Situational Analysis of Migrant Workers Community six districts of Manipur during lockdown. The study was conducted between 20th April – 30th April 2020
Analysis Report of Information Collected From Migrant Workers in Manipur, during the 
COVID-19 Lockdown

Data collection and Analysis by Praxis, Salam Rajesh, Partners in Change between 20th April and 30th 
April 2020

Context of the Assessment

Manipur state which is bounded on the east by Myanmar, on the north by the State of Nagaland, on the 
west by the State of Assam and on the south by the State of Mizoram and Myanmar, has two 
topographical zones - valley and hills. The hills cover about 9/10 of the total area of the State\(^1\). 
According to the 2011 census, Manipur has a total population of 27, 21,756 lakhs, with 26.18% in urban 
areas and remainder 73.82% in rural areas.

Despite the high literacy rate, Manipur remains a socio-economically backward state as compared to the 
rest of the country. The economy of Manipur is characterized by high rate of unemployment and 
poverty, low capital formation, inadequate infrastructural facilities, geographically isolation, 
communication bottlenecks and practically no industrialisation. Agriculture and allied activities 
continues to be the mainstay of the economy with more than 70% of the population dependent on it for 
livelihood\(^2\). Since the last decade, an increase in population has put tremendous pressure on the natural 
resources and the numbers of unemployment is on rise. Often, government schemes intended to 
alleviate poverty do not reach all intended people or are not enough to meet the goals.

The lockdown during to the COVID pandemic has increased the challenges faced by people living in 
Manipur, as they struggle to earn, to avoid slipping into poverty and starvation. While the State was 
been declared COVID Free on 20th April, however, country-wide restrictions, social distancing measures 
and limited movement is threatening the lives of the people living at the margins in the state.

Just like in other states, daily wage earners who are the weakest section of the society are being most 
affected as they have lost their source of income and as a result, they are pushed to the extremes. To 
assess the issues faced by this population, Partners in Change along with Praxis reached out to 32 daily 
wage earners from Manipur, who live in remote villages across the state. The respondents and their 
families interviewed in this study are daily wage earners who are engaged in agriculture, forestry, and 
fishing activities.

Table 1 – Profile of respondents

\(^1\) https://knowindia.gov.in/states-uts/manipur.php 
No. of districts covered | No. of respondents interviewed | Gender | Occupation
---|---|---|---
06 (Chandel, Kakching, Tamenglong, Ukrl, Bishnupur, West Imphal) | 32 | 20 female and 12 male | All are daily wage earner (6 are internal migrant workers)

The respondents were interviewed between 20\textsuperscript{th} April – 30\textsuperscript{th} April 2020. The primary objective of the assessment was to understand the issues faced by the villagers in remote places of Manipur and their coping mechanisms. Their access to various government schemes during the lockdown was also assessed.

**Findings**

1. **Wages**
   
   In the case of respondents in Chandel District, 6 out of 14 respondents are internal migrant workers and the rest are landless families mostly headed by a woman, which means they worked for others. On normal days, they earned around Rs 400-500 for a day’s of work, when they were able to find it. The nature of work that they are engaged in varies from day to day or season to season. For instance, they work on agricultural farm during the agricultural season, and on some days, they do other manual work. They are paid either based on the daily wage rate or the nature of work, with each work involving a different pay scale. However, since the lockdown, most of the farmers/landowners stopped hiring people on their lands, and this is affecting the livelihood of this population. Many of the respondents have stated in the interview, “We are daily wage earners. We work throughout the day in the farms, shops and other establishments, and with the pay that we earn at the end of the day, we buy food and other essential commodities”. Therefore, staying at home during the lockdown is not a viable option for them. “If I have to stay confined at home, I will die of hunger. So, I have to go out and search for food, and during that if I contract the virus, what can I do” said Phowlhring who is a widow.

   To survive during the lockdown, people are left with no other option but to go to the nearby forest to find seasonal edibles such as green leaves and mushrooms or to the nearby river for fishing for consumption. However, it was found that such activities could not be carried out like before, due to certain movement restrictions. From what they collect, if there is any surplus, they sell it in the village for as less as 20-30 rupees and use the money to buy other essential items.

   Besides the loss of income, price surge of essential commodities has accelerated the misery of the community. As state by Bina, a migrant worker “Earlier we could take Rs. 200 to the market and buy groceries, but now that is not possible since the price of commodities have increased so much.”
2. Access to food during the lockdown

Access to food varies from district to district, even in cases where the government is distributing food to the people. The ration distributed under PMGKAY was given free of cost to every household irrespective of who does not have a ration card. 22 out of 32 respondents were found to have a ration card and none of the migrant workers had one due to documents issue. All respondents except three have received rice under PMGKAY scheme, however, the amount received varied from village to village. In the assessed village under Chandel District, rice was distributed twice under PMGKAY, where in the last distribution, each member of the family received 5 kilos of rice.

In Noney subdivision of Tamenglong District, rice was distributed at 3.5 kilo per head. Upon enquiry, locals stated that the authorities reserved 1.5 kilo (out of the 5 kilo allotted per head) for distribution to persons staying on rents, particularly outsiders and local migrant workers.

In Imphal, initially families received only 3 kilo rice per family at the start of lockdown. Later, rice was distributed at 5 kilo per head. It, however, should be mentioned here that the move is attributed to a controversy, which had erupted over irregular ration supply in Imphal area in the period prior to the lockdown. While the local MLA’s claimed that rice was purchased from money contributed by them, it turned out that the rice was procured under the PMGKAY scheme.

The community, however, expressed that the amount of rice was insufficient for the families and they still struggle to purchase other essential items since the government is providing them only rice. Under a local MLA’s initiatives rice, pulses, mustard oil, onion, potato and some vegetable items, salt, papad, and detergent were provided to each family including migrant workers in the Imphal areas.

Respondents living inside the Loktak Lake, villagers at Champu Khangpok floating village within the lake, said they did not receive any sort of relief from the State Government. In the midst of the lockdown they sent out an appeal through the media for help. The MP for Inner Manipur, Dr RK Ranjan responded by providing rice, pulses and vegetables using his own funds. Later the All Manipur Students’ Union also provided rice, onion, cabbage, etc. to the fisher families. The Bishnupur District’s Deputy Commissioner’s office made some enquiries but nothing happened. Villagers said the DC office insisted on aadhar cards to receive the relief, which many do not have. The fishers suffered extensively as they could not go out from their village, inside Loktak, to sell their catch, and lack of money added to their woes in accessing adequate food, medicine and other essentials.

One major issue, which was brought forth as part of the study was that Manipur is dependent on rest of the country for essential commodities, and with the restriction imposed on inter-state movement during the lockdown, people in the state faced acute shortage of essential commodities including chemist drugs. As a result of this, price hike in essential commodities has been reported in the state. Many shopkeepers and locals have reported depleting quantity of products for sale.
3. **Access to entitlements**

As shown in figure 1 and 2 below, the overall access to various government schemes is low. The most accessed government scheme appeared to be PDS and MGNREGS. However, out of 21 job card holders, only six of them were found to have received wages during the lockdown (as on the assessment period). Most villagers are not registered under schemes like Ujjawala, Jan Dhan, and Kisan Samman Nidhi due to various complications with the application. Some of them reported to have applied for the schemes in the past but were unsuccessful. In remote villages like Lunghar in Ukhrul District, they were not aware of Ujjwala, Jan Dhan schemes.

![Access to Entitlements](attachment://entitlements.png)

**Figure 1- Access to Entitlements**

As indicated by the figure 1, 69% of the respondent indicated presence of ration card and access to PDS during lockdown. While this is a positive trend, what is noteworthy is the variation in the amount that was distributed. According to guidelines 5 kg of rice and 1 kg of dal was approved for disbursement, however, while none of the respondents stated receiving dal, many respondents stated having received only 3 kg or 4 kg of rice.

![Access to Economic Entitlements](attachment://economic_entitlements.png)

**Figure 2- Access to Economic Entitlement**
The above figure, showcases data with regard to economic entitlement, while all the people who have registered as part of the Kisan Samman Nidhi Scheme has received money, the benefits as part of MNREGA have reached very few people.

4. **Access to loan and advance salary**

In the assessed village of Chandel, people are mostly engaged in unorganized work and on a temporary/daily basis, due to this, often accountability is absent from the employer. As a result of this, many of the respondents feel uneasy to ask for advance payment from the employer, and therefore taking advance was avoided. With regards to loan, some of them have already taken it already even before the lockdown. It is usually taken from chit fund which is the most common informal type of loan in rural villages. With the loss of income during the lockdown, they are finding it very difficult to repay it, therefore they are hesitant to take further loans, due to fear of indebtedness.

*Toriing* is a landless daily wage earner, who is also a widow. She lives alone as all her children are married and live separately. In January this year, she took money from a chit fund for her appendix operation, which she has to return Rs. 500 along with interest every week. As she has not been getting any work during the lockdown, it is difficult to repay the money on time. She has applied for Kisan Samman Nidhi scheme and Ujjawala scheme long back, but it has been unsuccessful.

5. **Access to bank**

Access to bank has always been a difficult task in rural villages even on usual days mainly due to rush, erratic service, and distance in some cases. Since the lockdown, it has become a challenge to visit the bank due to the measures put in place by the government in light of the COVID-19 spread in other states. Many of the villagers have reported having to struggle to withdraw Rs.500 from their Jan Dhan and old age/disabled scheme account which was received from the government during the lockdown.

*Nungshitombi* is over 60 years old, who lives with her husband and her younger sister who’s often ill. Three of them are daily wage earners living in Rungchang village under Chandel District, they have migrated from the neighbouring district. The family has no access to government schemes except Jan Dhan account. During the lockdown, one day news came from her native village that she has received Rs. 500 in her account. As she was in dire need of money to buy food, she thought she would withdraw it. To her dismay, she learnt that she could only withdraw it from her home branch as she did not have an ATM or a passbook with her. Since she was in dire need of money, she still decided to walk to her hometown which is about 30 km far away, as there was no transportation. Her relative came on a bicycle to hand over the money on the midway. She still had to walk at least 15 km back and forth (30 km). Due to the long walk, she got blisters on her legs and could not walk properly for a few days.
**How are they coping?**

As mentioned in the earlier section of the report, in the case of respondents in Chandel district, the major source of food during the lockdown comes from the forest and river and the ration distributed under PMGKAY. There are days when they have to literally hunt for work by approaching the employers individually for work.

Being a rural area, another coping mechanism is the presence of strong community support in the communities and this becomes the biggest relief in a time like this - from borrowing rice from each other to offering a few ml of cooking oil. For instance, in the case of Kim, her parents often give her a few hundred to manage her household expenses during the lockdown. However, if the situation does not get better soon, then people will be pushed into poverty. “We would starve as the whole village economy would break down and more people will run out of their food stocks and little savings” Kim.

In terms of relief from various government schemes, the amount of Rs. 500 and only rice is too little to feed the family. However, few respondents who have received Rs. 2000 under Kisan Samman Nidhi had expressed that such amount was quite useful in this time of crisis as stated by Kim “Currently, my family is dependent on Rs. 2000 which I have just received under Kisan Scheme, apart from this I have no money at all”.

Ajina and her family have no access to a single scheme as they do not have any residential proof documents. According to her, this is because her family keep moving from one village to another due to the nature of her husband’s work. Her husband is a driver who is sickly most of the time. As a result of lockdown, her husband is unable to go for work. When asked about how she is coping, she said she is mostly dependent on kinds that come from church members. As she narrated, during the lockdown, one day she just sat helpless wondering what to cook for dinner since there was no food in the kitchen, but to her surprise, there was someone from the neighbouring village who had come to offer some rice and pulses for which she was very grateful.

**Issues that emerged during the discussion**

1. For migrant workers, access to any government schemes remains a challenge and therefore during this time of crisis, they are left out from receiving any relief that comes from the government. As Bina has stated “generally, accessing government schemes is difficult as we have migrated to another district for work. I have tried applying for schemes such as Kisan Samman Nidhi and Ujjawala, but I had to travel to my native place several times, to visit the concerned office. Later I’ve realised that I had spent so much on travelling and also lost my wages yet my work was not getting done due to many hassles with the application process. Hence, it did not make sense for us to keep trying so I quit”. This has been narrated by most of the interviewed migrant workers like her.
2. It was evident that for many daily wagers, taking advance from any employer or accessing a loan from the bank is not an option because of the nature of the relationship they have with the employers (as mention in the earlier section of the report), and the bank would doubt their capacity to repay the loan. This leaves them financially more vulnerable in times like this.

3. Usually, many people in the rural area stock up paddy for at least a few months. However, it is not possible for landless daily wagers due to heavy financial constraint and as a result of this; they suffer the most during the lockdown.

4. A bigger amount of cash relief and providing more essential commodities will ease the suffering of the most affected people like them.

5. Lack of knowledge of the application process of schemes and the cumbersome process makes people avoid accessing government schemes.