HOW HAVE EXISTING INEQUALITIES AND VULNERABILITIES AFFECTED INDIA'S RESPONSE?

COVID-19 has compounded uncertainties for India's poor and marginalised groups, causing insecurity, stigma, and a severe loss of livelihoods.
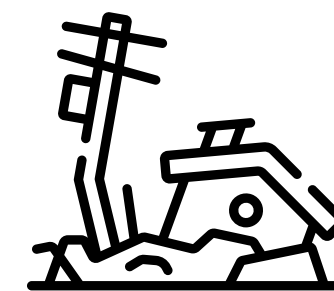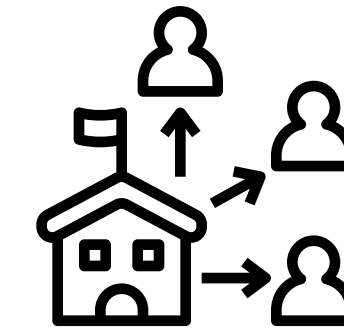

The effects of the pandemic have been differentiated by class, caste, gender, race, religion, and ethnicity. The largest impacts have been felt by members of precarious, marginalised, and minority groups, including Dalits, Muslims, and migrant workers.


India's size and diversity mean blanket national responses have not always been effective. A strict government lockdown destroyed rural and informal urban livelihoods, prompting an unmanageable exodus of migrant workers from Indian cities.

In different parts of India, lockdown restrictions and public health measures have coincided with heatwaves, floods, and cyclones, disrupting disaster response and humanitarian relief, and delaying recovery.

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COVID-19: IMPACTS OF THE PANDEMIC ON VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES IN INDIA

# COVID-19 HAS AMPLIFIED EXISTING UNCERTAINTIES

In India, the pandemic has been a stress multiplier, amplifying existing uncertainties around food and agriculture, water and sanitation, employment, health, climate, and disaster response.
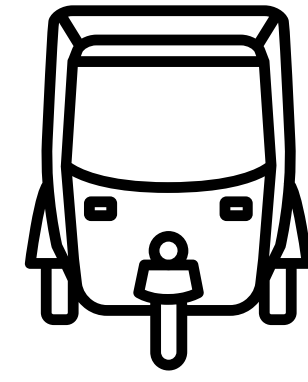
COVID-19 revealed how much Indian cities depend on the informal economy. The suspension of trade and commerce destroyed the earnings of a large casual labour force, who had few savings to survive without work.
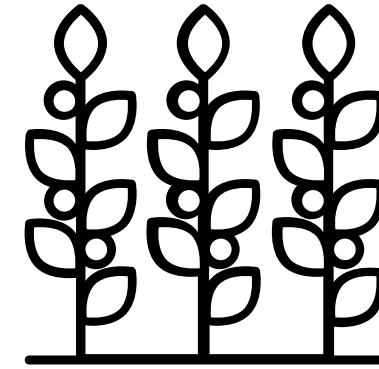
In rural India, lockdown disrupted the harvest of winter crops, making it difficult to distribute and sell produce. Many farmers moved to subsistence crops, while others created new linkages within the food system, including direct farm-to-home delivery models.
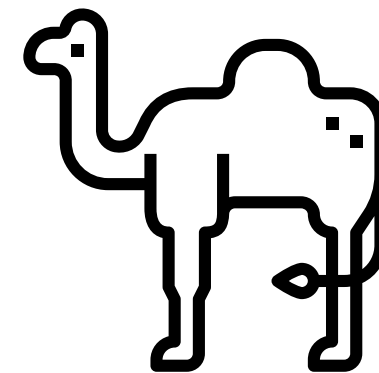
In the drylands of Kutch, in Gujarat, Rabari and Jat nomadic herders were unable to access markets for their livestock. Forced back into subsistence livelihoods, they sought support from local farmers, having previously traded animal dung for fodder.
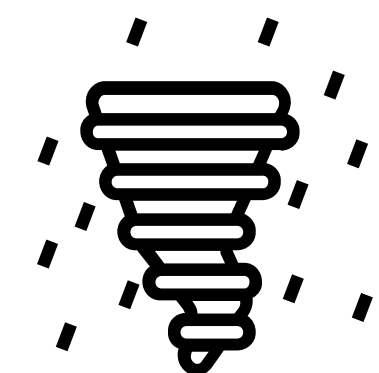
Restrictions have also held up disaster response. In West Bengal supercyclone Amphan coincided with lockdown and the return of workers, presenting a challenge for authorities to supply additional shelters for evacuees.

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COVID-19: IMPACTS OF THE PANDEMIC ON VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES IN INDIA

# HOW HAS COVID-19 AFFECTED VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES?

The pandemic laid bare the structural inequalities already present in Indian society, creating further marginalisation and stigma. The impacts are felt differently for different groups and communities.
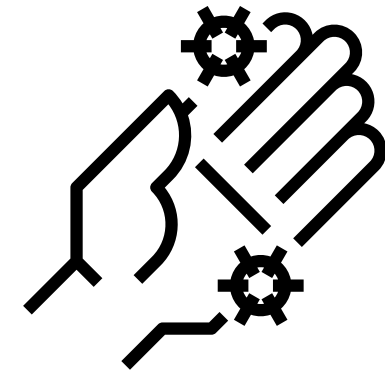
Groups including Dalits, Muslims, returning informal workers, and migrants from India's north-east have been stigmatised as potential spreaders of the virus.
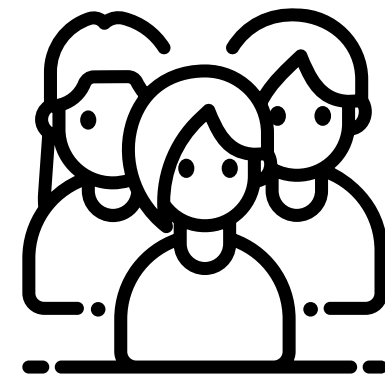
Women have suffered more than men. They are more likely to have lost work, and have been prevented from accessing healthcare and family planning services.
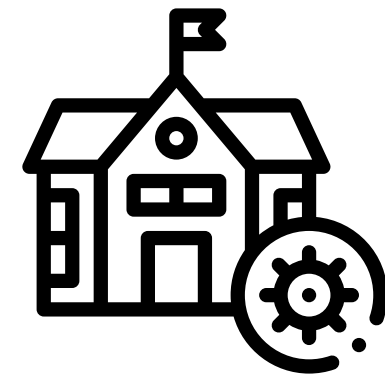
Disruptions to remittances and rural livelihoods have forced children out of education, while school closures have interrupted existing food ration and immunisation programmes.

The government provided relief through cash transfers and in-kind benefits but many found them difficult to access. Some benefits were only available to those with bank accounts, ration cards, biometric ID, or a fixed address.
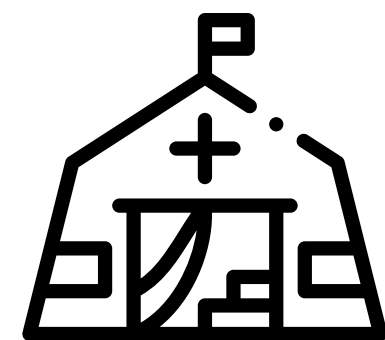
22-25 million domestic migrants left India's cities in March and April, returning to families. With transport suspended, many of these journeys were made on foot, with little support beyond the relief camps set up by NGOs.

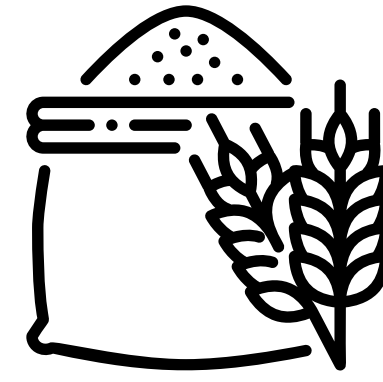# COVID-19: IMPACTS OF THE PANDEMIC ON VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES IN INDIA

RECOVERY AND CHANGE AFTER THE PANDEMIC

Although recovery from COVID-19 has been slow, selective, and uneven, the aftermath of the pandemic presents opportunities to create sustainable and inclusive livelihoods, while protecting the most vulnerable.
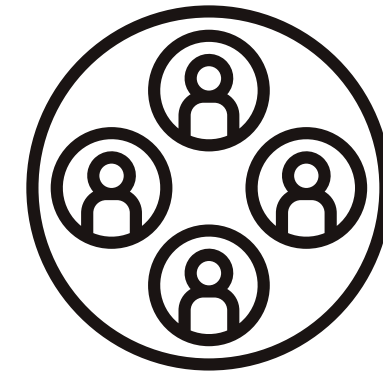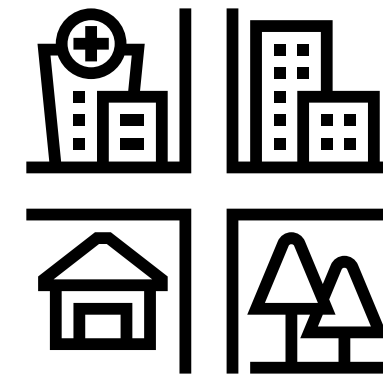

Short-term measures have focused on immediate relief and protection. Longer-term responses are now required, creating ways to sustain the delivery of basic needs including food, water, health, jobs, and shelter.


The voices and experiences of marginalised groups should shape government strategies, with a stronger role for civil society groups.

The exodus of migrant workers presents new opportunities for rural revival. Existing rural employment schemes could be targeted to upgrade existing infrastructure and create new community assets, supporting high-value, labour-intensive activities beyond farming.

Failures of government relief and social safety nets during the pandemic have shown the need for universal social protection, free from identity and residency requirements.
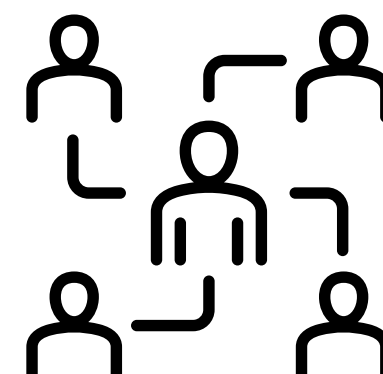
State and local agencies should adopt a community-based model for recovery. Reponses in the state of Kerala, and Dharavi, Asia's largest urban slum, involved civil society organisations and community leaders in screening and contact tracing.

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