ISSUE BRIEF

Covid-19 in India – Recommendations for ‘Urgent Action Human Rights Due Diligence’ for Lead Firms Sourcing Agricultural Goods

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The context of the second wave of Covid-19 in India

India is strongly hit by a second wave of Covid-19 and the healthcare infrastructure reaches its limits. Taking measures to contain the spread of Covid-19 is crucial. The rural belt in India is less severely affected than its densely populated cities, however, the number of cases is rising quickly and the estimated number of unreported cases is high. Healthcare facilities are experiencing a dire shortage of oxygen and operate at lower standards in rural areas, i.e., fewer equipment and trained personnel. Unlike during the first surge of Covid-19, inter-state migration is less pronounced, yet this situation remains subject to change.

While the current rate of increase in new cases is significantly higher than that reported during the first wave, the current lockdown is not as strict as the lockdown during the first wave. Lockdowns in India are issued at a state level and in case of high infection rates, local containment zones are created (e.g., for local markets). Transportation remains accessible as an essential service (similar to food, fuel, pharmacies, and banks), but access may be more restricted in practice depending on the regional situation.

Vaccination programs have been ongoing since mid-January 2021 and currently as of May, people aged 18 and over are receiving vaccinations. Besides local authorities and healthcare facilities, vaccinations and testing are also offered in other public facilities such as schools that have been sanitized and transformed.

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1 Insights of this issue brief are based on initial evidence from primary and secondary research on supply chain resilience and human rights in the agriculture sector during the pandemic, conducted between January and May 2021.
into testing and vaccination centers.\textsuperscript{11} However, the overall rate of vaccination among the population is still low and delayed due to shortages in vaccination supply.\textsuperscript{12}

Everyone in India is eligible to receive public healthcare (including workers in the informal economy), but an identity card is required for vaccinations.\textsuperscript{13} Acknowledging the fact that not all citizens have an identity card, the government is devising options to facilitate equal access to vaccinations.\textsuperscript{14} In addition to health risks, the pandemic puts pressure on the economy, with effects on, e.g., employment rates, supply chains, and inflation rates.\textsuperscript{15} The effects of the pandemic hit the poorer population the hardest.\textsuperscript{16} Providing emergency relief is as important for the immediate impact as it will be to contain the medium-term effects.

**Challenges to providing relief during the pandemic**

- **Medical care\textsuperscript{17}:** limited availability of supplies for vaccines and oxygen to treat severe cases of Covid-19, number of Covid-19 cases exceeds the capacity of hospitals, backlog of Covid-19 tests might delay breaking transmission chains
- **Information dissemination\textsuperscript{18}:** misinformation about the pandemic, social media as an important source of information and self-organization of support as social media platforms are used to circulate real-time information, but such information is disseminated often within closed groups and possibly with limited reach of rural population
- **Fraud and corruption\textsuperscript{19}:** attempts to lure citizens into providing personal data (allegedly as a requirement for registering for vaccinations) that may be used to access personal bank accounts or to create fraudulent accounts, overpricing of medical treatment and charging medical fees without service provision
- **Wage and income insecurity\textsuperscript{20}:** less prevalent where workers are guaranteed employment for a certain period of time, reports of unpaid wages in 2020 and 2021 in different states and industries (including in the agricultural sector)
- **Potential risk for child labor\textsuperscript{21}:** the pandemic affects structural factors that make children’s engagement in work more likely (including children who are orphaned, families losing employment)


\textsuperscript{13} See, e.g., Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (2021, May 6), note 9.


Recommendations for urgent action human rights due diligence

Lead firms in global agriculture supply chains must conduct urgent action human rights due diligence to mitigate immediate as well as longer-term human rights risks related to the pandemic. Measures need to integrate all supply chain partners to adapt to specific local contexts and the fast-changing parameters of the pandemic.

The first wave of the pandemic highlighted the positive impact of maintaining economic processes:

- **Involving traders**: leverage the proximity of traders to the farm level, identify suppliers and farmers who employ temporary workers (as those are at highest risk of losing employment, accommodation, and food security)\(^2\)
- **Maintaining procurement processes**: accommodate farmers’ limited sources of income and their reduced ability to pay wages during the pandemic (e.g., harvesting times might be prolonged due to smaller workforce), ensure income security for supply chain partners and workers

In order to choose effective ways of action, corporations need detailed information from the ground, which can be gathered and applied through the following methods:

- **Roundtable discussions with supply chain partners**: convene a timely, informal meeting with representatives from all relevant stages in the upstream supply chain (e.g., from mills, roasters and refineries, traders and agronomists, farmers and workers), identify the most urgent needs of employees and communities within companies’ operational contexts, clarify individual and coordinated options for providing relief (e.g., adapt timeframe or terms of payment for orders and wages, offer financial support and/or infrastructure support)
- **Support the work of local organizations\(^23\)**: exchange information about locally active support networks, coordinate or partner with regional actors for distributing relief among communities to avoid replicating or delaying efforts, collaborate with trusted local community leaders

The initial results further show opportunities for providing support via existing relationships to the farm level:

- **Administrative support**: assist supply chain partners or workers in administrative or legal tasks (e.g., application for essential services pass, inform about registration for vaccination)
- **Infrastructure**: leverage corporate infrastructure and distribution networks to support governmental and civil society organizations and regional initiatives
- **Workers’ insurance**: continue and expand efforts to identify workers without IDs (as this is needed to receive vaccinations), maintain trainings for workers to inform them about their eligibility to government relief and insurance schemes
- **Information and education\(^24\)**: relay official information to help dissolve myths about Covid-19, and create awareness of Covid-19 among workers, especially where literacy levels are low
- **Material support**: ensure the availability of personal protective equipment and hygiene products, facilitate access to Covid-19 testing kits, and advise on a safe workplace set-up, including housing for migrant workers

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May 2021