

# Pandemic and public policy goals

Balancing or rather complementing social infrastructure and economic progress has to be the target of policymakers



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The inherent balancing act among seemingly paradoxical imperatives of public policy cannot be better illustrated by the Prime Minister's exhortation of the old Hindi proverb while announcing the 21-day lockdown: "Jaan hai to Jahan Hai" to the recent tweak to "Jaan bhi, jahan bhi". Even during a pandemic, emphasising solely on public health is not a luxury available to policymakers in a vast developing country like India.

The coronavirus pandemic has brought out in sharp focus many challenges policymakers have to face both in getting the right inputs from the experts as well as converting them into actionable programmes in the real-world context. As various epidemiological models predict widely different figures from 1,200 deaths to millions because of the pandemic in India, understanding of the impact of mitigation measures is very difficult.

## Learning Curve

The Government of India has claimed that without the lockdown 8.2 lakh people would have been infected with the virus till the first week of April. These predictions keep on changing as more data becomes available from actual cases. Therefore, we find a steep learning curve all over the world and recommendations changing as the pandemic progresses. The World Health Organization, which in January was against travel bans and said that there is no evidence of human to human transmission of the virus, is now warning against the lifting of the lockdowns too early.

This unreliability or incompleteness of the relevant feeder information is always coupled with implementation challenges. Public systems in different parts of India have different capabilities. One of the reasons the government of India gave for an early and long lockdown was that the public health system in India will be overwhelmed by the scale of in-



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fectured patients in case the numbers approach anyway near to the maximalist projection.

We will never know for sure how many lives are saved by the measures taken by the government but the loss of livelihoods is a tangible reality. This tension between an invisible and visible enemy makes the task of policymaking extremely complex. We have to first focus on the urgent and important issue of survival of vulnerable sections.

## Immediate Measures

In the immediate term, the objective has to be that the mitigation measures should have the least impact on the possibility of economic recovery and at the same time should not lead to any complacency on the part of administration and citizenry. The three main pillars of this strategy need to be calibration of lockdown measures as per the real-time information and analysis, developing SoPs for dealing with emerging complications and building an information infrastructure suited for communicating

clarity of the purpose and quick reaction. Central and State governments are trying to put in place these elements, with varying degrees of success.

Simultaneously, securing the livelihood of people is the biggest challenge. If quick action is not taken, all the gains that are made in poverty reduction in the last couple of decades will swiftly dissipate. Prognosis by economists and international financial institutions is very bleak. There is a need for direct intervention for ensuring the survival of the cross-section of the people who have no social or familial security. This cannot wait for the economic revival or long-term structural solutions to be put in place.

Innovative decisions like, making ration cards of all the States valid throughout India, supporting farmers to procure labour for harvesting by creating migrant employment hubs in each tehsil, connecting them electronically and working on re-establishment of the food supply chain can be some of the measures that need to be taken up.

The government needs to also look beyond the formal banking system for direct cash transfers. There has been a lot of progress in financial inclusion in the last few years, however, still, the most vulnerable and unskilled migrant labour may not have access to formal banking channels. The problem needs to be attacked without worrying too much about the efficiency of delivery. Everything plausible need to be tried without perturbing too much about failure.

As Bill Gates has said in the context of vaccine development for Covid-19, that

in the current situation wastage of a few billions is not the relevant consideration, when we know the alternative is the loss of trillions and in India's case, all the socio-economic progress have been made after independence. There are heartbreaking stories from all over the country of people not being able to get treatments in public hospitals or not being able to find enough food. These concerns should take precedence over concerns of twitterati like online education or work from home or service delivery.

## Medium-term Measures

In the medium-term, it is clear that some businesses like aviation, hospitality and tourism will not revive rapidly and would need a government bailout. However, the nature of these bailouts can help us in moving towards a more equitable society. Any government action plan should give primacy to workers compared to shareholders.

There is a discussion that the government is planning to bring four proposed labour codes to replace 40 labour laws through the ordinance route to lift business sentiment. There is also a discussion about wave of reforms that seemed politically difficult till now like freeing up sectors for FDIs or reforms in land acquisition Act.

Pumping more money in the economy beyond the constraints set in the FRBM Act, 2013, is also on the table. In this endeavour of long-term economic recovery, focus on the creation of decent jobs should be paramount and higher shareholder value should be seen only as a medium to achieve this.

And as the country hopefully recovers, updating of physical and more importantly social infrastructure can no longer be avoided. One thing the Covid-19 pandemic has made it clear is that social infrastructure like hospitals, schools has a great multiplier impact on economic progress and sustenance. One without the other is not possible and balancing or rather complementing these two quintessential requirements has to be the ultimate goal of public policymaking in India. Ideological solutions that are always in search of a problem will only hamper the recovery of the nation and its citizens.

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