuals worked in MGNREGS compared to the previous year.

3) Study of the relief measures (2020) in Rajasthan and other states

The state governments across the country took initiatives for providing relief to the poor, needy and affected populations. Some of the learnings from the study of relief measures taken by other states of the country are:

- Many state governments made arrangements to provide **PDS ration at the doorsteps** of the beneficiaries. Similarly, the Govt. of Rajasthan could also take such initiatives for distributing the ration. This type of initiative would also be very useful to older populations and the persons with disabilities (PWDs).
- **Urban Employment Guarantee (UEG):** Some States (Odisha, Kerala, Himachal Pradesh and the latest, Jharkhand) have launched Urban Employment Guarantee (UEG) programme for providing employment security to the urban poor on the lines of MGNREGS. We feel it is important to initiate a scheme like the UEG programme in the state of Rajasthan to provide employment security to the urban poor. As we found out in the study on the conditions of the migrant workers (as outlined above), this kind of initiative will benefit the state population the most among all the relief measures and schemes to combat the impacts of the pandemic.
- **Community Kitchen** initiative of Kerala government through local self-governments (LSGs) with the support of Kudumbasree played an important role in providing meals to labourers in quarantine, and other groups

such as destitute and others. This type of initiative could also play an important role for the marginalized sections of Rajasthan.

- The government of Kerala launched a health insurance scheme named Awaz Health Insurance Scheme for providing support to migrants. This scheme is also helpful in providing valid documents to migrants and also helps the government to keep the records of migrants. A scheme like this will be worthwhile to help the internal migrants and also to the government as well as migrants at the destinations especially during any crisis like the present.

Recent initiatives by the Union and state governments to combat the impact of the Second Wave:

Both, the GoI and the GoR have taken the following initiatives in the wake of the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic:

Health and Vaccination

- **Rights of Patients:** NHRC issued a charter on the rights of patients in the hospitals and their companions.
- **Covid-19 Vaccination:** State government announced free Covid-19 vaccination for all citizens of 18-44 years age in the government health centers. Vaccination for people (45 years and above) is also being provided free by the central government in the government health centers. Later the union government announced to provide free vaccines to all the 18+ citizen in the government health centers.
- **Vaccination without identity proof:** Covid-19 vaccination can be done without identity proof for the homeless, De-Notified Tribes (DNTs) and other such non-mainstream citizen groups.
- **Improved Health Infrastructure:** Rs. 1 crore in each constituency may be disbursed from MLA Local Area fund towards improving health infrastructure and making Model CHC on the recommendation of the respective MLA.
- **Universal Health Insurance Scheme:** Rajasthan government launched **Chiranjivi Health Insurance** Scheme with universal coverage (with small fee from some sections of citizens) providing financial coverage up to Rs. 5 lakhs per annum. In the same, Covid-19 and Mucormycosis (black fungus) are included.

Food security

- **Additional food of 5kg per person** is to be provided free of cost in the months from April to November 2021 under the NFSA.
- **Rajasthan government** announced Rs. 50 crores from MLA Local Area Funds (Rs. 25 lakhs from each MLA fund) towards the food and social security of the vulnerable sections such as the poor, destitute, wage labourers etc. This fund has to be spent through the Covid Mitigation Fund under the CM Relief Fund.

- Supreme Court of India directed the state governments to design a **scheme to provide ration to the migrant workers** who are not getting benefits under NFSA and asked India government to provide ration for the same.

Relief to Covid-19 affected children and families

- **Relief for Children:** India government announced that the children who lost their parents due to Covid-19 would be given monthly stipend once they turn 18 years of age and a fund of Rs. 10 lakhs when they turn 23 years and free education till they turn 18, with all funds to be disbursed from the **PM Cares Fund**.
- Government of Rajasthan announced to provide immediate a financial relief of Rs. 1 lakh to children who lost their parents to Covid-19 and a fund of Rs. 5 lakh when they turn 18 years, and monthly stipend of Rs. 2500 till they turn 18 years. The government also announced to provide free education till they complete their class-12th through residential schools or hostels.
- The women who lost their husband will also be provided with a financial relief of Rs. 1 lakh and a pension of Rs. 1500 pm. Children of such widow woman are to be provided an assistance of Rs. 1000 pm and Rs. 2000 annual for books and uniforms.

Mitigating the Impact of Covid-19 Second Wave: Some policy suggestions

The impact of the second wave has been devastating. There is a need to prepare a comprehensive relief and rehabilitation plan for mitigating the impacts of first two waves of the Covid-19 and also to take measures to avoid the possible third wave. Based on the above studies, some of the policy suggestions for such a plan are as following:

Health

- **Rapid Vaccination Campaign:** the only effective way to avoid a third wave of the Covid-19 seems to be the mass vaccination. There is an immediate need to make sure that the vaccine is freely and easily available for all. Moreover, the state government can come out with various incentives, in addition to the relief measures, to motivate people to get vaccinated.
- **Improved Health Facilities:** The second wave of the pandemic has highlighted that our health care system is weak and vulnerable and is not able to provide adequate care in the face of a pandemic like Covid-19. Government must strengthen the public health care system, by adding all essential facilities such as beds, regular oxygen supply and reserve stocks, medicines, ICU beds, especially in rural areas and small towns. **The health sector budget in the state should be increased substantially to strengthen public health care system.**

Food Security

- **Food security for Non-NFSA families:** There is an urgent and immediate need to provide ration to the families and individuals who are out of the purview of NFSA.

- The Supreme Court has also directed the governments to prepare such a scheme for providing ration to migrant workers.
- **Increased Coverage in NFSA:** Government should open the process of inclusion of new beneficiaries in the NFSA list. The union government should increase the coverage under NFSA based on the current (estimated) population estimates instead of the 2011 population figures. The Supreme Court has also directed the government to look into this.
- **Rajasthan government should start a scheme to provide ration to the additional persons based on the current estimated population, till the India government revises the norms of to increase the coverage based on current estimated population.**

Livelihood security

- **Increased days in MGNREGS:** Number of days under MGNREGS should be increased to at least 150 days per year.
- **Initiating Urban Employment Guarantee:** The government should consider initiating urban employment guarantee scheme in the urban areas.

Relief to Covid-19 affected families

- **Measure for children who lost their parents to covid-19:** Many children lost their one or both parents during the two waves, especially in the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. The state government must come out with a comprehensive relief package for all such children who lost their parents in this period due to Covid-19 or other reasons.
- **Increased Budget for Covid-19 Mitigation:** Union and state governments must provide increased budget towards the Covid-19 mitigation.
- **Effective Implementation of Social Security Schemes:** As various studies have shown, the implementation of social security and food security schemes has been adversely affected and it has slowed down in most cases (many schemes have poor performance in terms of physical and financial achievements). Government should ensure effective implementation of the government schemes in innovative and decentralized ways.
- **Decentralised implementation:** The Covid-19 mitigation plan should be implemented in a decentralized manner.
- **Transparency:** There is a need for more transparency and accountability in the Covid-19 control programmes and funds including PM Cares Fund.