

Date: May 21st/2020

To

The Honourable Chief Minister,

Government of Karnataka

Dear Shri Yeddyurappa,

We are gratified to note that there has been efficient disbursement of emergency food relief and that no major cases of mass starvation or deprivation have been reported from any of the rural regions in Karnataka. We are also appreciative of the fact that the Government of Karnataka has made every effort to disseminate information about Covid-19 and undertaken measures to control the spread of the pandemic.

However, people continue to face immense distress and since the pandemic-related emergency may continue for an indefinite period, we are concerned that this situation may unwittingly be used to rush through policy changes which otherwise require careful deliberation. Therefore, we urge the State to refrain from making sweeping alterations which must necessarily be guided by wider consultations and debate. On the other hand, there is a prima facie case for implementing several measures that will ensure long-term benefits for all without compromising the federal status of Karnataka. Accordingly, we suggest (**vide attached appendix for details**) the following immediate as well as longer-term measures that need to be initiated urgently in order to provide wide ranging relief to traumatised and disadvantaged individuals and communities:

- a. Immediate:* Emergency Relief, Rehabilitation, and Repatriation of Migrant Workers; Educating the police force to cultivate compassion and behave strictly according to the law; payment of wages, salaries and benefits to all employees; Compensation for crop losses; Enhanced MGNREG programmes for rural and urban areas; Food and Nutrition Provisioning;
- b. Longer-term:* New Labour Legislation to ensure the rights and dignity of all workers; Design and implementation of innovative and efficient Agricultural Policies and Programmes; Promotion of small-scale, rural-based processing and production units; Ecological Restoration and Conservation; Strengthening Panchayat Raj Institutions; Improving public health services; Retraining and skilling youth.

To better realise the above goals and objectives, we urge the government to immediately undertake the following measures that would benefit from participatory synergies:

a. Currently no details are available regarding the constitution of the State Committee/Task Force to address and manage the COVID-19 lockdown and post-lockdown situation. We request the government to consider nominating professionals and experienced persons, including civil society members, as advisors to the state emergency task force at this crucial time. There must be regular dissemination of the decisions of the committee and details of the implementation and utilisation of the new economic stimulus funds and other programmes in the state.

b. Grievance Addressal System: Since the situation requires significant amounts of monetary, food, medical and other transactions (including administration), we suggest the initiation of an effective grievance redressal system that is available to all, at all levels (from hamlets to metropolitan areas) which will be more than just telephone helplines. Such a system should be decentralised with easy access assured to people. The grievance redressal system should also have a mandate to direct people and the administration towards problem resolution.

If Karnataka is to retain its reputation and edge as a progressive and forward-looking state, the government needs to rise to the occasion during this emergency. Only humane, just, and democratic governance can ensure that this crisis does not become a humanitarian catastrophe.

As representatives of an academic community that is deeply concerned about some of the recent events, we earnestly look forward to a worthy response from you.

Yours sincerely,

Signatories

1. Prof. Vinod Gaur, Honorary Emeritus Scientist, CSIR Fourth Paradigm Institute, Bengaluru.
2. Prof. Rameswari Varma, Faculty and Theatre person (formerly with IDS, Mysore University), Mysuru.
3. Prof. M.S. Narasimhan, Mathematician, formerly with TIFR.
4. Prof. Phoolan Prasad, Emeritus Scientist, Dept of Mathematics, IISc.
5. Dr. Ramachandra Guha, Historian, Bengaluru.
6. Prof. Vidyanand Nanjundiah, Centre for Human Genetics, Bengaluru.
7. Shri. G.V. Dasarathi, Computer Scientist and Entrepreneur, Bengaluru.
8. Prof. Amit Basole, Faculty, Azim Premji University, Bengaluru.
9. Prof. Deepak Malghan, Faculty, IIMB, Bengaluru.
10. Dr. Nitin Rai, Ecologist, Ashoka Trust for Ecology and Environment, Bengaluru.
11. Prof. Sharad Lele, Ashoka Trust for Ecology and Environment, Bengaluru.
12. Prof. T.V. Ramachandra, IISc, Bangalore.
13. Prof. Supriya Roy-Chowdhury, Political Scientist, Bengaluru.
14. Prof. V.K. Natraj, Mysore University, and Former Director, Madras Institute of Development Studies, Mysuru.
15. Prof. Prajval Shastri, Astrophysicist, Bengaluru.
16. Prof. S. Mahadevan, (retired), IISc, Bengaluru.
17. Shri Balan Nambiar, Artist, Bengaluru.
18. Prof. A.R. Vasavi, Social Anthropologist (formerly with the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru).

COPY TO THE CHIEF SECRETARY, SHRI. T.M. VIJAY BHASKAR.

APPENDIX: DETAILS OF SUGGESTIONS TO THE GOVERNMENT OF KARNATAKA FOR VARIOUS PROGRAMMES AND POLICIES

- 1. Emergency Relief, Rehabilitation, and Repatriation of Migrant Workers:** We are concerned and alarmed at the hardships faced by a large number of migrant workers. Nearly 3 lakh migrants have registered on the 'Seva Sindhu' portal and only about a few thousands have been facilitated to return to their home states/regions. Issues that need immediate attention are amelioration of the condition of migrant workers who are stranded/abandoned on highways, in camps, shelters, vacant lots, or on streets. There is confusion about jurisdictional issues between nagar palikas and peri-urban villages, and the lack of clarity has meant that several migrant citizens and distressed residents have not been considered to be entitled to food and other benefits. Clarity on this is urgent. Much better organisation is required for provisioning food, transport, and health facilities to all workers.
- 2. We request the state to issue an order requiring all police personnel, at all levels, to refrain from violence and punitive action against migrant workers.** As the processing of application papers, health assessment, and transportation to other states are being conducted at various police stations, the state must provide clear and feasible guidelines to facilitate these processes. Currently, many of the police stations in Bengaluru city are functioning in an arbitrary manner and workers are experiencing distress and humiliation.
- 3. Karnataka must assert and build on the federalism assured by the Constitution.** The state of Karnataka has been a pioneer in initiating many innovative and pro-people policies and schemes. The current government needs to build on this legacy and assert its federal rights rather than implement draconian measures passed down from the centre. Some of the measures that the state can take include the following:
- 4. New Labour Legislation:** The government of Karnataka needs to take this opportunity to legislate new labour laws that will assure workers decent and fair wages, working conditions and norms, and health and residential facilities.

A large percentage of migrant workers returning to other states are from the construction industry. The Building and Other Construction Workers' Welfare Cess Fund (BoCWWCF) must be used for their welfare. Karnataka with 10.74 lakh registered workers has collected the highest cess and some of the disbursements have begun. In addition, given their dire condition, Rs. 10,000 can be given to all the registered workers through Direct Benefit Transfer. This would cost Rs.1100Cr.

A large number of workers are probably not registered by their employers, so they unfortunately cannot benefit from this. All workers can however indirectly benefit from the balance amount if the state:

- a) Pays for their train fare to their home towns (Rs. 1000 per person average).
- b) Pays for food for their journey (Rs. 150 per person average).
- c) Gives them Rs. 5000 cash each at the point of boarding their transport.

Since no industry other than the construction industry has this cess, this scheme can be used to benefit ALL workers who are travelling.

The construction industry's attempt to prevent workers from leaving for their homes is counter-productive. It will only ensure that people mistrust their employers and make them unwilling to come back to their place of work. This will be disastrous for the industry in the long term. The measures suggested above, on the other hand, will give people confidence that Karnataka state cares about their welfare, and they will be looked after in any such calamity in future too. The likelihood of the workers coming back to Karnataka (instead of going to other states where they are being treated well) improves as a result, and all industries will benefit from this.

5. Reinstate orders stipulating payment of all wages, salaries, and benefits that have been withheld during the lockdown period, by all employers.

Also, reinstate orders providing relief from payment of rent and loans (below a certain sum) so as to enable a large number of working class members to recover from the loss of employment during the lockdown period. Domestic

workers (estimated to be about 4-5 lakhs in Bengaluru alone), in all the cities and towns, require legal and administrative support to claim their salaries and dues from employers. Karnataka is one of the largest hubs of the global supply chain in readymade apparels. The possible drying-up of export orders will adversely impact the lives and livelihoods of this large segment of workers, most of whom are women (more than 4.5 lakhs). A special scheme in association with the garment industry needs to be devised to assure minimum income and support to this section of the population.

- 6. Agricultural Policies and Programmes:** Since agriculture is a state subject, the Government of Karnataka needs to formulate policies that recognise the specificities of the state's agro-ecologies and address the needs of small and marginal farmers who constitute the marginalised majority. It is important that key institutions such as the State Agricultural Producers' Marketing Committee (APMC) be retained and new rules made to facilitate better servicing of such organisations.
- 7. Crop Loss Compensation and Restorative Agriculture:** The lockdown has led to the loss of income from sales of crops for several lakhs of farmers. Many have incurred debts to cultivate these crops. A system of providing compensation to such farmers should be considered. The compensation can be in the form of cash payments to support cultivation for the forthcoming mungaru/kharif and hingaru/rabi seasons and can be linked to the need to restore the soil, water and bio-diversity of these cultivated tracts.
- 8. Promotion of 'Farmer Producer Organisations' and small-scale, rural-based processing and production units** will enable real autonomy and economic stability of the rural sectors and challenge the existing divides between the urban industrial and the rural agricultural. This will be the realisation of 'self-reliance' and will be more important than promoting the entry and hold of corporate interests in agriculture.
- 9. Ecological Restoration and Conservation:** This is an opportune time for the state to develop and implement plans and programmes to restore the fragile and abused ecological resources of Karnataka and to in-build climate change resilience. Programmes such as restoration and conservation of all ecological resources such as rivers, lakes, tanks, agricultural land, rural commons, and forests will serve as a substantial foundation for enhancing the economic and ecological sustainability of the state. Greater

decentralisation of forest conservation will ensure that the rural poor and forest dependent people will be better able to cope with the ongoing distress. To meet these goals the Forest Rights Act should be implemented in all forest areas of the state and gram sabhas given greater authority in the management of forest resources. Given the tendency to focus on boosting economic growth post-COVID19, there will be pressure to dilute environmental regulations for industries. The terrible accident at the LG Polymers factory in Vishakhapatnam, as well as several other mishaps, indicate how inadvisable this would be. Environmental regulations must be more forcefully enforced in the time of a public health crisis, not less. The Karnataka State Pollution Control Board should be given more autonomy, more resources and more downward accountability to carry out its responsibilities without fear or favour.

- 10. Scaffold and Strengthen Panchayat Raj Institutions:** Karnataka has been a pioneer in promoting decentralised administration, and the benefits of this are visible in the fact that emergency relief operations have been facilitated through the panchayat system. Deferral of panchayat elections (which were due now) to a later date requires the assurance that the current elected members can continue in office until elections are held and not be replaced by arbitrary committees to administer the panchayats (as is being discussed and planned now). In addition, this is an opportunity to strengthen local administrative capacities by providing regular professional inputs, streamlining accountability, and assuring regular disbursement of funds.
- 11. MGNREG programmes in rural and urban areas:** We are pleased to know that in many of the rural areas, the MGNREG works have been restarted and payments have been initiated. We request that the new tranche of funds allocated to the MGNREG programme be utilised judiciously and with accountability. Linking MGNREG to a combination of agricultural and ecological restoration works will be key. In addition, a new employment guarantee programme can be initiated for urban areas, especially for tier II and III towns, to address the problems of workers who have lost employment in varied sectors.
- 12. Food Provisioning:** The current disbursement of food grains via the PDS, Midday Meals, Anganwadis, etc is largely efficient especially in rural areas. However, given the pandemic emergency, the state needs to provide better

flexibility for disadvantaged persons (migrants, physically and mentally challenged, destitute, etc) to access these facilities and for the state to honour its commitment to their right to food. Excessive reliance on technical and bureaucratic measures has left a proportion of people outside these schemes. Including them at this time is vital. In addition, the state needs to recognise that food security should also include nutrition security. Millets and pulses, grown in the state, can be distributed through the PDS. This will enhance their production and thus improve the ecological conditions in different areas, and contribute to the nutritional well-being of citizens.

- 13. Health and Wellness:** There is an urgent need for the Government of Karnataka to improve its public health services. While schemes such as Ayushman Bharat have enveloped pre-existing state-based schemes, their implementation and impact are severely limited. The state needs to activate all PHCs in both rural and urban areas so that health facilities are available locally and people need not rush to towns and cities for treatment. Medical facilities in all taluka and district headquarters need to be revamped to provide treatment for all major illnesses and surgeries, including treatment of COVID-19 related ailments and other epidemics.
- 14. Re-training and Skilling Youth:** Many villages now house returned migrants, especially youth, who may not be able to return to the urban areas in the immediate future. For such citizens, the state needs to consider training and skill development for new rural and other livelihood opportunities. Instituting these training centres in the six key regions of Karnataka will cater to agricultural, industrial and service economies.