Research Idea

Collaborative Partnership of Government and Nonprofits Agencies in Response to COVID-19

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Introduction

The complete national lockdown to halt the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic triggered a workplace and labor market crisis in India. Notably, the internal migrant laborers in big cities are pushed out of their work, and in the consequential absence of money and food, the stranded laborers are left with no other choice but to leave the cities. Their sufferings and pains do not end upon reaching their respective villages; instead, the resettlement challenge begins. NGOs work in collaboration with local governments to provide services to returning migrants. How does this collaborative partnership with local governments impact the effectiveness of NGO activities? This survey research examines the role of local NGOs in enabling the homecoming workers throughout their journey from quarantine centers to community resettlement within four Indian states—Bihar, Jharkhand, Rajasthan, and Orissa. This research argues that the local NGOs are

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instrumental in promoting community resistance, but local government commitment is necessary for NGOs' program effectiveness. This research evaluates the outcomes of NGOs' initiatives in enabling migrant workers to cope with the crisis. This study contributes to the government-nonprofit partnership in disaster response. This research defines the conditions to protect and promote migrant workers' rights and provides policy recommendations for developing a replicable public-nonprofit partnership model to address the short-term and long-term effects of Covid-19 on migrant labor.

Context and Literature

Despite regulations, violence against migrants, and skepticism about its impact on wage differentials and development (IOM n.d.; SSRC, 2008), labor mobility has increased in the last few decades. The UNDP Human Development Report of 2009 indicates that internal migration is four times higher than international migration (UNDP, 2009). Internal migration for livelihood is a widespread phenomenon across developing economies. There is a massive flux of migrant workers from rural to urban areas because of high economic disparities among regions and limited opportunities in rural areas as the urban areas are the epicenter of growth.

In India, the number of internal seasonal migrants is estimated to be more than 100 million (Deshingkar and Akter, 2009), though the drivers and consequences of labor migration are diverse (Srivastava and Sasikumar, 2003). Landlessness and social deprivation, indebtedness, and limited employment opportunities all drive individuals and families to migrate (De Haan, 1997; Breman, 1978; Haberfeld, Menaria, Sahoo and Vyas, 1999; Marius-Gnanou, 2008). Most of these migrant laborers are absorbed in the informal sector, where they are preferred for their cheap labor with devoid social security and legal protections. Lack of

profitability of entitlements across state borders makes them lead a sub-human existence with limited access to essential services (shelter, health, and education), and labor rights (Mosse et al., 2002; Deshingkar and Akter 2009). Nonetheless, the Census and NSS data indicate that the rural-urban influx of migration has been increasing substantially (Srivastava, 2011). States such as Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Bihar, Rajasthan, Orissa, and West Bengal are the primary suppliers of labor because of weak economies and a surplus of labor. On the other hand, Maharashtra, Gujrat, Haryana, Punjab, and Tamil Nadu, are known for their robust and flourishing economies, attracting many migrant workers. However, the urban labor markets treat them with opportunistic indifference, extracting hard labor but denying them basic entitlements, including shelter, rations, subsidized health, and education.

In summary, migrant work is a survival strategy, and internal labor migration increases as the Indian economy expands and urbanizes, though it poses many threats to the migrant laborers. The existing legislation and government policy remain biased against migrant workers (Mosse et al. 2005). Civil society organizations in India have taken initiatives for the social protection of migrant workers (Deshingkar, Khandelwal, and Farringtopn, 2008), but their scale is too small. Given this context, when the nation announced a complete lockdown to contain the spread, it caused great upheaval for the workplace and labor market. Specifically, the lockdown pushed the migrant workers in big cities out of their work. As a result, in the absence of money and jobs, they became desperate and started to return to their respective villages. The sufferings of homecoming migrant workers received immense national and international media attention, highlighting the lack of government support, delayed trains, days of waiting for the train, hazardous 300 miles of road travel, and death at the railways. However, their challenge does not end with their arrival to the villages; instead, the resettlement challenge begins calling for immediate and long-term assistance. The homecoming migrant workers' challenges include the social stigma of carrying the virus, lack of information, and misinformation, the challenge to quarantine themselves in tiny houses, food and survival needs, and transition and resettlement to the community.

Besides other limitations, the government relief package's efficacy remains limited in mitigating economic hardship, as it depends on delivery mechanisms. Moreover, hundreds of thousands of people living on the margins do not have the necessary documents (Jan-Dhan accounts) or are not registered as construction workers or MGNREGA1 beneficiaries. Reaching out to these populations in a timely and efficient manner is another big challenge for the government. Thus, despite the financial packages being rolled out to avert panic and vulnerability, it is an implacable situation that many will be left out as documentation is core to availing these safety-net programs.

Given the despair of the migrant workers, NGOs and civil society organizations are coming forward with more volunteers and social commitment through mobilizing resources. Concerned citizens and industry players are also coming forward with pledges of financial support and donations. Several NGOs are currently functioning in many villages in the remote areas of India through several initiatives, including providing food through community kitchens, building quarantine centers, creating awareness, and ensuring the hygiene of frontline workers. While in several villages, government and civil society institutions proactively collaborate and supplement each other while reinvigorating panchayats and other local institutions to reach out to the homecoming migrant workers, such partnership is missing in many other villages.

A long-term collaborative partnership response is crucial to supplement state initiatives, strengthen community resilience, and minimize the consequences of this pandemic on migrant workers. Disaster preparedness in broader social partnerships can include traditional partners, public sector agencies, private businesses, and civic sector organizations such as NGOs, community and voluntary organizations, or any combination such as public-private partnerships or private-NGOs partnerships (Nelson and Zadek, 2000; Selsky and Parker, 2005). The dynamic partnership implies working towards common objectives, mutual trust, willingness to work together, shared responsibility, and accountability (Craig, 1995). While combining resources and competencies (Nelcon and Zadek, 2000), the partnering process relates to social capital dimensions of trust and collective action, which facilitates coordination and cooperation among community members on issues of shared concern (Putnam, 2000).

A Community-Based Social Partnership is defined as a social network that involves a combination of public-private and civic sectors, with members engaging in voluntary, innovative relationships to sensitize the community to participate in actions, to jointly respond to a shared risk or crisis (Drakaki and Tzionas, 2017). Moreover, trust, collaboration, collective action, solidarity, social cohesion, information, and communication within the partnership can potentially facilitate community social capital and community competence and resilience (Norris et al., 2008) to combat and alleviate the distress caused by the rippling effect of the crisis.

In summary, the influx of thousands of migrant laborers into the villages raised multiple needs and concerns, which call for immediate and long-term initiatives to mitigate the migrant labor crisis in India. While the migrant laborers call for rapid response, including food shelter, the long-term

requirements involve documentation (such as Jan-Dhan account) to access government benefits and employment guarantee.

Research Question and Methodology

Accordingly, the primary research question includes whether the NGOs' partnership with local governments impacts migrant workers in their short- and long-term resettlements. The NGO partnership is expected to have a positive outcome alleviating the pain of migrant workers tied to the short-term and long-term effects of Covid-19. To evaluate the theoretical expectations, online remote survey research can be designed. The study sample should comprise the homecoming migrant workers in several villages within four states of India, including Bihar, Jharkhand, Rajasthan, and Orissa, which are the biggest suppliers of migrant labor. This study randomly selects villages in each state with an adjustment of the presence and absence of participating local NGOs in response to the Covid-19 crisis of migrant workers. In each of these villages, migrant workers will be randomly selected from the panchayat list of migrant workers. To ensure the data triangulation, government officials (such as collector, BDO, Sarpanch) and local villagers (five in each village) will also be surveyed to measure the outcome of NGOs' support and participation in relief work. Thus, migrant workers, villagers, and local public officials will be surveyed to examine NGOs' role in safeguarding the migrant workers.

Potential Novel Contribution of the Research Idea

This research is relevant and sheds light on the crucial aspect of the short-term and long-term effects of Covid-19 on the workplace and the labor market in developing economies, known for the supply of cheap labor for domestic and international companies. This study contributes to

the literature on the effectiveness of community-based partnerships and NGO initiatives in response to the pandemic's effect on an extraordinarily estranged and marginalized section of migrant labor. The study complements the existing literature on migrant labor while highlighting a unique aspect of the labor market in the pandemic. This research defines the conditions to protect and promote migrant workers' rights at the policymaking level. The research recommendations will help policymakers develop and replicate the collaborative public-nonprofit partnership model to address the short-term and long-term issues of migrant labor. The research has broad policy implications for social justice, inequality, and poverty reduction for marginalized migrant labor, inside and outside India, amid pandemic.

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