State of Provisioning of Relief Services in Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Jharkhand, during the Coronavirus Lockdown: A Survey on Mobile Vaani

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Key highlights:

- Over 60% of the respondents have not received the free ration to which they were entitled. Anganwadi linked distribution is doing marginally better.
- At least 1 in 2 people have not received the financial assistance promised to them.
- Over 50% respondents said they can only manage household expenses for a week if the lockdown were to be extended; 1 in 4 had no idea how long they would be able to manage.
- Most respondents said that the police and local officials were not stopping them from accessing essential services, but close to 25% respondents claimed forceful behavior.

This report presents results from an IVR survey conducted on April 11th and 12th, of Mobile Vaani users from across Bihar, Jharkhand, and Madhya Pradesh. Mobile Vaani is a voice-based participatory media platform that has been running since several years in over 25 districts spread across these states. We conducted a rapid assessment survey on IVR (Interactive Voice Response) technology, to understand the state of provisioning of relief services during the Coronavirus lockdown. A survey tool of 11 multiple-choice questions was developed and pushed to regular Mobile Vaani users, who responded in large numbers to this questionnaire. Over 1,700 people answered all the questions, and the analysis below considers this data.

This survey report is also interspersed with experiences that Mobile Vaani users have shared during March 24th to April 14th, 2020, the duration of the first nationwide lockdown.

Based on these user experiences, we also initiated engagement with district magistrates in select districts in Bihar, Jharkhand and Madhya Pradesh describing the issues and suggestions on alleviating these. These efforts and their results are described towards the end of this document.

Survey respondents

<table>
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<th>State</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Farmer/Agriculture labour</th>
<th>Daily Wage labour/Contract labour</th>
<th>Salaried employee</th>
<th>Self - employed</th>
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<td>6.1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jharkhand</td>
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<td>51.5%</td>
<td>24.1%</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
<td>17.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madhya Pradesh</td>
<td>499</td>
<td>56.9%</td>
<td>21.6%</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
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Most users on Mobile Vaani come from extremely humble backgrounds. More than 50% of the users are connected with agriculture, and another 25-30% are daily wage labourers.
How Mobile Vaani works

People place a missed-call to Mobile Vaani phone numbers, our servers cut the call and call them back, so that platform access is free-of-cost for the users. They can then listen to audio content over these calls, and also record messages that can be heard by other users after a manual moderation process. In this simple manner, Mobile Vaani enables a rich interaction among the community members to help answer each other’s questions, report local news, discuss the news events, discuss policies, etc. A wide range of topics are covered on Mobile Vaani, including agriculture, livelihood, education, health and nutrition, sanitation, financial inclusion, and governance and accountability. For this reason, Mobile Vaani users come from a wide range of backgrounds, and especially from among those who are not able to use the Internet. Further, a wide network of community volunteers respond to concerns raised by their communities, and help address these issues by engaging constructively with other local NGOs, social workers, and administration staff.

1 – Delivery of public services

This section deals with several essential public services being provided in the village by various government departments and civil society organizations during the lockdown period. The following graphs present our state-wise findings.

1.1 – Food distribution

![Graph 1.1: Food being distributed in village by authorities or by NGOs](image)

Close to 80 percent of people reported in Bihar that food is not being distributed in their villages, either by the authorities or by NGOs. Results for neighbouring Jharkhand are more encouraging where 31.7 percent people reported that food is being distributed. In Madhya Pradesh, close to 70 percent people reported no distribution of food.
State governments have also encouraged Anganwadi centers and mid-day meal helpers to distribute uncooked grains. However, a similar trend exists in the three states: Bihar scores abysmally low when it comes to the distribution of food items among Anganwadi beneficiaries or through the mid-day meal schemes. Madhya Pradesh and Jharkhand are doing better.

1.2 – Treatment of police authorities

In the last three weeks, many reports were doing the rounds in electronic as well as print media of people being prevented by the administration and police from availing basic banking and health facilities. The survey shows a different picture, more than half of those surveyed reported that police and administration are being helpful, and are not stopping people from availing essential services.
Police generally invokes fear in mind of people but during these lock down days, there is complete change of guard in police approach towards the general people. Food and water are being provided to people by the police. The community has all the good things to say about police.

**Girdhaur, Jamui, Bihar**

“Police is not harassing us, there is a time allotted for buying essential items or going to bank or ATMs. Police has given clear instructions, if somebody disobey the rules, then only police will take action” – Genauri Paswan, Patna, Bihar

Police officers on the duty have understood the gravity of the current outbreak and they take bath and wash their duty uniform outside before entering their homes.

**Police officer, Sahebganj, Jharkhand**

People are not following the guidelines of the lock down and are roaming freely in the market areas. Police despite being present is not taking cognizance. In the initial days of the lock down, police was stringent and were taking strict actions against the violators but after a video of police lathi charge got viral, police has gone soft on people.

**Dalsinghsarai, Samastipur, Bihar**

However from many of our locations, especially in urban areas where migrant workers are stranded, we are continuing to receive adverse reports of police action. We will write more about this in our upcoming report on migrant workers.

### 1.3 – Other health services

![Graph 1.4: Availability of doctor at local PHC and CHC, people availing health services for other general and critical illness](image)

With healthcare workers focusing their attention on the Coronavirus crisis, we got reports that other regular health services were being neglected. In Bihar, almost 50 percent of the people reported that doctors are not available at the PHC or CHC, while in Jharkhand 40 percent of people reported the
same. The figure from the state of Madhya Pradesh is better with around 44 percent people reporting that doctors are available.

Two people from the same family died because they were not able to get emergency medical assistance because of unavailability of Doctors because of the lockdown. They went from one facility to other but all the effort to save them went in vain.

Report from Samastipur, Bihar

Because of the lock down, patients are facing very tough time, firstly they do not have enough money left for treatment and secondly medicines are not available in rural areas. Number of patients have swelled up. Situation for coming days looks very grim.

Dr Paswan, Samastipur, Bihar

Even those with worrying symptoms are facing issues in getting medical attention.

I have gone to government hospital as well as private hospital as I have some symptoms. No Doctors are available. I am very worried

Mahesh Kumar, Samastipur, Bihar

People are being harassed at medical facilities of good repute in Patna. Despite paying all the medical bills for medicines and surgery, the Doctor is asking for undertaking a Corona test. We are running from one counter to other only to know later that Corona testing facility is not there in hospital.

Father of a child who needs surgery, Muzaffarpur, Bihar
2 – Access to relief measures

This section describes access to the relief measures announced by the central and respective state governments. Findings are segregated into (a) state wise results of relief measures, and (b) access to the relief measures analysed by employment-type of the respondents.

2.1 – Free ration availability

Under the aegis of PM Garib Kalyan Yojana, poor people are to be provided free-of-cost ration which is to be twice the quantity of their current entitlement, over the next three months. This scheme was announced to ensure that no poor family would suffer on account of the non-availability of food grains due to disruption in the next three months. In addition to this, the government of Bihar, further announced a package under which one-month of rations will be given for free to all the ration card holders.
holders - 5 kg of wheat or rice and 1 kg of preferred pulses. Jharkhand has also announced two months of ration to 2.55 crore people who are currently covered under public distribution system.

Our users however reported that close to 90 percent of the people in Bihar have not received free rations by the government, whereas 75 percent of the respondents in Jharkhand and Madhya Pradesh have not received these free rations.

Employment wise also, the trend is similar, where close to 90 percent of the people working as wage labourers and engaged in agriculture in Bihar have reportedly not received any free rations. In Jharkhand, only 27 percent of wage labourers reported receiving free ration while in Madhya Pradesh, only 24 percent of farmers or agriculture labourers reported receiving rations.

Qualitative insights from the ground also indicate information gaps with respect to announcements of government schemes among the Mahadalits and Mushahar communities in Bihar. In addition, many ration cards have not been renewed despite applications having been submitted 2-3 years back. Commodities are also being black marketed, making free rations essential for people.

Central as well as state government has made announcements with respect to providing ration to the those having a ration card. People here have no clarity that how much ration are they entitled to. In addition to this, there are numerous families who have no ration card, what provisions the government has for them is unclear. Provisions made by government is not reaching to those who are in dire need.

Vijay Kumar Vijay, MLA, Munger, Bihar

Ration has come in my village, but it has not been distributed. Others have got ration, but they have not given it to my family. We do not have any farm or any other source of livelihood. My husband works in Delhi and he has been stranded there because of the lock down. I have children who are starving.

Isika Devi, Nalanda, Bihar

We are old and with no resources, my 11-year-old orphan granddaughter lives with us. There is no ration left. Upon asking for ration, the assistant secretary is threatening us with dire consequences. He is saying that complaint will be lodged to the police, if you ask for ration. We are helpless and want to arrange some food for our granddaughter

Grandfather of Rajshri, Shivpuri, Madhya Pradesh

No ration card, red card is available in our village. This is resulting in near starvation situation in my village. We are getting no support from the administration

Chandan Yadav, Ghazipur, Uttar Pradesh
2.2 – Pension transfers

The central government announced that three months of pension funds will be transferred to the beneficiaries, such as for old age, widow or Divyang pension. In Bihar, the state government further announced that three months of the pension amount will be paid in advance. Madhya Pradesh similarly announced Rs 600 per month for pensioners of the state, to be paid in advance.

Almost sixty percent of the people however reported not having received any kind of pension amounts, across all the three states. Employment wise, only close to a quarter of the people engaged in labour work and agriculture related work have received some kind of pension in Bihar.
I am widow with small children. I have not received the widow pension that I am entitled to. In addition to this, there is a lock down, so I am unable to go outside to earn. I have also not received the free ration by the government.

Rammani Devi, Shivpuri, Madhya Pradesh

2.3 – Other cash transfers

The central government also announced financial support to all women account holders having a PMJDY (Jan Dhan) account. The government committed to providing Rs 1500 per account holder, to
tide over the Coronavirus crisis. The amount would be deposited over the next three months starting, from April 2020, in three installments of Rs 500 each. The Bihar government further announced on March 25th that each family possessing a ration card will be additionally given a sum of Rs 1000.

Of all the states, Bihar has fared better. 40 percent of people reported having received financial support from the government, whereas in Madhya Pradesh only 34 percent people reported the same, followed by Jharkhand where only 19 percent people reported having received any financial monetary support. Employment wise, the trend is similar to the aggregate data.

Voices from the ground indicate that the disbursement of money has started, but there are gaps.

*We have been told that we will get Rs 1000 in our bank accounts, till date, I have not received any amount in my account*

**Upendra Kumar Yadav, Deoghar, Jharkhand**

*Not able to work because of lock down. Financial condition has worsened, the government has promised free ration and sum of Rs 1000 which I have not received. Commodities are being sold in black in our area and nobody is taking cognizance, if the situation persists till April 14th, I will on the verge of starvation. Government must do something about us. I am following all the guidelines.*

**Neeraj Kumar, a labourer from Munger, Bihar**

2.4 – Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana

Under the PM Garib Kalyan Yojana, Ujjwala gas connection holders are to be provided three gas cylinders free of cost starting April 2020, for 3 months. As per the announcement made, the Ujjwala connections holders will receive money in their bank accounts as a reimbursement after having paid for the cylinder at the point of service. One cylinder will be given per month, and the duration between booking two cylinders should be more than 15 days.

Reports from the ground suggest that people are facing great difficulties in accessing the benefits of this scheme. There are a plethora of issues plaguing the implementation. The mobile number of the beneficiary must be registered under the scheme. Some agencies are asking for additional money to book a cylinder. We also found many cases where the money was transferred to the registered bank account of the beneficiary, but due to easy availability of cylinders, people actually had to pay at black market rates.

*Families in my village have not received the passbook for ujjwala gas connection, we also do not have any information that when will get gas cylinders.*

**Sumit, Ghazipur, Uttar Pradesh**

*Ujjwala gas connection money has been transferred into the bank accounts, booking has been made for 6 cylinders, but we are unable to get the cylinders as it is unavailable. We are facing lot of challenges in running the home without LPG.*

**Residents of Vishnupura village, Ghazipur, Uttar Pradesh**

*The gas agency is asking for money for issuing cylinders booked under Ujjwala connection. People are running from pillar to post but to no avail.*

**Satish Chandra, Gram Pradhan, Ghazipur, Uttar Pradesh**
“My wife’s old mobile number was registered under the ujjwala gas yojana, the gas agency, Indane is declining to issue me any cylinder as we do not use that number anymore”

Shamsuddin, Muzaffarpur, Bihar

2.5 – Withdrawing cash from the bank

Banking services is included as an essential service by the Ministry of Home Affairs, but withdrawing money from the bank and ATMs is turning out to be challenging.

Bank mitras are last mile banking access points for millions of Jan Dhan account holders in rural areas. They are central to the government’s direct benefit transfer process to ensure that funds transferred to bank accounts are made available to beneficiaries in cash. Reports from the ground suggest that due to the lockdown restrictions, these bank mitras are reportedly not being allowed free movement by local administration and the police. In addition to this, cash shortage in banks and retail outlets especially in rural areas is also a challenge. Several branches are shut and the movement of cash from currency chests to branches is not happening. Dismal rural ATM penetration and their non-functioning has added to the hardship of people.

News reports also suggest that social distancing is not being practiced as hordes of people are queuing up at the banks. Some fake news is also doing the rounds that the transferred money will be take back by the government if it is not promptly withdrawn, which is causing people to queue up at the bank branches!

21 days lockdown has resulted in cash crunch among people. Bank of India ATM is not functioning thus long queue of people including children could be seen. Bank starts functioning at 10 AM and from that time hordes of people could be seen lining up to bank cash counter to withdraw money.

Kamlesh Jaiswal, Mobile Vani community reporter, Bokaro, Jharkhand

Because of cash crunch at home, People are regularly going to the bank Customer Service Point to withdraw money only to find out that the server is not working. Many of them have fallen ill.

Ratan Sada, villager, Samastipur, Bihar

In order to withdraw money that people have received under Ujjwala yojana, villagers have flocked to the banks in large numbers and are not following any norms of social distancing. This is the story of most of the banks here. Bank officials and administration is having tough time controlling the large crowd which are coming to the banks.

Mahto, Mobile Vaani community reporter, Jharkhand

“I am going to Punjab National Bank from last 4 days only to find out that there is no cash. ATM is not working from last year”

Kumar Amit, student, Nalanda, Bihar
To further protect the rural poor from the economic impact of the outbreak, the Central government announced expediting the transfer of cash through DBT (Direct Benefits Transfer) for the unemployment allowance and pending MGNREGA wages of workers.

The picture on the ground tells a different story though, as more than 70 percent people across all the three states reported not having received any allowance under MGNREGA in the last two weeks of the lockdown. Employment wise also, the data presents a similar trend across all the three states.
### 3 – Ability to cope during the lockdown

**Graph 2.5:** If the lockdown continues after 14th April, how many days do you think, you could manage household expenses

We further asked the respondents that in case the lockdown is extended, until when they will be able to manage their household expenses. According to the findings, more than 50 percent of people in all the three states reported that they can manage just for less than a week. All these three states, especially Bihar and Jharkhand, have lakhs of migrant workers who travel across the country to work and earn wages. They live hand to mouth, they can only eat if they earn enough through work.

“I earn 400 rupees every day and I have a family of six people to feed. We will run out of food and money in a few days. I know the risk of coronavirus, but I can’t see my children hungry”

*Ramesh Kumar, daily wage labourer, Banda, Uttar Pradesh*
We also asked the respondents about adverse effects of the lockdown which they feel will persist in their lives in the immediate future. The loss of income and being unemployed emerged as the single biggest causes of concern. Being out of work is the top of mind worry for most people. This trend is not particular to only daily wage or contract labourers, but among all employment types. Given that people have small margins of savings to sustain themselves, and with new work at a halt, these concerns are expected.

*I am sitting and not doing any work from 21st April. Local administration is not providing any provision of food and ration thus we are facing hard times.*

*Amarnath, labourer, Ghazipur, Uttar Pradesh*
I am a farmer; this lock down is a right step but we are facing lot of agriculture related issues. I have still not received money for our paddy crops. I have taken loan from KCC and money lender and I am unable to pay them back. Traders are also not coming to buy the harvest. These are difficult times

Lal Mahto, Harazibagh, Jharkhand

4 – Government action

During the week of April 6th, based on the plethora of voice reports on these issues being recorded on our platforms, we wrote letters to the district magistrates of Bokaro and Hazaribagh in Jharkhand, Samastipur, Jamui, Munger, and East Champaran in Bihar, Ghazipur in Uttar Pradesh, and Shivpuri in Madhya Pradesh. Copies of the letters were also sent to the Chief Secretary in the Health Department, Food Supply Department, Social Justice, Public Welfare Department, and the Panchayati Raj Department. We drew the attention of the administration to the following suggestions to alleviate the problems being faced by people:

● Regular OPD functioning at the PHCs should restart.
● A helpline should be set up for ration issues to be escalated to relevant authorities for action when ration dealers do not disburse ration, or black marketing of essential commodities is noticed.
● Emphatic loud-speaker announcements should be conducted via the Gram Panchayats urging people to be compassionate towards migrant workers returning home, to help ensure that their symptomatic testing is not unduly stressful, and that their isolation wards are clean and food is provided to them.
● Provisions should be made to not exclude people from relief measures such as those who don’t have ration cards, or don’t have pension accounts linked with Aadhaar, or active Jan Dhan accounts, etc. A simple cash disbursement process should be developed for them, or vouchers should be given to them for the purchase of essential commodities.
● Utility service providers such as banks and LPG distributors should be issued an advisory to coordinate their distribution activities, like by issuing tokens to the customers, so that there is no unnecessary crowding which can stress people and lead to violations of social distancing.
● It must be ensured that community health workers have adequate protective gear, that training and treatment protocols are clearly communicated to them, and the communities support them in these times of crisis.

We are very happy to report that all these suggestions have been considered and we have had new advisories being issued by the state governments on these aspects. This is of course not just our success, but we are satisfied to have contributed towards a collective voice by the civil society to effectively communicate ground-realities to the government and encourage quick action. The Bihar Chief Minister announced just yesterday that OPDs should be made functional again, and this order will soon be actioned by the district magistrates. To handle ration related complaints, helplines have now been started right up to the block level, and separate time slots have also been assigned for women, elderly, and men to come to the ration shops. The Gram Panchayats have been advised to utilize their funds to communicate important information to the communities, and ensure better functioning of the isolation centres. Provisioning of the relief measures are also being smoothed. Those who submitted ration card applications within the last three years but are still awaiting new cards, will regardless be given rations. In addition to bank branches, CSC kiosk operators will also assist with disbursement of the cash transfers, and help people verify whether the cash transfers have been
made or not. All utility providers have improved their practices, and by and large are now distributing tokens and effectively communicating to their customers. Finally, the district magistrates have ensured that masks and sanitizers are distributed at the isolation centres, PHCs, hospitals, and frontline workers in the field. Medical teams are also visiting the isolation centres and health facilities to ensure compliance with safety protocols.

Our survey however highlights continued gaps in many services, especially issues of exclusion from relief measures due to the use of DBT via Aadhaar linkages, not having a ration card, not being registered as a worker under any of the welfare boards, and problems in withdrawing cash from the banks. We will continue to raise these issues to the concerned government departments and administrators for their attention, and continue to monitor the situation on improvements in the delivery of these relief measures and other public services. With extension of the lockdown having now been announced, an efficient and inclusive delivery of relief measures is critical to avoid hardship among vulnerable communities. Some aspects on which we feel continued attention is required:

- Resumption of agricultural work, MGNREGA, and some industries, will alleviate the income crunch to some extent, but not all families will be in a position to jump back into regular livelihood. These families and low-income communities will need special attention to ensure inclusion.
- With restrictions on physical movement to continue to some extent, banking services will remain affected, and thereby access to cash. ATMs, CSCs, and other business correspondent models will be critical to have people take advantage of relief measures including cash transfers.
- Cash transfers alone will not work due to broken Aadhaar and bank account linkages for many people. Therefore the public distribution system will continue to be a lifeline and must seamlessly function. PDS should be universalized to further eliminate exclusion errors due to new households who might fall back into poverty due to a loss of income.
- Disruptions in supply chains for food as well as for agricultural inputs for the next Kharif season must be tracked carefully to not create pockets of disruption.
- Those people being allowed to work, such as street vendors, will need passes to move around. The process to obtain such passes should be simple and efficient.
- Stranded migrant workers continue to face hardship, yet even after so many days, ration and cash disbursement to them remains a challenge. We will have more to say about this in our upcoming survey report that focuses specifically on migrant and daily wage workers.
- Finally, with many services such as groceries delivery, agricultural mandis, utilities, etc to be started again, the people working in these industries will remain at greater risk than others. We strongly feel that both the private and the public sector should pay higher wages to these at-risk workers, and ensure that all of them are enrolled for health insurance. The higher wages can either be subsidized through increased income or wealth taxes on wealthy citizens, or passed on as higher prices to consumers with subsidy being available to lower-income consumers.

The pandemic has clearly signalled the urgent need for a reset in our current ways of running the economy, on two crucial fronts: We need to invest more in the public health and education industry than industrial sectors that cater to just elite interests, and have greater income equality and stronger labour laws to protect the rights of blue-collar workers. Gram Vaani’s campaigns on this front will continue beyond the Coronavirus crisis.

For any further details about Gram Vaani’s work on the Coronavirus front, please see this page that we keep regularly updating: https://gramvaani.org/?p=3631.

Our recent article in the India Forum is also relevant to understand what the crisis means for rural and low-income communities: https://www.theindiaforum.in/article/what-covid-19-means-us.
5 – About Gram Vaani

Gram Vaani started its operations in January 2009, incubated at IIT Delhi and funded through a grant from the Knight Foundation to build a low-cost automation system for community radio stations. This first product called GRINS (Gramin Radio Inter Networking System) was very successful, and even today it powers 40+ community radio stations across the country. Gram Vaani next built its vAutomate IVR platform in 2011 to mimic the functionality of community radio but in an on-demand setting served off a cloud hosted infrastructure which made scaling straightforward. This solution has powered many exciting interventions run by a diverse set of over 150+ social sector partners, across the health, education, agriculture, and financial literacy space. In 2012, Gram Vaani launched the Mobile Vaani service as an effort to go beyond the role of a technology provider, and directly provide community media services in rural areas. Mobile Vaani has been extremely successful and has accumulated over 2M users, along with being a rich source of learning and innovation in terms of novel processes for content development and field operations, to embed technology based interventions in the day to day life of communities. In 2015, Gram Vaani entered into a strategic partnership with the Life Impacting Services unit of OnMobile Global Ltd, and now operates as OnionDev Technologies Pvt Ltd as the holding company.

Over these years, Gram Vaani has worked with more than 150 partners who have used its technology and community media platforms, to produce countless stories of impact. We have won several national and international awards, including:

- Knight News Challenge, in 2008
- Manthan Juror’s Distinction award, in 2009
- Economic Times Power of Ideas award, in 2010
- mBillionth awards, in 2012 and 2013
- Grand Challenges Canada Rising Stars in Global Health, in 2012
- Nasscom Social Innovation Challenge, in 2015
- Grand Challenges Canada Rising Stars in Global Health, in 2017
- Grand Challenges India award, in 2019

Our work has been covered under several case-studies:

- Dasra, Improving Governance in India, and Leveraging Mobiles for Governance
  https://www.dasra.org/cause/improving-governance-in-india
  https://www.dasra.org/cause/leveraging-mobiles-for-governance

- GSMA case study on Mobile Vaani

- UNESCO-Pearson Initiative for Literacy: Case study on Mobile Vaani
  http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0025/002588/258878e.pdf

- About Gram Vaani and our development approach:
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rcN53jWJj1I

- About Mobile Vaani, filmed by TimesNow for the Amazing Indians programme:
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c9FFt_illqM