

# ASSIST REPORT ON COVID-19 AND RELIEF MEASURES

## 1. THE PROBLEM:

The novel coronavirus, or COVID-19, pandemic has spread across 213 countries and territories. This is an unprecedented challenge the mankind ever faced. Its rapid spread brought devastating effects on almost all aspects of human life.

Many countries declared lockdown to control its spread and people everywhere are asked to stay home to keep themselves safe and follow certain prescribed precautions and safety measures. Under the circumstances, the Government of India too declared a total lockdown across the Country from 23rd March and the state of Andhra Pradesh too had to follow the path. The situation of the people in our target areas like the rural agricultural labourers and other informal workers in the unorganised sector everywhere has become miserable. They are all dependent on daily wages. Their situation is, the day they work, they get wages, the day they get wages, they get food. Literally, theirs is a hand to mouth existence. With the lockdown, their life came to a standstill suddenly. They are too ignorant to understand what Corona is and how it is affecting the whole world, the only worry they always have is, how to survive with at least basic needs fulfilled for themselves and for their families. This simple and basic need of theirs got affected severely during the lockdown, with no work and no scope to get out of the house.

The question doing rounds in the rural areas is which of them is more serious - corona virus or lockdown? The debate continues. It is fighting two enemies at a time, the unknown Corona virus and the increasing positive cases in the state of Andhra Pradesh and the districts of Guntur and Prakasam, the operational areas of ASSIST and the known enemy of hunger. With lockdown imposed throughout the Country, the woes of the ordinary masses doubled.

Social stigma, fear of the unknown disease, hunger pains, keeping the family members safe, following measures like social distancing which was something unknown to them, taking care of the children and aged, lack of access to regular medicines, non-availability of medicines and medical facilities for the chronic diseases like hypertension, diabetes, little care for the pregnant and lactating women, depression, unable to cope up sudden illness and deaths, not able to perform last rites or rituals, not able to relate to near and dear ones at times of crisis and thereby foregoing the solace and comfort they were otherwise getting (especially in rural areas where social relations play an important part in people's lives, without which they cannot imagine a life), the confusing and conflicting versions of the Government about the disease and lack of clarity on the safety measures and precautions to be followed - in short, this is the state of affairs in our operational area in rural Andhra.

With ever increasing positive cases, a fear psychosis developed in people's minds, whether the person next door is normal or affected, whom to trust and whom not... a social stigma got attached to the disease. Earlier days, people affected by diseases like TB, leprosy were isolated, kept in special places and were treated as untouchables. The same analogy people are applying to the Corona positive patients and to the isolation and quarantine methods. With ignorance and superstitions ruling the day, for the illiterate and not so enlightened people, the subject is beyond their comprehension. Even the educated and urban elite are at times confused, what to

talk about the illiterate and rural masses? Added to this, the increasing number of cases in a community put public in a fix. Yet another stigma attached to the community, harbouring suspicion and fear. The issues were many and daily health bulletins and reports were alarming and confounding.

## **2. RESPONSE FROM ASSIST:**

The whole world is talking about the virus, the safety measures and precautions, the masks, the gloves, the PPEs, sanitisers, social distancing... and what not! The biggest problem here is to make the downtrodden understand the issues, to translate and transfer the information to them. This is the biggest challenge ASSIST faced. Still, to some extent, it could succeed with the target families because of the background work, where the organisation, as a part of its mission, focused on health and sanitation issues. Personal hygiene has always been a favourite topic for our functionaries. In their regular awareness and sensitisation tasks, such issues are dealt with daily. Now, the same is linked with corona and taken forward on a wider scale to cover social distancing as well.

With the help of authentic material on the subject, the team advocated the safety precautions to the target families repeatedly. The staff relied on the literature provided by the WHO, UNICEF and other national and international organisations while disseminating information so that the target families are well educated and rightly so. At the same time, the staff themselves adopted all necessary safety measures in carrying out the work. Necessary permissions and approvals from the authorities too were not ignored. They went hand in hand with the officials, involving them and working closely with them. The situation now demands that all the concerned work together, putting up a united fight against the common enemy.

Many villagers through their respective Village Development Societies approached the organisation with requests for help. Applications were pouring in from every community to save their lives from starvation. With fear of the glaring and stark reality of life in front of them, people pleaded for help with folded hands. The committee members and the village elders, unable to see the flight of the children and elderly people, turned to the organisation seeking help. Responding to the pleas made by its own people and unable to digest the fate of people whom it always cared for, ASSIST approached the donors on a war footing basis, simultaneously working out the budget for the required immediate assistance. ASSIST had two priorities set before them- taking care of their food requirements and saving them from the dreaded pandemic of Covid-19.

- Believing that hunger has no law and that nothing can be taught to a hungry man before filling his stomach, ASSIST rose to the occasion with free distribution of essential commodities - 10 kg rice, 2kg dhal and one litre cooking oil - may not be much to a family, but something for immediate survival.
- The political leadership in the present times took time for the Government to come to the rescue of people. In these circumstances, ASSIST and its staff are with people in need. The food material given by the organisation has been the great help to the starving families.
- Along with taking care of hunger pains, the second aspect of health issues were taken up. At times it was simultaneous, as even in food distribution, certain necessary precautions and safety measures were adopted by the staff and taught to the target families. Wearing a

mask, using soap or sanitiser and washing hands thoroughly and repeatedly and maintaining social distancing - were the aspects focused on.

- Personal hygiene has always been a priority issue in all ASSIST awareness programmes. WASH (Water, Sanitation and Hygiene) has been emphasised right from the beginning and washing hands before eating, after the use of washroom and before entering the house from outside is a traditional practice in Indian families. The same is reinforced by ASSIST by linking it to the Corona in the present times.
- Awareness creation and sensitisation of the masses is done effectively thereby curbing the further spread of the Corona.
- More importantly, communal harmony is also emphasised among the target families. As the travel history of a religious group played an important role in the rapid spread of the pandemic, especially in Guntur, Prakasam and Kurnool Districts, there were feelings of animosity among the local communities. The organisation took measure to eliminate any ill-feelings and to bring in peace and harmony.
- The worst affected group in this tragic situation is the migrant labourers. While immediate measures were taken to give them relief, the organisation vows to take it forward to emphasise their flight in all its future programmes through designing appropriate livelihood programmes. The lessons learnt will be incorporated into the approaches to development.
- Weaving is the main profession in some of the target villages. Weavers, mostly working on the material procured from the master weavers, are the worst affected community in Chirala area. The problems and the flight of this community is highlighted by the national media also. The weavers' association took up the issue with the government to extend certain welfare benefits to this community on par with others. As they have no other means of livelihood, the weavers requested for exemption or relaxation during lockdown to carry out their activities by following social distancing mode. This is another area close to the heart for the organisation and it vows to carry forward their cause with renewed interest and efforts.
- Once the lockdown is lifted and the Corona is controlled or at least brought to a halt from rapid spread, the organisation will review with the target population, the staff and the donors its future course of action. The priority areas for action would be sorted out - improving health by promoting sanitation and eating the right food, promoting sustainable livelihood activities, more vigorous savings to take care of emergencies like the present one, children's education and in certain areas preventing child labour relapse.
- As the Corona seems to be staying with us for more time, as per the information that is available with us, little more focus on relief measures, may have to be assessed. Masks may have to be distributed to all the target families. Special assistance may have to be extended to the family members of the victims.

### **3. RESPONSE FROM PARTNER ORGANISATIONS:**

If ever anyone believed in humanity and human values, it is now, at times like these. If you are not with people now, you can never be with them ever, because they may not be there to take your services. This was the motto demonstrated practically by the donor organisations. In fact, Covid-19 happened across the World, affected the countries of the donor organisations first and most severely than India, still no donor kept this in mind while extending their help to the families of ASSIST operated area. The response was most positive and immediate. No questions asked and no clarifications sought. This was their belief in universal brotherhood. The help from

partner organisations came in two ways: one is the special assistance and grant given by them exclusively towards relief and the second one is, allowing the ASSIST to make alterations in the existing budgetary provisions to accommodate the relief aspect. The people of the target area are forever grateful to these organisations for coming forward with much needed assistance in these critical times. People owe their life to these organisations and their belief in humanity has become stronger with this noble gesture of the partner organisations.

The organisations extended support are as follows:

- ⇒ FEMI Foundation, The Netherlands.
- ⇒ G-Star Foundation, The Netherlands.
- ⇒ RRDF, The Netherlands.
- ⇒ San Zeno Foundation, Italy.
- ⇒ The Kadoorie Charitable Foundation, Hong Kong.
- ⇒ GE, Hyderabad through United Way of Hyderabad.

#### **4. SUPPORT EXTENDED:**

While executing the sensitisation activities in a possible way among the target villages with the residential staff and through the community leaders and volunteers, ASSIST has been concentrating mainly on personal hygiene and behavioural changes in washing feet and hands with soap before entering the house and habituating the people to wash their hands with soap more frequently in a day, especially before meal and after using the toilet. Another significant factor imbibed in them is maintaining a minimum one metre distance with other person in any transaction. Either contacting with others or to go out of the house, one should compulsorily wear mask to prevent any virus epidemic.

Consequence to the lockdown in the Country, the labour force in the agriculture and other informal sectors affected very badly with the loss of employment and subsequently wages. ASSIST was able to provide 10 kgs rice, 2 kgs dhal and 1 litre cooking oil per each family to over 12,000 families in all its target villages and migrant families in Prakasam, Guntur and Krishna Districts of Andhra Pradesh.