

9 April 2020

To,

Prime Minister's Office
E Block, Central Secretariat
New Delhi, Delhi 110011

CC: Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI); Finance Minister

Sub: Request to launch Pradhan Mantri Free Talk Time and Internet Sewa Yojana

Respected sir,

On behalf of the Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF), a non-profit working on digital development since 2002, we want to extend our full support to the fight against COVID – 19 in this difficult time.

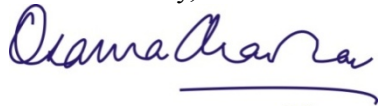
We understand the public health and safety measures taken in response to the containment of the pandemic. Having worked on extended access to technology, connectivity, and information in rural and underserved areas for 18 years we recognise the importance of internet and connectivity in accessing basic essentials and services.

Closure of economic activity has also meant uncertainties for large sections of India's vulnerable populations. Apart from having a considerable impact on their livelihoods, this has also had ancillary effects ranging from lack of access to information on social protection schemes announced by the government to lack of access to verified and credible health and safety information. Further, One Time Passwords (OTP) sent to mobile phones have become crucial to access benefits under PDS with non-use of Point of Sale biometric machine for health and safety reason.

A functioning mobile phone has become the means to access such essential information, goods, and services at this juncture. However, given the stress on livelihoods insights from our communities have indicated underserved populations are finding it increasing difficult to ensure pre-paid credit in their phones. This has led to constraints on access to measures aimed at supporting their livelihoods in this difficult time.

Therefore, we humbly put forward our submission below for internet access for vulnerable populations to be included within social protection schemes. DEF would be happy to extend further support towards this end.

Yours sincerely,



Osama Manzar
Founder – Director
Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF)
Email: osama@defindia.net
Website: www.defindia.org

PRADHAN MANTRI FREE TALK TIME AND INTERNET SEWA YOJANA

As public health and safety measures like social distancing and lockdowns demonstrated agile responses like work from home for many of the urban milieu, a rapid assessment survey by Jan Sahas showed how migrant workers were evicted from informal settlements or labour camps and abandoned by their labour contractors with unpaid wages. Nearly 93% of the workers surveyed by Jan Sahas earned between Rs. 200-600 per day and 92.5% have already lost work ranging from 1 – 3 weeks.

The informal sector in India comprises of [close to 81%](#) of the employed workforce with 77% coming under the category of vulnerably employed. A significant proportion of this category is comprised of seasonal agricultural migrants. The [Economic Survey of India 2017](#) estimated an annual 9 million inter-state migration in India between 2011- 2016 while the 2011 census puts an estimation at [139 million](#) accounting for both inter- and intra-state movements. The announcement of a 21-day lockdown triggered the massive exodus of millions of migrants, [claimed](#) to be largest since the Partition of India.

Putting the scale of impact on migrant workers into perspective, more than 79% of the total labourers who have outstanding debts believe that they would not be able to pay off their debts in the near future while 50% believe this would put them in risk of violence. 42% reported not having ration as on the date of the survey and a lack of livelihood for more than 3-weeks with an average 2-5 dependents would led to death by starvation. On the other hand, human resource heads of major companies report that [work from home is here to stay](#) as it increases productivity and lowers establishment costs.

Never before, have the fissures in the Indian digital divide been thrown into such sharp relief. While access and connectivity have continued to structure the equities, opportunities, and digital dividends – the pandemic has shown its indispensability for livelihoods and right to life. With no availability of livelihoods in the cities and no available means of transport to their villages, migrant workers have been making arduous journeys on foot through highways, forests, and villages. At least 17 migrant workers and their family members – including 5 children [have died](#) en route.

Jan Sahas highlighted 5 key points of note based on their study and ongoing response to the reverse migration to the villages on account of COVID -19:

- Mobile batteries were dead and there was no means to charge them.
- As mostly prepaid users their balance was over and there was not enough money to recharge.
- They were usually moving in groups because there would be at least one working mobile in each group and this would help them stay connected.

- There was nobody to depend on - the police were chasing them away, highways were blocked, and social distancing was keeping all help away.
- The only hope was to have mobile phones working so that calls for help could be placed and they could let their families and relatives know where they were and how they were moving.

There are about 450 million smartphone users as compared to 550 million feature phone users in India. About 40-45% of feature phone users own a device of less than Rs 1000, according to [International Data Corp \(IDC\) India](#). It is safe to assume that vulnerable populations form a significant proportion of this 550 million. Low smartphone penetration and connectivity in India [also mean](#) that COVID – 19 related awareness or relief measures do not reach the migrants.

62% of the labourers surveyed for the Jan Sahas study said that they were not aware of the relief schemes and packages announced by the Central and State governments while 37% responded that while they were aware of the schemes they did not know how to access it. An ensuing conversation with Ashif Shaikh of Jan Sahas also revealed that though most migrant workers carried phones, their batteries were currently discharged or that they were out of pre-paid credit which were also a cause for them not being able to reach out to their friends and relatives and access information.

Further, as the influx of migration increases in the rural areas it is going to raise the expectation of public service delivery of social protection schemes through existing e-governance architectures. Through its own experience of working with communities DEF has seen how One-Time-Passwords (OTP) sent to mobile numbers have now become indispensable to access ration through the public distribution system (PDS) as biometric authentication devices are phased out as a public health and safety measure.

This further reinforces the function of internet and digital devices as media for public service delivery in rural India. Through its work in leveraging information and communication technology and access to information in extending social protection coverage and building rural entrepreneurship models, DEF has seen the role that internet, connectivity, and the potentialities predicated on them have on improving livelihoods and income opportunities in rural areas.

Considering that significant proportions of the vulnerable populations rely on feature phones, and pre-paid connectivity, and the fact that they have no means to pay for being connected, it becomes important for the government to come forward and support digital connectivity and communication as a basic necessity, fundamental need, and basic human right, and declare complete free access to telecom and data for all those who are Below Poverty Line (BPL); who rely on ration; who depend on MNREGA, who are migrant workers, who are daily wagers, and who are part of the informal sector.



In the time of COVID – 19 where rural communities and institutions are struggling to respond to the pandemic, community based social entrepreneurs and banking correspondents nurtured by DEF are ensuring individuals are able to access their direct benefit transfers. This would not have been possible without access to information predicated on connectivity, digital literacy, and digital entrepreneurship initiatives.

The internet has been crucial in service delivery and has increasingly become, and in no other time more sharply than the present, an arbiter for inclusion. Crises and emergencies like the COVID – 19 pandemic have brutally highlighted how access to internet and connectivity have become an inalienable right to life. All public service delivery of social protection in rural areas are currently contingent on e-governance and internet infrastructural support and access to information continue to be crucial in supporting our underserved populations in these critical times.

The fight against COVID – 19 should not divert attention away from digital inclusion but focus on it as a centre – piece of public health policy. As access to information about social protection, means of access, and internet infrastructure to enable them could save millions of lives and livelihoods that stand to be endangered as a result of this crisis. This situation also highlights the need to formulate a digital crisis response plan under Digital India that focuses on focuses on unintended exclusions of the unconnected.

The response plan can also include the effective utilisation of the Universal Service Obligation Fund (USOF) to provide support and extension services to vulnerable populations during times of crises. Rapid response strategies can include provision of access to internet and talk time as a part of central and/ or state government social protection schemes through Internet Sewa Yojanas which could serve to ameliorate the current hardships faced by vulnerable populations through ensuring access to essential information, goods, and services. Further making relief camps for migrant workers free WiFi-zones or WiFi-hotspots could also serve to provide basic access to internet in times of urgent need.

If the experience with COVID – 19 has taught us anything, it is that public health policies as well as crises and emergency response should have a digital inclusion plank to mitigate the fallouts for vulnerable populations and ensure the availability of adequate safety nets.

For further information, please get in touch with:

Osama Manzar
Founder – Director
Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF)
Email: osama@defindia.net

Anulekha Nandi
Manager – Research and Advocacy
Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF)
Email: anulekha@defindia.org