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**MPI and COVID-19**

The recently published Global Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) 2020 by the United Nations Development Programme and Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative has jeopardised the advancement in the reduction of MPI due to the impact of COVID-19 on deprivation parameters. The projected figures in the report are disturbing, and this certainly requires early intervention in order to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of 2030. It is expected that an additional 490 million people will fall into multidimensional poverty within a period of 10 years in developing countries. Those countries that were on the right track in reducing multidimensional poverty before COVID-19 may not achieve the target as predicted. The situation projected in the report is shocking in countries in the sub-Saharan Africa.

The MPI report has cited two areas that have severely affected the deprivation indicators. These are nutrition and children's school attendance. An analysis of 70 countries shows that the pandemic has disrupted school education globally due to national and local lockdowns, where 91% of the children are out of their schools. It is anticipated that the school attendance of 50% of the primary school-age children in these countries will continue to be affected. Delay in food supply and implementation of food security schemes results in affecting the livelihoods of the poor. It is reported by the World Food Programme that about 130 million people across 55 countries face acute food /insecurity. The MPI report has pointed

out that at least 25% of the people who were not undernourished before COVID-19 will become undernourished. This could be reduced only if food security is ensured to them sufficiently. Otherwise, the multiplier effect of such a situation will drag many people in the developing nations into the "poverty trap" shortly.

The MPI report that has combined the impact of attendance (50%) and nutrition (25%) reveals that the aggregate global MPI of 70 countries can change from 0.095 to 0.156 in 2020. This is almost equivalent to the value of the year 2011. So the impact of COVID-19 raises deprivations and sets poverty back by 9.1 years. Similarly, for school attendance, the total MPI of these countries could increase from 0.095 to 0.125 in 2020, equivalent to the value of 2015. This certainly increases the deprivations due to COVID-19 and takes poverty reduction back by 5.2 years, by adding 237 million people to multidimensional poverty in the coming years—a big policy challenge. The saddest part is about managing the 107 million multidimensionally poor, who are in the age 60 or above during the pandemic.

MPI for India is calculated as 0.123. About 27.9% of the total population includes the multidimensionally poor. The percentage of people susceptible to multidimensional poverty is 19.3%. The share of deprivation dimension to total multidimensional poverty in terms of health, education and standard of living is 31.9%, 23.4% and 44.8%, respectively. However, these figures need to be revised in the context of COVID-19, and a revised index has to be worked out in the days to come.

**EPW Index**

An author-title index for *EPW* has been prepared for the years from 1968 to 2012. The PDFs of the index have been uploaded, year-wise, on the *EPW* website. Visitors can download the index for all the years from the site. (The index for a few years is yet to be prepared and will be uploaded when ready.)

*EPW* would like to acknowledge the help of the staff of the library of the Indira Gandhi Institute for Development Research, Mumbai in preparing the index under a project supported by the RD Tata Trust.

The impact of the pandemic will be severe on MPI. It is important at this stage to mobilise more resources and continue all supportive measures in terms of the public distribution system, regular immunisation programmes, safety network for the poor, etc, that may minimise the affect of deprivation indicators on MPI.

**N Rajagopal**  
THIRUVARUR

## The Sunderbans in Crisis

The COVID-19 outbreak has caused a huge public health crisis throughout the globe. While imminent health concerns have naturally taken priority, the impact of certain other consequences of the pandemic is yet to be fully appreciated. One of these other consequences includes the unplanned migration of a mostly unorganised labour population in the developing world. To understand the consequences of such a migration on the lives of labourers and wildlife, let us look at the present situation in the Sunderbans in India.

The Sunderban Biosphere Reserve, India (9,630 sq km) is situated within the world's largest delta and is the only abode of mangrove tigers. About 4.6 million people live in the Sunderbans and their lives are intricately intertwined with the forests around them. Accordingly, being the largest contiguous mangrove patch in the world, the area has been heavily regulated by the Government of India for its conservation.

Traditionally, the livelihood of the residents of Sunderbans is dependent primarily on agriculture, fishing, tiger prawn production, seed collection, wood and honey collection, and ecotourism. Approximately 60% of the total productive population of the area is dependent on agriculture and 88% is dependent on fishing. There was a consistent increase in total agricultural land from 1990 to 2006 (16.9% to 20.93%) and ecotourism grew at 101% from 2003 to 2009. However, there was a sharp decline in these occupations in the following years due to rising sea levels and climate change.

The total agricultural land declined to 16.36% in 2013 due to rising sea levels and

the supercyclone Aila 2009. Likewise, the residents who have been dependent on fishing for sustenance are finding it increasingly hard to catch fish due to the excessive saltwater intrusion in the inner delta and the overexploitation of common pool resources. This has resulted in a situation wherein 34% of all the people residing in 54 out of the 102 islands in the area are under life-threatening poverty.

All of this has resulted in the seasonal migration of men from the Sunderban area to other parts of India in search of better livelihood opportunities. At present, the situation has become so dire that one member from 75% of all families in the area is required to migrate and work in other parts of India to sustain their family.

Earlier this year in May, another supercyclone Amphan caused massive devastation throughout the Sunderbans amidst the COVID-19 lockdown. Officially, 28% of the Sunderban area had been damaged by the disaster and 1,200 sq km (out of the total 4,263 sq km) of forests had been destroyed. With seasonal labour migration halted due to the lockdown and the dropping rates of ecotourism, the socio-economically marginalised population has once again resorted to agriculture as their only means of sustenance. However, given the high levels of saltwater intrusion caused by the rising sea levels and the flooding of the Sunderbans by the cyclone, agriculture does not seem to be a viable option.

Accordingly, reduced income opportunities due to COVID-19, destruction of properties due to Amphan, and low productivity of agricultural land due to climate change have pushed the marginalised population of the Sunderbans to the brink of survival. The combined impact of these issues has forced the

population to resort to illegal means to sustain a living.

Thus, there has been an increase in the illegal exploitation of mangrove resources and tiger poaching activities. While local relief efforts have temporarily managed the situation in the remote Sunderban islands, it may take decades for the islands and islanders to heal. The economic austerities brought about by the pandemic will further delay this recovery. There is a serious need to introduce alternative green-livelihood options for the marginalised and vulnerable populations of the Indian Sunderbans. Some of the possible livelihood options could be the introduction of grocery shops, development of local transport, pond re-excavation, organic farming, handicrafts works, small-scale aquaculture, poultry farming, and plantation of fruit-producing trees. These alternative livelihoods can replace community livelihoods like fishing, aquaculture, agriculture, ecotourism, non-timber forest product collection, etc, which have been adversely affected due to migration of labourers and poaching in conserved forest areas and the shrinking market due to lockdown.

With reduction in income sources, vulnerability from natural disasters, and the dangers posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the marginalised island communities can rely only on sporadic and uncertain relief efforts to conserve the largest delta in the world and the last abode of the charismatic mangrove tigers. It is imperative that the concerned state governments should pay heed to this issue and provide alternative means of sustenance for the people living in the Sunderbans.

**Abhiroop Chowdhury, Raghuveer Nath, Armin Rosencranz**

SONIPAT

### EPW Engage

The following articles have been published in the past week in the EPW Engage section ([www.epw.in/engage](http://www.epw.in/engage)).

- (1) Locked in: What the COVID-19 Pandemic Spells for Victims of Domestic Violence—*Anjali KK and Shubha Ranganathan*
- (2) United States to Quit World Health Organization: What Does It Mean for the World?—*S Faizi*
- (3) Kashmir Media Policy: Accentuating the Curbs on the Freedom of Press—*Geeta Seshu*
- (4) Migration Governance in a Pandemic: What Can We Learn from India's Treatment of Migrants in the Gulf?—*Rhea Abraham*

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## Submission Guidelines

EPW welcomes original contributions that have not been submitted, published, or accepted for publication elsewhere. Contributors must specify the same in the article submission email. Contributors are urged to follow EPW's stylesheet (<https://www.epw.in/style-sheet.html>). All contributions must be accompanied by:

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In order to foster debate and discussion, responses to articles published in EPW are encouraged.

## Postscript (Word limit: 800–1,200)

Short accounts or reflections on different aspects of culture (travel, literature, dance, music and film) will be considered under this section.

## Engage

Contributions to this section may be in the form of articles (2,500–3,000 words), photo essays, podcasts and videos on topical social, cultural, economic and political developments. For more details, visit: <https://www.epw.in/notes-contributors-epw-engage>.

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