Migrants in the pandemic and the challenge for local government

Lessons from India

Migrant workers heading home crammed inside a goods truck.

Source: Raju Kumar

Author:

Yogesh Kumar[1] and Kabir Shrivastava[2]

Abstract

This policy brief addresses a challenge for local government that has emerged with COVID-19, particularly in rural areas of developing countries. As the urban informal economy in India collapsed due to the pandemic, large numbers of people have been returning to their villages of origin in rural areas. However, some of their skills are not relevant in rural settings and the migrant workers cannot easily be absorbed into agricultural employment. Local government in these areas is therefore faced with a new problem that also has consequences for local democracy. The policy brief presents the problem, a case study and possible policy responses, with a focus on the district level of government in India.

About ICLD

The Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy (ICLD) is part of the Swedish development cooperation. The mandate of the organization is to contribute to poverty alleviation by strengthening local governments.

Introduction

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on migrant workers

Economies in most countries suffered due to lockdowns imposed to limit the spread of the virus. These lockdowns affected millions of informal sector workers. In India, there was an exodus of migrants from metropolitan cities towards villages. During their arduous journeys home, the migrants encountered various restrictions on movements due to the lockdowns.

Skewed urbanisation and ineffective local government: the structural constraints

India is the largest democracy in the world with constituted local governments in rural and urban areas. There are more than 3 million elected representatives who govern 250,000 Gram Panchayats, three serving about two-thirds of the citizens of India. Like many developing countries, India has a skewed pattern of urbanisation. Around 70 percent of the population lives in cities with population sizes of more than 100,000. Cities of that size account for less than 10 percent of the total number of cities and towns in the country (Census of India, 2011). Small and medium-sized towns lack an economic base to absorb excess labour supply in the agriculture sector, therefore there is usually large-scale migration from rural areas to metropolitan cities (Kundu, 2009).

[1] Executive Director of Samarthan-Centre for Development Support, a civil society organisation based in Bhopal, India. For more details, please visit www.samarthan.org. Email: yogesh@samarthan.org
[2] Architecture graduate from Maulana Azaad National Institute of Technology, Bhopal, and a designer with a keen interest in rural infrastructure.

Panchayats implementing social distancing measures at a public space in a village.

**Source:** Samarthan-Centre for Development Support

Planners, executives and leaders of local governments in urban areas were not prepared to deal with such kind of pandemic. There was high demand on local governments and administration to arrange transport, food and other amenities such as quarantine facilities. It was difficult to apply controls such as social inclusion of migrants who were perceived to be infected or ensuring social distancing in public places. Later, difficulties arose in providing gainful employment to match the skill sets of the migrants (PRIA, 2020). Moreover, local governments received neither clear guidelines from the Centraland the state governments nor additional flexible funds to meet the emerging local needs. This was a missed opportunity for local governments in both rural and urban areas to demonstrate their greater relevance to their constituencies with appropriate policy measures in place.

Methodology

This paper is based on primary surveys, studies and on-the-ground observation of the role of local government in the COVID-19 crisis. A primary survey was conducted after a strict lockdown was announced of 3,266 returnee migrants in the state of Chhattisgarh in India to identify their skill sets (Samarthan, 2020). Their expectations from local government were also mapped. Another set of data used in this brief was generated in year 2014 from Pawai, a small town, and from about 70 hinterland villages in Panna district in the state of Madhya Pradesh in India (Samarthan, 2014) where at least 10 stakeholder groups (especially elected representatives of the local governments, traders, farmers, teachers, and bankers), were interviewed to identify areas of planning for local governments. This study was conducted before the pandemic to explore the interdependence of small towns and hinterland villages for livelihoods promotion and delivery of various services. The policy brief draws significantly from these two studies.

Migrant workers skilled in the construction sector.

Source: Samarthan-Centre for Development Support
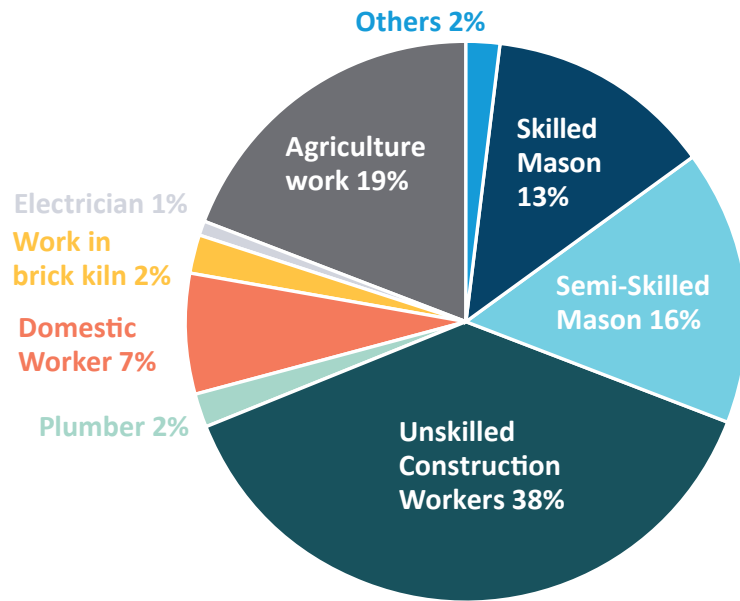
Graph 1: Skill sets of returnee migrants

Results

Relevance of skill sets of returnee migrants to meet the local need

The study of Samarthan conducted with returnee migrants showed that three-quarters did not own enough land to sustain an agricultural income. The migrants' skill sets could enable them to work in the non-farm sector. Almost one-third were skilled as plumbers, electricians, masons or are semi-skilled construction sector workers. Additionally, 38 percent were employed as unskilled labourers in the construction sector.

The 2014 study of Pawai town and the hinterland villages clearly showed that small urban centres were lacking infrastructural facilities for establishing marketing centres, educational centres, banks and other essential services that are necessary for a rural economy. Villages also require infrastructural development to strengthen their economic base and market access to enhance sustainable livelihoods for a large number of distressed migrants.

Migrants' construction sector skills, acquired while living in metropolitan cities, should be used in building the infrastructure of small towns which are in proximity of villages. Small towns cannot become vibrant economic hubs due to a lack of adequate infrastructure to enable economic activities to flourish, creating a need for well-developed agriculture marketing facilities and better institutional facilities for a non-agriculture sector to flourish (Kumar, 1989). The need for migrant-centric planning by local

governments has become apparent and urgent in the pandemic. Currently, local governments in rural areas and urban areas are failing to work in synergy to develop a comprehensive plan to utilise human and other resources more effectively.

Policy recommendations

These recommendations are for policymakers in central or provincial governments as well as local government leaders and officials:

1. Strengthen comprehensive regional planning of urban centres with rural hinterlands

It is important that comprehensive urban and rural planning is promoted jointly by local governments to develop functional economic linkages of the rural and urban economies. This can be done by joint consultative workshops to determine a vision for area development and to explore opportunities and challenges. A joint team of rural and urban local bodies can develop a plan of action for at least three to five years. This is imperative for addressing employment needs of the large number of returnee migrants with different skill sets that may not be suitable for the economy and lifestyle of rural areas or very small urban settlements. The Department of Planning and other State Departments dealing with local governments need to provide adequate financial resources and mobilise experts in different fields – namely, economists, spatial planners, architects, IT experts and so on – to work with local governments on an effective and reinforced mandate for comprehensive migrant-centric planning. Local governments also have citizens with different skill sets, such as retired or serving officials, technocrats, teachers, professors and doctors, who can volunteer their services to local governments.

2. Establish migrant resource centres for dignified livelihoods and social security

During lockdowns migrants found it difficult to get relevant information about their journey back home. With a regular inflow of migrants throughout the year, local governments should establish migrant resource centres[3] both at the source and destination. The centres could help a large number of aspiring migrants to find meaningful work in metropolitan areas. In a situation such as a pandemic, migrants in urban areas will be looking for cheap yet safe rental accommodation, health facilities, employment opportunities and legal advice for pending wage payments. Moreover, the centres could serve as counselling centres for migrants in psychological distress. Dedicated provisions should be made in the national budget for running the centres in large cities and in rural areas of high migration.

Migrant labours queue at the Migration Resource Centres.

Source: Samarthan – Centre for Development Support

[3] Migrant Resource Centres are a concept tried out by several civil society organisations in India to facilitate safe migration of poor people who are moving out. The centres are established at source to help prepare for migration as well as at the migrants' destination. Transfer of remittances, legal advice and support mechanisms are some of the key functions of these centres.

With local governments' limited resources, it is possible to dedicate a room on their premises to run an migrant resource centre, deploying one of their staff to provide services. Any local civil society organisation can also provide volunteers to run the centre. Raipur City and nine municipal-level local governments in the state of Chhattisgarh in collaboration with Samarthan, a local civil society organisation, have been running migrant resource centres.

3. Dynamic database of migrants for policymaking and benefit transfers

The national government[4] has accepted that there is no realistic estimate of the number of migrant workers in the country. This was stated in a response submitted to the Supreme Court of India in response to the migrants crisis during COVID-19. There are dated sample-based studies that provide some approximate figures. However, a robust real-time database of migrants needs to be developed by the national government. It should be maintained by local governments and monitored by state governments. Each migrant, when moving out of their village, should be registered voluntarily to declare: a) his/her destination; b) number of family members also moving out; c) social security number or unique identity; d) name and contact number of the employer/agent in their onward destination. The migrant should also register at the destination municipality after arrival. This database will facilitate easy transfer of social security benefits like food subsidy, old age or disability pensions, transfer of children and their scholarships to state-run schools. Moreover, it will be a useful database for rural and urban local governments to undertake more realistic planning for the provision of basic services for the population in their jurisdiction.

Conclusion

Local governments have a pivotal role in addressing pandemics, disasters or other contagious disease outbreaks in the local context. They need to look at their current capacities and gaps in order to be able to address such situations in the future. This may require reorganising functions and structures of local governments' administrative set-ups for delivering services. It may highlight the need to hire experts/additional staff or use volunteers from among local residents to support such initiatives. There is a need to revisit current town plans or development plans to formulate a strategy, processes and timelines to initiate new cycles of planning. There may be constraints on resources to address new challenges, it may require robust financial planning, reorganisation of budget heads and mobilisation of additional resources internally as well as from grants and aids.

---

[4] https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/govt-has-no-data-of-migrant-workers-death-loss-of-job/article32600637.ece

Key questions for local government

The following questions will be relevant for local government to explore their functions and authority in situations similar to the COVID-19 pandemic:

- In your local government, are structures, systems and processes flexible and robust enough to connect with the migrants and people in distress (due to the pandemic) to provide immediate relief and basic services?

- Is the local government proactive in thinking and acting, making use of available human and financial resources to take the measures required when needed – such as in the pandemic, social distancing at public places, relief measures for migrants, and so on?

- Is there a functional relationship with other neighbouring local bodies to invite them for collective planning to explore complementarities and the efficient use of limited resources in addressing issues emerging from the pandemic?

References and further reading

Census of India, 2011. *Provisional Population Totals: Urban Agglomerations and cities.* New Delhi: Census of India.

Kumar, Y., 1989. *Urbanisation, Urban Growth and Development in Uttar Pradesh.* Unpublished Doctoral Thesis.

Kundu, A., 2009. 'Exclusionary Urbanisation in Asia: A Macro Overview', *Economic and Political Weekly,* November 44 (48).

Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA,) 2020. *Migrant Workers Need Effective Support from Governments.* New Delhi: Society For Participatory Research in Asia.

Samarthan, 2014. *Sustainable Development Plan for the Town of Pawai and its Hinterland Villages.* Bhopal: Samarthan.

Samarthan, 2020. *Status of Migrant Workers in the State of Chattisgarh in India.* Bhopal: Samarthan.