As India gradually wakes up from a two-month lockdown, it is of utmost importance that the poor and vulnerable in the rural heartland have a much-needed safety net.

Read how Watershed Organisation Trust is helping communities reemerge and shore up capacities while revitalising livelihoods.

Helping the poor and migrants rebuild their lives
M eantime, the world lost almost 350,000 lives to COVID-19 with at least 5.5 million people affected, according to Johns Hopkins University. India is now among the most-affected 10 countries in the world with over 150,000 cases. At least 4,300 people have succumbed to the virus in our country.

As one of the rapid response measures, WOTR conducted a series of virtual workshops across seven states to spread awareness on COVID-19 among the rural communities, with over 1,300 people in attendance. These online workshops help bust myths and to make sure the delicate socio-economic fabric in these parts remain insulated from COVID-19 as long as it can, so that it does not wreak havoc on the most vulnerable and disadvantaged sections, who are largely dependent on agriculture and labour. The existing rural infrastructure may not be able to cope if the situation turns as bad as in our urban centres. This is why WOTR’s work has never been as crucial as it is at the moment.

WOTR’s UNWAVERING RESOLVE IN CONFRONTING CRISES

As we inch towards the end of the fourth lockdown (60 days and counting), COVID-19 is redefining the way we live and operate.

For WOTR, as an organisation with a mandate to work for the vulnerable, especially farmers and women, mobilising self help capacities of individuals and communities is paramount. WOTR is uniquely placed to leverage its existing multi-sectoral infrastructure to respond to COVID-19 through various measures such as distribution of essentials, creating awareness, generating employment and livelihood support activities across seven states - Maharashtra, Telangana, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Odisha, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh.

WOTR is fostering strong partnerships with the central and state governments, NGOs, community organisations, local civic bodies and other institutions to work on a collaborative model, streamlining best practices, promoting preparedness and building resilience.

We are reaching out through our network of village-level workers - the Panlot sevaks, Jal sevaks, Mahila pravartaks, Village Development Committees and Self Help Groups. These measures will not only contribute to post-COVID-19 preparedness and response, but also to revive our immediate environment and design ecosystem-based adaptations to the climate crisis in the future.
1. OUTREACH / ENSURING HELP TILL THE LAST MILE

WOTR organised 14 virtual workshops across seven states on COVID-19. Over 1,300 participants from 294 villages came together for the online interactive workshops to express their concerns as WOTR staff provided crucial tips on how to deal with COVID-19, returning migrants, and the importance of keeping the villages in the COVID-19 Green Zone.

On May 20, 2020, WOTR had reached out to 123,195 households in 25 districts, spread across 646 villages in seven states.
2. EMPLOYMENT & LIVELIHOOD / CREATING A SAFETY NET

The mass exodus of migrants from cities due to COVID-19 has resulted in a spike in unemployment. WOTR has been working to generate employment especially for the returning migrants through its project activities like construction of check dams, farm ponds, stone bunds, digging of dugwell, etc. We are facilitating employment generation through MNREGA as well.

Propullo Puduraito, a skilled mason from Kadasai village in Gunupur block of Rayagada district in Odisha says: “Because of the lockdown, we suffered huge losses in income. So we approached the Village Development Committee to initiate work for the labourers. With the guidance from WOTR staff, we started construction work for check dams. I earned an income of Rs 6,020.”

Thanks to the labour days generated, Rs. 3.25 cr was distributed as wages until May 20, 2020, (beginning mid-March) most of which are through works involving soil and water conservation structures and irrigation facilities. Of these, Rs. 1.21 cr (up 37% from May 10 data) is contributed through WOTR projects while Rs. 2.03 cr (up 63% from May 10 data) is through MNREGA (GOI) and Adarsh Gaon Scheme (GoM).

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Odisha</th>
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<th>Madhya Pradesh</th>
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<th>Maharashtra</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. of labour days generated</td>
<td>3,204</td>
<td>1,665</td>
<td>24,848</td>
<td>1,725</td>
<td>113,428</td>
<td>1,908</td>
<td>60,533</td>
<td>207,311</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of labourers employed</td>
<td>401</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>2,168</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>6,946</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>1,148</td>
<td>11,152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of families benefitted</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>1,947</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>2,778</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>1,170</td>
<td>6,586</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Inflow of migrants / Checking COVID-19 spread

A high COVID-19 infection rate is observed among the migrants returning to their villages. In such a scenario, it is important for the village-level workers to adopt measures that will check the spread of the virus.

WOTR’s Wasundhara sevaks along with village-level workers are helping in identifying migrants and are keeping a record. Those who have COVID-19 symptoms are counselled and asked to remain in quarantine. Besides, the migrants are provided food and other essentials.

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<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. of migrants returned to villages</td>
<td>913</td>
<td>451</td>
<td>726</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2,506</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>6,219</td>
<td>10,899</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of persons in quarantine</td>
<td>543</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>197</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>669</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>2,677</td>
<td>4,181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of persons supported by WOTR through food/employment/counselling</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>553</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>803</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

So far, 10,899 migrants have returned to their villages, of which 4,181 are kept in quarantine. WOTR has supported 803 individuals, providing them counselling, food and employment opportunities.
3. COMMUNITY MOBILISATION / 1,844 WOMEN ON THE FRONTLINE

Across the country, in its project villages, WOTR’s Wasundhara sevaks, SHGs, VDCs along with gram panchayat members are assisting the local administration in combating the pandemic by creating awareness, dispelling myths, making protective face masks, and advocating proper hand washing.

“When the lockdown was announced on March 25, we first trained our Wasundhara sevaks about creating awareness on COVID-19 through phone calls. They (Wasundhara sevak/sevikas) then trained the villagers in social distancing, proper hand washing and on the importance of wearing a protective face mask. We have also spread messages through wall paintings and providing government helpline numbers,” says WOTR’s Anshuman Panda in Odisha.

As of May 20, 2020, WOTR has 3,046 village-level workers who are supporting the local administration of which 1,844 (>60%) are women.
‘Service to God’: Geeta Raitaa, Wasundhara Sevika in Raygada, Odisha

Geeta Raitaa is a 22-year-old woman from Tirlida village in Kulusing panchayat, Gunupur block, Raygada district, Odisha. In 2018, she joined WOTR as a Wasundhara sevika. Now, she is playing a vital role in creating awareness among her village community about the pandemic.

She is in constant touch with WOTR field staff and follows instructions given to her. She has conducted 11 training sessions on hand washing and on the importance of maintaining physical distancing. Besides, she has stitched 850 protective face masks and distributed at her village while helping in providing rations and sanitation kits.

Geeta has also helped the local gram panchayat in registration of migrant returnees who are now kept in quarantine.

“I find immense pleasure in working for the people as I feel it is a service to God. I want to make my village an example of development in the entire country,” she says.
Until now, WOTR has conducted 2,150 awareness sessions and have impacted 152,942 people.
5. DISTRIBUTION OF ESSENTIALS / SHGs A FORCE TO RECKON WITH

WOTR is distributing essentials along with its women SHG members who have been actively supporting village communities’ right from the outset. They have been working with families who need lifesaving hygiene essentials, carrying out awareness campaigns, helping in providing fact-based information, sewing and distributing masks and ensuring proper hand washing, besides supplying vulnerable families essential commodities. In the states of Odisha, Telangana and Jharkhand, WOTR facilitated distribution of essentials through PDS, which benefitted 6,139 households.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. of masks prepared</td>
<td>10,255</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>5,555</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2,622</td>
<td>56,690</td>
<td>75,222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of tailors involved</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>299</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of persons who received masks</td>
<td>8,895</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>3,270</td>
<td>720</td>
<td>18,500</td>
<td>2,419</td>
<td>54,500</td>
<td>88,434</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of households which received grocery kits</td>
<td>214</td>
<td>XXX</td>
<td>3,160</td>
<td>452</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>438</td>
<td>2,688</td>
<td>6,952</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of households which received sanitisation kits</td>
<td>1,756</td>
<td>XXX</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>438</td>
<td>24,820</td>
<td>27,014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of households which received PDS facilitated by WOTR</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6,032</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6,139</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

299 tailors created 75,222 masks. Along with these, WOTR distributed face masks to 88,434 individuals. Besides, WOTR made available grocery kits to 6,952 households and sanitisation kits to 27,014 households.
6. SUPPORT FOR SUSTENANCE / VEGETABLE PATCH IN THE BACKYARD A LIFESAVER

WOTR has been assisting needy families who are struggling to get rations and distributing vegetables sourced from kitchen gardens. Kitchen garden and multilayer farming initiatives have proved to be beneficial for small and marginalised farmers in rural Maharashtra when supply chains are largely cut off due to the pandemic.

Radhabai Damodar Gadekar is a farmer from Jalna district in Maharashtra. “I began multilayer farming after WOTR introduced us to the concept in September 2019. During the lockdown, there is no weekly market. Vegetables available in the village are too expensive. Now, multilayer farming has come to my rescue,” she says.

As agricultural activities are in full swing due to the ongoing Rabi harvest and the forthcoming Kharif sowing, the lockdown has been an obstacle to the sale of produce and affects both supply as well as demand management.

While both the central and the different state governments have announced relaxation for agricultural activities and support for farmers, WOTR has been working to provide input support like providing fertilisers, machinery, seeds, compost beds and such agricultural essentials to the farmers.

Until May 20, 2020, 24,074 households have benefitted from 9,289 kitchen gardens and 433 multilayer farms.
7. MARKETING FARM PRODUCE / 12,764 QUINTALS OF PRODUCE SOLD

As the lockdown has severely affected logistics, disrupting availability, WOTR facilitated the sale of farm produce goods, thereby generating a means of income for many farmers. In the states of Jharkhand, Maharashtra and Telangana, 775 families have received support through FPOs selling over 12,764 quintals of rice, wheat, paddy and vegetables amounting to Rs 2.2 crore.

8. MEDIA COVERAGE / WOTR IN THE SPOTLIGHT

WOTR’s activities on the ground in response to COVID–19 have been covered extensively by the media. As of May 20, 2020, 22 news articles appeared in local newspapers and five news stories in television networks.

Press coverage of WOTR's COVID-19 response
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

WOTR is grateful for the generous support of our donors, friends and colleagues who have made possible all of the above interventions.

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