
1. Battling Hunger in Times of Corona

Why in News?

- As PM announced an all-India lockdown for three weeks to break the chain of Covid-19, one could see the extent of the threat.
- But, this lockdown also led to pandemonium. Migrant labourers from Mumbai, Delhi, and other metros left in herds for their homes in Bihar, Jharkhand, UP, etc.

Brief Background:

- In 1918 Spanish flu, which infected 500 million people globally when the world's population was just 1.8 billion, killed 50 million, of which the largest deaths (estimated 14-18 million) were in India.
- The government did not want take any chances, so that complete lockdown was announced.
- Welfare measures of government:
- A welfare package of Rs 1.7 lakh crore was announced by the government. This is too small to cope with the onslaught of this virus.
- How does one finance this cost? Windfall gains from crude price crash, diverting all subsidies and some development funds, CSR funds of the private sector and invoking India's corporate leaders to come forward, deficit financing, etc.

Challenges in Handling Food Supply Lines:

- Food is essential and, as they say, no army can march on an empty stomach even for a few days.
- While the government has already announced that beneficiaries of the public distribution system can avail of three months ration in one go.
- However the challenge is to ensure that Fair Price Shops deliver this in an orderly manner, and that their own supply lines remain intact.
- Home (street) delivery would be ideal in such times to avoid crowding at one place. This is where civil society, with due safety gears, can play a role.
- From NGOs and Resident Welfare Associations to religious organisations and paramilitary forces, all can be engaged in orderly and safe distribution of food, both pre-cooked and fresh.
- Another challenge is supplying perishables like fruits and vegetables, milk, and so on. All these need to move on mobile vans in packaged conditions from street to street.

Steps Needs to be Done:

- FCI and other procuring agencies need to be fully trained on safety precautions, and supplied safety gear, so that wholesale supply lines don't get choked.
- We should use this opportunity to suspend the APMC Act and encourage NGOs, civil society, and corporate houses, to directly procure from farmers.
- For example, those NGOs with experience in food preparation and distribution (the likes of Akshaya Patra) can be at the forefront to guide the Local Authorities.

Conclusion:

- The challenge of screening and providing safety kits to these workers becomes doubly daunting, but is critical to stop the spread of virus to every home.

