Battling Hunger during Corona

What is the issue?

- As the Prime Minister announced an all-India lockdown for 3 weeks to break the chain of Covid-19, one could see the extent of the threat.
- There should be a focus on handling food supply lines to ensure that people do not go hungry.

What was the relief measure that followed?

- A Rs 1.7 lakh crore Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana relief package followed the lockdown.
- This is too small to cope as the final package, including compensation for business losses, will be at least Rs 5-6 lakh crore.
- This would be financed by windfall gains from crude price crash, diverting all subsidies and some development funds, CSR funds of the private sector and invoking India's corporate leaders to come forward.

Why should food supply lines focused?

- There should be focus on handling food supply lines to ensure that people do not go hungry.
- But there should also be a focus that people don't crowd a few selling points, which can become hotspots of spreading the virus.
- The government has already announced that beneficiaries of the PDS can avail of three months ration in one go.
- The challenge is to ensure that Fair Price Shops deliver this in an orderly manner, and that their own supply lines remain intact.

How the crowd can be avoided?

- **Home delivery** would be ideal in such times to avoid crowding at one place. This is where **civil society**, with due safety gears, can play a role.
- NGOs, Resident Welfare Associations, paramilitary forces, religious organisations, etc., can be engaged in safe distribution of food.
- Those NGOs with experience in food preparation and distribution (like Akshaya Patra) can be at the forefront to guide the local authorities.
- All the perishables like fruits, vegetables, milk, etc need to move on mobile

vans in **packaged conditions** from street to street.
- The weekly markets need to be temporarily suspended, lest they become viral spreading centres.

Does India have enough resources?

- These retail distribution lines, be it of grains or fresh food, need to be seamlessly linked to wholesale supply lines of food.
- Luckily, government godowns are overflowing with wheat and rice -about 77 MMT on March 1, against a buffer stock norm of 21.4 MMT on April 1.
- Procurement operations for rabi crops are just around the corner.
- Food Corporation of India (FCI) and other procuring agencies need to be fully trained on safety precautions, and supplied safety gear, so that wholesale supply lines don't get choked.
- Farmers can be asked to come first to automated centres for procurement, and also expedite modernisation of mandis linked to silos.

How should mandi operations be handled?

- Mandi operations for fresh produce in large APMC mandis should be handled with due safety from the virus.
- Majority of operations require a massive labour force to fill gunny bags.
- They need to be trained and given safety gear to handle food.
- The challenge of screening and providing safety kits to these workers becomes doubly daunting, but is critical to stop the spread of virus.

What could be done further?

- The APMC Act should be suspended immediately.
- NGOs, civil society, and corporate houses should be encouraged to procure from farmers directly.
- Finally, when things settle, it will be worth knowing how this virus spread all over the world.
- There is a need for a better global governance for pandemics to avert the next crisis.

Source: Financial Express

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