A ‘duet’ for India’s urban women - Decentralised Urban Employment and Training

What is the issue?

- Public works could provide valuable support to the urban poor, especially if women get most of the jobs.
- In this regard, here is a look at a suggestion called the DUET (Decentralised Urban Employment and Training) scheme.

What is the need for social protection in urban areas?

- The COVID-19 crisis has drawn attention to the insecurities that haunt the lives of the urban poor.
- Generally, they are less insecure than the rural poor, partly because fallback work is easier to find in urban areas.
- Nevertheless, the urban poor are exposed to serious contingencies.
- These include both at individual (such as illness and underemployment) and collective (lockdowns, floods, cyclones, financial crises and so on) levels.
- There is, thus, a need for better social protection in urban areas.

What are the possible options?

- Universalising the Public Distribution System in urban slums would be a step forward, and it can be done under the National Food Security Act.
- But foodgrain rations do not take people very far.
- Employment-based support is one way of doing more.
    - It has two major advantages: self-targeting, and the possibility of generating valuable assets or services.
- There has been much discussion, in recent months, of a possible urban employment guarantee act.
- The specifics of the act, however, are not so clear, and there is little experience of relief work in urban areas.
- The Decentralised Urban Employment and Training (DUET) is a proposal in this regard.

How does DUET work?

- The government, State or Union, would issue “job stamps”, each standing for

one day of work at the minimum wage.

- The job stamps would be liberally distributed to approved public institutions.
- These may include educational institutions, hospitals, museums, shelters, jails, offices, transport corporations, public-sector enterprises, neighbourhood associations, urban local bodies, etc.
- These institutions would be free to use the stamps to hire labour for odd jobs and small projects that do not fit easily within their existing budgets and systems.
    - The "service voucher" schemes popular in some European countries works the same way.
    - But the difference is that they are used by households instead of public institutions, for the purpose of securing domestic services.
    - The service vouchers are not free, but they are highly subsidised, and households have an incentive to use them.
- Wages, paid by the government, would go directly to the workers' accounts against job stamps certified by the employer.
- To avoid collusion, an independent placement agency would take charge of assigning workers to employers.

What are the advantages?

- The DUET approach would help in -
    i. activating a multiplicity of potential employers
    ii. avoiding the need for special staff
    iii. facilitating productive work, among others
- It would also ensure that workers have a secure entitlement to minimum wages, and possibly other benefits.
- Notably, there is no dearth of possible DUET jobs. Many states have a chronic problem of dismal maintenance of public premises.
- To work well, DUET would have to include some skilled workers (masons, carpenters, electricians and such).
- That would widen the range of possible jobs.
- It would also help impart a training component - workers could learn skills "on the job" as they work alongside skilled workers.

How about giving priority to women workers?

- This should not be like a minimum quota for women. Instead, as long as women workers are available, they should get all the work.
- In fact, women could also run the placement agencies, or the entire programme for that matter.
- To facilitate women's involvement, most of the work could be organised on a part-time basis, say four hours a day.

- A part-time employment option would be attractive for many poor women in urban areas.
- It would give them some economic independence and bargaining power within the family, and help them to acquire new skills.
- Giving priority to women would have two further merits.
- First, it would reinforce the self-targeting feature of DUET.
- This is because women in relatively well-off households are unlikely to go (or be allowed to go) for casual labour at the minimum wage.
- Second, it would promote women's general participation in the labour force.
    - India has one of the lowest rates of female workforce participation in the world.
    - According to 2019 National Sample Survey data, only 20% of urban women in the age group of 15-59 years spend time in "employment and related activities" on an average day.
    - This stifles the productive and creative potential of almost half of the adult population of the country.

What are the challenges?

- How far will the public institutions concerned make active use of the job stamps is a big question.
- In the DUET scheme, the use of job stamps relies on a sense of responsibility among the heads of public institutions, not their self-interest.
- It is, thus, not easy to guess how intensively job stamps will be used.
- The best way to find out is to give the scheme a chance, may be by way of a pilot scheme in select districts or even municipalities.

Source: The Hindu

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