

Looking back on the COVID-19 Year:

MSSRF Response



The Context

The COVID-19 pandemic spread rapidly and extensively across the world, creating a health emergency situation since 2019. The governments across the globe including India, declared a complete lockdown to break the chain of the fast-spreading virus. This lockdown created hardship to the livelihoods of millions of economically weaker sections of people such as those working mostly in the unorganized sector. It has set India back on 10 out of 17 SDG indicators, and made to face biggest economic contraction in 80 years. In these worst hours, MS Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF) came out to support vulnerable and marginal communities on-ground relief work as per its mandate.

The Foundation harnesses science for sustainable development especially among rural communities and mandated to work with pro-poor, pro-nature and pro-women approach. Our work spread across different agro-ecological zones in India. Because of our vast reach among communities of different geographies, we had responded quickly to the COVID-19 emergency, providing support at the field level to rural communities and also facilitating situation assessments to provide policy recommendations.

Assessing the crisis

Experts at the Foundation analyzed the situation emerged due to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown followed by an in-depth analysis of government and community response. Later the government had took a lot of measures like relaxation in movements of food and agricultural and allied sector related activities; marketing of agriculture produces across the country.

The movement of agriculture produce and its marketing relaxation came as a huge relief to coastal communities and other rural communities whose lives were

around it. Besides these relaxations, the government provided food under Public Distribution System – with varying components across states.

Restriction on movements were serious concern for many people such as for fisherfolks to venture into sea and sell their produce timely into the market. All workers, from labourers engaged in production to those marketing across the value chains also faced hardship. Keeping all these constraints in mind, the Foundation tried to respond in its capacity which was in line with government efforts to reduce the impact of the pandemic.

MSSRF's response

Our scientists and subject experts interacted with government institutions, affected stakeholders like fisherfolks, small and marginal farmers, agriculture markets and corporate entities. Our assessments came out in the form of a series of policy briefs to advocate government agencies to take some immediate measures to ease community lives and livelihood. Besides policy briefs, the Foundation instituted Media fellowships to unravel the grassroot realities of the Covid-19 pandemic on daily lives to bring real life stories.

Policy briefs:

The Foundation came up with a series of policy briefs on assessing farmers and farming activities across states, marine fisheries, floriculture, and aquaculture to advocate with the respective state governments and the Central government to address concerns related to the lives and livelihoods of communities associated with sectors. Each brief contain a series of recommendations relevant to particular sectors and these were brought to notice of policy and decision makers.

In Agriculture policy brief, [*"On Farmers and Farming in Tamil Nadu, Puducherry, Kerala, Odisha and Assam"*](#), detailed assessment of the challenges and concern of

farmers and farming scenarios across the Tamil Nadu, Puducherry, Kerala and Odisha were documented. The situation assessment captures the existing scenario across different crops, various concerns and looks at field-level initiatives that are ongoing. Sections include marketing of produce, plight of labourers, effect on standing and next crop, debt, dairy, and poultry. It makes a series of recommendations for this situation in the immediate and mid-term especially for the most marginalized landless labourers, women-headed households and marginal farmers.

In Fisheries policy brief, ["Livelihoods of marine fishing communities along India's east coast"](#), a detailed assessment was made of challenges faced by fisher community along the east coast of India due to the lockdown. Soon after the first lockdown, the annual fishing ban came putting livelihoods at additional risk. The brief provided recommendations such as on income support.

In Aquaculture policy brief, ["Aquaculture in Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Odisha"](#), a detailed assessment was made of impact on both freshwater and brackish water fish farmers in Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. They had been severely affected due to restriction on transportation and closure of processing industries and sudden collapse of export. The brief made some recommendation including arrangement of transports, minimum support price for fishes.

The policy brief on Floriculture ["Livelihoods of smallholder farmers engaged in floriculture in Tamil Nadu"](#) documented small farmers in Tamil Nadu who were one of the worst affected due to restrictions on movement. The State is one of the largest producers of loose flowers in India. The brief has made some recommendations including providing mix and inter-cropping support besides connecting producers to factories and extraction units.

MSSRF Field Response

MSSRF started engaging with its stakeholders to provide relief in its own capacity. The foundation provided basic necessities to communities, such as farmers and the fishing community. They needed assistance in carrying out their livelihood activities. Some of the measures taken by the Foundation in different states are as below:

Farmers and Farming

The Foundation's promoted Farmers' Producers Organisations (FPOs) in Villupuram and Dindigul districts in Tamil Nadu and Ganjam district of Odisha came out in support of strengthening local economy in the time of crisis.

The Foundation supported Tamil Nadu FPOs in purchasing of oil and pulses and selling these in the villages through the FPO outlets. In Odisha, with the help of FPOs, the Foundation facilitated farmers in selling their green grams which was stuck due to lockdown.

The Foundation facilitated in rolling out two mobile agriculture marketing initiatives in Pudukottai district in collaboration with Department of Agriculture, NABARD, and CESTADs to purchase vegetables from farmers' field and sell directly to consumers.

Besides, the Foundation provide ICT helps such as Interactive phone-in programmes with experts organized across different states in partnership with NGOs, research institutions and the government.

Marine Fishing Communities

Foundation facilitated fishers and fish vendors to receive government announcements related to COVID-19 in a timely manner; organizing phone-in programs and audio conferencing with experts on regular basis and address their timely queries; and disseminating the information about the COVID-19 pandemic

through Fisher Friend Mobile Applications and, also precautionary measures through other messaging apps.

In addition, the foundation experts regularly documented challenges faced by fishers and fisher women and periodically updated the district administration for necessary support. Online and off-line awareness program were conducted, and posters displayed in all the coastal villages. The Foundation had started 24/7 helpline facility support to fishers to address their issues related to the COVID-19. The Foundation provided 50 liters of Iceboxes to 500 women fish vendors and small craft fishers for the hygienic transportation of fishes from the landing Centre to the marketplaces to avoid contamination of fish.

Aquaculture

The Foundation had taken several initiatives to support the aqua fish farmers. Experts prepared IEC materials on Dos and Don'ts under the COVID-19 situation in fish farming and widely communicated to fish farmers.

The Foundation helped farmers in selling fishes to identified local fish traders; organized audio conferencing to address queries related to fish farming and marketing; Phone in programmes were arranged to provide advisories related to fish farming and clear their doubts with expert guidance.

Mina Swaminathan Media fellowship

The Mina Swaminathan Media Fellowship was awarded to three vernacular journalists focusing on issues related to gender and development, particularly in the rural context.

The 2020 Media Fellows dealt with gender and health issues, focusing on post-COVID-19 situation in rural India, to explore how coronavirus changed women's lives - in incomes, health care, mental health, increased household chores, burden

of childcare etc. The selected three journalists from Odisha, Kerala and Tamil Nadu widely reported in the media on different dimensions of the impacts of the pandemic on given theme.

MSSRF's role in reducing health risk of COVID-19

In Kolli Hills and Wayanad centres, and all field sites the foundation conducted a series of awareness campaigns on the COVID 19 pandemic, distributed hand sanitizers, hand wash bottles, and produced face masks and face shields to benefit the frontline workers of COVID19 and the general public. A modified pedal-operated hand sanitizer dispenser (low cost and readily manufactured using PVC pipes) was distributed for institution/ public use. The Centres also supported two women groups consisting of 21 members to make the double-layered, reusable cotton mask (with 240 thread count) and distributed 10,000 such masks.

Biju Patnaik Tribal Agro-biodiversity Centre provided Covid kits, masks, and shields, oximeters, sanitizers, Etc., to the Primary Health Centres under Jeypore, Boipariguda, and Kundra blocks in the presence of Block Development Officers and Koraput block in the presence of Collector and District Magistrate and Chief District Medical Officer.

The Centre organized a village-level awareness programme on the Covid-19 through posters in all MSSRF operational villages. More than 200 posters – depicting the hand wash process, the COVID protocols, and balance diets or immunity booster food calendars – were placed at Gram Panchayat Offices, Block Head Quarters, Medical centres, and other common places. More than 60 cluster-level programmes on the Covid-19 awareness were organized in which hand wash demonstration was conducted, and awareness was discussed on immunity-boosting foods or balanced diet and the Covid-19 protocols.

The Coastal System Research Centre, supported 1500 vulnerable fisher families towards livelihood, health, and nutrition during the COVID-19 pandemic to

overcome livelihood challenges. Our Machilipatnam office in Andhra Pradesh distributed 8,000 reusable cotton masks to the community residing in the project villages, namely Sorlagondi, Nali, Mangalapuram, and Basavanipalem. Fish for All Research and Training Centre has initiated the COVID 19 response program to help the poor- vulnerable fishing communities cope with the pandemic situation. The Centre identified 20 fishing villages for extending support in Ramanathapuram, Pudukottai, and Mayiladuthurai districts. The Centre provided bio-fortified food rich in minerals and vitamins to 5,000 households focusing on women, the elderly, and children. In addition, the team distributed around 55,000 double-layered masks and 1,000 litres of hand sanitizers to 10,300 households. A total of 15 Videos, audio conferences, and phone-in programs were conducted through Village Knowledge and Resource Centres on different topics to create awareness about the regulations for fishing in the COVID-19 situation.

Infra-red Thermal scanner, medical kits, Pulse oxymeter, were provided to the PHC and ANM in Sorlagondi, Nali, Mangalapuram villages.

The Ecotechnology's district teams engaged in the COVID-19 assistance package for the 28 producer collectives and enterprise groups in six districts: Theni, Madurai, Dindigul, Karur, Trichy, and Namakkal in Tamil Nadu. Online meeting platforms such as *Zoom* and *Goto* and messaging apps like WhatsApp were used to build the capacity of the field level intermediaries and the farmers to ensure their adequate access to agriculture extension services.

Apart from COVID relief measures, all our training and other capacity-building programme continued following Covid-19 protocol. All the participants during different capacity building programme were provided with face masks and sanitizers.