



PRESS RELEASE

New Delhi, 13 March 2020

Need for Special Measures to Check Spread of COVID-19 among Homeless and Other Inadequately-housed Persons **Government Must Impose a Moratorium on All Evictions**

Given the global pandemic of the coronavirus/COVID-19, **Housing and Land Rights Network (HLRN)** calls on the central and state governments to implement special measures to prevent and check against the spread of this virus among homeless and inadequately-housed people, who face increased vulnerability, on account of their poor living conditions and already high morbidity.

India has at least 4 million people living in homelessness in urban areas and over 70 million people living in 'informal settlements' without access to essential services. The homeless population and those who live in settlements without adequate housing are particularly vulnerable to contracting and spreading this disease, as a result of their insufficient protection, high population density, low levels of nutrition, and lack of access to adequate healthcare and basic services, especially water. Additionally, the lack of information about the disease due to lower levels of literacy and similarities of symptoms with the common flu, could make the detection, testing, and treatment of COVID-19 among these marginalized population groups more difficult.

Homeless persons living on the streets as well as in shelters are extremely vulnerable. Shelters provide increased risks because of their high density and crowded living conditions, inadequate space, and lack of adequate sanitation and hygiene. In informal settlements, inadequate housing resulting from the lack of ventilation, space, and basic services places residents at increased risk of contracting and spreading the coronavirus. These groups and communities thus require specific measures, including in the form of improved living conditions and access to basic services, improved public health facilities, emergency housing provisions, protection from evictions, and other special protection measures, including healthcare coverage.

While we greatly commend the central and state governments for their rapid response mechanisms and their concerted efforts to check against the spread of the virus, HLRN would like to make the following recommendations to ensure that the most vulnerable—especially homeless persons and those living in inadequate settlements—are protected.

1. Need for improved living condition and access to basic services

- Ensure **regular supply of clean water in all homeless shelters and informal settlements** across the country. The basic prevention measure for COVID-19 is frequent washing of hands, but this is a challenge for the urban poor, as the majority does not have access to clean and sufficient water. Water tankers could also be stationed at designated points across cities/towns.
- Establish **sufficient and functional community toilets** with adequate water and sanitation facilities, and provide regular cleaning and disinfecting.
- Take sufficient steps to **provide adequate cleaning/disinfection** of common areas and spaces in informal settlements and homeless shelters and clusters.
- Ensure regular disinfecting and cleaning of blankets, sheets, mattresses, and other shared utilities in homeless shelters. Studies indicate that the virus could live on surfaces for a few days. Thus, ensuring that homeless persons have access to clean and hygienic living spaces is very important. Regular monitoring of shelters is also required.

2. Need for improved public health measures

- Ensure that **mobile health vans visit homeless clusters and informal settlements** frequently to check symptoms and treat those suffering from the common cold, cough, flu, and other illnesses. These vans should include trained medical personnel who are equipped to respond to this crisis.
- Set up **health camps in informal settlements/homeless clusters** that do not have access to Primary Health Centres. All medical personnel in government clinics and Primary Health Centres should be made aware of the threats, detection, and required responses to COVID-19.
- Ensure the **distribution of soap, sanitizers, disinfectants, and masks** (to those who require them) in informal settlements, homeless shelters, and areas where homeless people live.
- With the closure of all primary schools, take steps to provide mid-day meals and other nutritious food to children of homeless and other low-income communities.
- Prioritize medical attention and care for pregnant/lactating women, infants, older persons, and those with chronic illnesses from these communities. Children living on their own in street situations also need special attention.

3. Need for adequate information

- Ensure that the **government's awareness campaign on COVID-19 and its prevention also reaches homeless communities and residents of informal settlements**, including through the use of oral announcements and other means of information dissemination, in local languages, for those who are not literate.

4. Need for safe housing

- Provide **temporary housing and emergency accommodation** for homeless and other inadequately-housed persons who are not well or need to be isolated. Explore options for temporary housing, including utilizing vacant hotel rooms, buildings, and unoccupied residential facilities. Develop guidelines on self-isolation for those who are homeless.
- **Impose a national moratorium on evictions, demolitions, and forced relocation** of the urban and rural poor. Under the current circumstances, demolishing homes and rendering people homeless would greatly result in increasing their vulnerability to contracting and spreading the virus. An effective means to control the spread of COVID-19 is isolation, social distancing, and staying at home. It is thus absolutely essential that all states halt any plans to evict persons and destroy their homes for any reason, including ostensible 'public purpose' projects.

5. Need for social protection measures

- Recognize that people living in such settlements and homeless clusters are working in the informal sector and do not have access to health insurance, social security, and other leave benefits. Special measures, thus, need to be taken to ensure that loss of employment/work as a result of COVID-19 protection and prevention measures do not result in adverse impacts on the income and health of such workers.
- Ensure that protection and response measures do not result in the violation of the right to privacy.

Recognizing that COVID-19 and its rapid spread are great challenges for the state and its people; commending the central and state governments for their interventions and response mechanisms; and, appreciating greatly the work being done by healthcare providers and medical personnel, HLRN believes that measures to protect the most vulnerable should be incorporated into any state response plan. People on the streets and those living without adequate housing must have access to adequate information, protection, healthcare, and safe housing. Several countries, including the US and UK, are developing plans to address the special needs of homeless persons during this outbreak. We believe that India would benefit and save lives by incorporating a similar strategy on an urgent basis. Housing and Land Rights Network would like to offer its support in this essential task for the government.

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