Public employment programmes in the time of COVID-19

KEY MESSAGES

▪ Public employment programmes (PEP) refer to a wide array of interventions including public works, cash for work, and temporary or emergency employment programmes. PEPs have a long track record of deployment in response to cyclical shocks (such as recurrent drought), seasonal deprivation (such as during the agricultural slack season), and severe macro-economic crisis involving sharp income loss and large under- and unemployment.

▪ PEPs entail the payment of a wage, in cash or in kind, for unskilled and semi-skilled labour, for work typically performed in labour-intensive projects organised around worksites. PEPs are a common social protection instrument that can simultaneously perform one or more functions: protective (income relief, consumption smoothening), productive (rehabilitation and maintenance of local infrastructure and community assets), promotive (resilience building, environmental rehabilitation) and transformative (provision of care services, green jobs, decent working conditions).

▪ In the face of COVID-19, PEPs will need to both adapt to ensure safe working conditions for participants and expand to provide income and employment to vulnerable workers affected by the pandemic. The traditional labour-intensive, public infrastructure focus of PEP work requirements poses challenges in complying with the public-health safety measures put in place to contain the spread of the virus. Programmes targeting the poor will inevitably include populations at increased risk for COVID-19, so care should be taken to ensure appropriate programme adaptations and safety measures for these higher-risk populations. Special attention must be paid to assuring that vulnerable groups, particularly women and youth, are not excluded from the programmes.

▪ Adapting PEPs so they continue to operate in the context of prolonged health risks will be critical for addressing the pressing income and employment shortfalls for the existing and newly poor and vulnerable worldwide. Adjustments to PEP design and implementation should include the enforcement of physical distancing and other mandatory public health measures, the provision of individual and household goods, work around one’s homestead, community sanitation and care services, and in some cases, continuing the programme benefits while suspending work requirements.

▪ PEPs, in fact, have a key role to play not only in the short term, by mitigating the impact of the public health emergency and its economic fallout, but also in the medium and longer term, by helping rural households and economies weather the effects of the looming economic recession and recover in the post-pandemic. Well designed, PEPs can help boost both the public health, social protection and macroeconomic responses to the crisis.
THE CONTEXT

COVID-19 has quickly morphed from an unprecedented health crisis to a massive economic shock—and, unless immediate and decisive action is taken to sustain consumption levels and prevent disruptions to food supply chains, it could easily lead into a global food crisis. In June 2020, the World Bank projected a contraction in global GDP up to between 5.2 and 8 percent, the deepest global recession in eight decades (World Bank, 2020a), and estimates of the possible rise in unemployment, poverty and food insecurity put the figures in the tens of millions (ILO, 2020a; World Bank, 2020b). According to some scenarios, the majority of the newly poor live in rural areas, and the greatest impact is expected to be felt in sub-Saharan Africa (World Bank, 2020c; Vos et al., 2020).

Initial expectations were that the impacts of COVID-19 on agri-food supply chains would mostly be felt in post-farm downstream segments (Reardon et al., 2020). But these expectations have given way to the realisation that the rural sector will not be spared the effects of the pandemic. Rural households, in fact, are being hit hard by the disease and the containment measures adopted to prevent its spread. Small farm households depend on public spaces and movement for their livelihoods, including seasonal agricultural work and access to markets to sell their produce or purchase agricultural inputs. Reduced mobility inevitably is having a detrimental effect on their livelihoods, which is being compounded by reduced consumer demand as well as the loss of remittances and nonfarm income sources (FAO, 2020a; 2020b).

Rural populations in low-income countries already have limited access to health care or income protection in case of sickness or inability to work, and they often hold informal jobs that cannot be performed remotely. Vulnerable migrant workers returning home may face discrimination as potential carriers of coronavirus, while looking for jobs and increasing the demand for food in rural areas. By adding to the rural workforce, they may not only displace women from income-earning opportunities but depress agricultural wages at a time of growing needs. This income shock could be exacerbated by the drop in urban demand for farm products and the logistical challenges of bringing produce to urban markets (FAO, 2020a; 2020c).

The combination of these factors is likely to transmit the effects of COVID-19 back to rural areas, potentially disrupting local food systems and supply chains. The glut in food availability in rural areas, particularly perishable vegetables and tree crops, combined with post-harvest losses may reduce the cash that farm households could use to purchase agricultural inputs in the coming season, eventually leading to a contraction in future food supply. Unless address head-on, this would have dismal consequences for the wellbeing and food security of both rural and urban populations.

THE RESPONSE

The fallout from the halt to economic activity around the world points to the urgent need to expand social protection—quickly and decidedly. Countries, rich and poor alike, have been responding by broadening the coverage of existing social programmes as well as introducing new ones to reach previously unserved populations. While cash transfers account for the majority of the social protection measures introduced around the world in response to COVID-19 (Gentilini, 2020), there is also considerable scope for expanding the provision of emergency or temporary employment for the immediate response, and to provide large-scale employment opportunities during the recovery period. New programme designs can be adapted for PEPs not only for rural but also urban areas, to prevent a slump in demand that would have further negative impacts on producers and workers in peri-urban and rural areas.
Large-scale PEP schemes have been used in the past in the face of severe crisis. More than 30 countries implemented them in the aftermath of the Great Depression, as well as 50 years later to help retrenched workers cope with the effects of the debt crisis and austerity policies in Latin America in the 1980s and 1990s, and more recently in response to the global financial crisis of 2008 and the Ebola outbreak in West Africa in 2015 (McCord, 2020). PEP schemes are also used in situations of chronic poverty and food insecurity, and in post-conflict and fragile contexts with a weak private sector. Well-established PEPs are at the core of Ethiopia’s Productive Safety Net Programme, Africa’s second largest, as well as South Africa’s Expanded Public Works Programme and India’s Mahatma Ghandi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, which seeks to help realise India’s landless labourers’ and informal rural workers’ right to food and to work.

PEPs may have different objectives and their design will vary accordingly. Their main focus could be linked to employment creation (providing work where it is scarce or drops as a result of a shock), social protection provision (buffering consumption and offering income security in the face of crisis) or the promotion of labour-based investment (through the creation, upgrading or maintenance of community assets, services and infrastructure). Their primary goal typically is to provide a source of employment to adults, while organising work that serves to maintain or rehabilitate public infrastructure and expand basic services (ILO, 2013). PEPs, in fact, have been most successful when they not only provide an income cushion but also create local public goods, e.g. through the rehabilitation of irrigation systems, soil conservation, road construction, restoration of agriculture activities, etc. This often requires that the community be consulted from the planning stage and that provision be made for proper maintenance of the public goods so that they will not fall into disrepair (McCord, 2008; 2012).

In the context of COVID-19, however, PEPs will need to both adapt and expand in order to meet the daunting challenges posed by the global health and economic crisis unleashed by the virus (ILO, 2020b; 2020c). In doing so, they will also need to address challenges such as the exclusion of women and of vulnerable groups, which have often marred this type of programmes. By adapting their design and implementation, PEPs would be in a position to provide temporary employment and immediate relief to distressed households. By expanding, both during and in the aftermath of the emergency, they should be able to play a vital demand stimulus role during the recovery phase and help affected rural economies bounce back from the deep recession induced by the pandemic (Bance & Gentilini, 2020; McCord, 2020).

Redesigning PEPs to respond to COVID-19

To prevent the risk of infecting PEP participants and spreading the virus, PEP operations will need to abide by the principles of ‘do no harm’ and ‘duty of care’. This calls for a redesign of existing programmes, away from crowded public work sites, along with the strict enforcement of public health measures to safeguard the safety and well-being of workers and prevent the transmission of the disease.

Adopting the principles of ‘duty of care’ and ‘do no harm’ implies that to avoid outbreaks of COVID-19 in PEP sites, occupational safety and health measures need to be put in place as a matter of priority, including the provision of personal protective equipment (PPE) to workers, access to water and sanitation, and physical distancing. When work requires physical proximity, alternative measures will have to be planned and could, if necessary, involve the suspension of work tasks (WHO, 2020). Any actions or omissions that could reasonably be expected to cause harm to others must be avoided by all means, giving special attention to gender and age factors,
for instance, through suspending work requirements for pregnant women. Moreover, not only should public employment programmes not involve children as participants, but when parents enrol, measures should be taken to ensure that children would not simply replace them in their former jobs or in performing intensive household chores (ILO, 2013).

Ultimately, PEPs may have to interrupt or postpone operations unless they put into practice measures to safeguard the principles of ‘do no harm’ and ‘duty of care’. If they do abide by these principles, PEPs can play two critical functions in the response to COVID-19: they can provide immediate relief to households hit hardest by the pandemic, while at the same time supporting the public-health response to the emergency. To do this, PEPs will need to consider the following actions:

▪ **Increase wages.** One way in which PEPs can flex to respond to the increased vulnerabilities triggered by COVID-19 is to increase the wage paid to workers. The ‘vertical expansion’ of existing programmes not only recognises that social assistance payments are typically shared within households but also that, in the current emergency, PEP participants will need to support more family members due to the loss of jobs, farm and non-farm income and remittances.

▪ **Expand coverage.** Another solution involves extending programme coverage by adding employment opportunities in communities where a PEP is already active or expanding their operations to more areas of the country. Specific targeting criteria could be adopted to ensure access to work opportunities for those most affected by the crisis, such as informal workers and the newly unemployed, women, youth and migrant workers including returning migrants. This ‘horizontal expansion’ of PEPs could include transplanting the PEP model to urban areas, where the loss of formal and informal jobs not only imperils the well-being of urban workers but is also likely to dampen the demand for farm and non-farm goods and services from rural areas.

▪ **Waive work requirements.** To avoid having to suspend programmes that cannot enforce strict physical distance or provide PPE to workers, PEPs can waive the work requirement and keep paying the daily wage to programme participants while the health emergency lasts, such as was done with the urban PSNP in Ethiopia. Alternatively, the PEP caseload could temporarily be transferred to an existing cash transfer programme so that PEP participants may receive cash payments without the requirement to provide labour in return.

▪ **Diversify the types of work.** To strengthen the public health response to the crisis, PEPs can adapt their design and operations away from their traditional focus on the creation and maintenance of community assets towards the production of individual and household goods, such as stitching of face masks or the production of PPE. Programme participants can also play a critical role in the public health emergency by performing such essential tasks as distributing soap and hand sanitiser, chlorinating water for medical staff and patients (as was done in the response to the Ebola outbreak), disinfecting public spaces like schools and clinics, and enforcing physical distancing and staggered entrance into crowded places such as markets or pay points for bank transactions or cash transfer payments. PEPs could draw on the experience of South Africa’s Expanded Public Works Programme, which involves workers in the provision of community support services, including child and home-based care of frail persons, community health and hygiene awareness and education, water drainage, waste collection, as well as distributing food parcels during school closures, taking produce to markets, and a host of other social, health and environmental services linked to
climate change adaptation. Performance of some of these tasks will require training of PEP workers, which offers the potential for equipping them with new skills that could subsequently ease their re-entry into the labour market.

South Africa’s Expanded Public Works Programme

South Africa’s Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) was launched in 2003, in response to high levels of chronic unemployment, which in 2015 still stood at over 25 percent of which the bulk were Black Africans, especially youth. The EPWP seeks to provide poverty and income relief by creating temporary work opportunities for the unskilled, unemployed, poor and vulnerable including persons with disabilities. Since its inception, the EPWP has generated over eight million employment opportunities (Kelobang & Boon, 2018).

At the time that the country imposed a nationwide lockdown, the programme was providing work and income to approximately 800 000 vulnerable South Africans. In a matter of days, the EPWP saw a sharp increase in demand. To respond to it, the EPWP speedily mobilised new PEP participants at community level, accelerated the expansion of existing projects and identified new ones, especially those that could provide essential services such as cleaning and disinfection of public spaces, health education programmes, assistance in pharmacies and public health centres (screening, tracing, triaging), child minding and early childhood development, waste management, and school support programs, among others. In line with the Government’s emergency response, the programme continued to pay all workers under contract during the span of the national lockdown and stepped up safety measures for those operations that provided essential services including home and community-based care for sick or elderly persons. To further support the government’s public health response, the EPWP launched an initiative, in partnership with non-governmental organizations in the health sector, to hire 20 000 young people to support the distribution of sanitisers and soap in high-risk areas (Pillay, 2020).

It is important to bear in mind that PEPs historically have faced a number of challenges, such as excluding vulnerable populations, which could become more acute in the context of COVID-19. Several measures should be considered in order to address the long-standing challenges that have in many instances affected the performance of public employment programmes in the past. In particular, PEPs should:

▪ **Pay adequate and timely wages.** Traditional PEPs typically set wages at below market rates to ensure self-targeting of the poorest. But this is self-defeating in the midst of an emergency in which agricultural wage labour, nonfarm income and migrant remittances are all bound to decline. In addition, workers must receive their payments without delay, preferably through digital means to avoid crowds gathering around physical pay points. Delays in wage payments can discourage potential participants from enrolling in the programme in the first place, as has been documented in India where late payment for work completed under MNREGA has been common and, contrary to the programme guidelines, compensation to workers for such delays has seldom been paid (Narayanan *et al*., 2017; Kapoor, 2018).

▪ **Ensure proper planning and implementation capacity.** The sudden and sharp drop in rural incomes triggered by COVID-19 is likely to strain the capacity of PEPs to respond speedily to the concomitant surge in demand for alternative sources of income support for needy households, which is what the current crisis demands. Weak implementation capacity has been associated with the rationing of jobs that PEPs have to offer to those seeking assistance, and with other implementation failures that compromise the potential impact of
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these programmes, resulting in a loss of welfare that requires urgent action. Budget and staff shortages in PEPs need to be redressed in a systematic manner over the long term, but temporary solutions must be considered in light of the COVID-19 crisis, such as appropriating funds for increased allocations to step up PEP implementation or deploying field staff to the most deprived areas in the country so that they can play a role in promoting awareness among potential participants and managing the caseload of new applicants for public works.

- **Coordinate with agricultural activities.** PEP activities must be timed in coordination with local cropping calendars to ensure that they will not divert attention away from farmers’ own land (WFP, 2013). If ill-timed, public employment programmes could crowd out work on one’s farm or the deployment of household labour to alternative income-generating activities, such as casual work or off-farm businesses, thereby cancelling out the potential gains from participating in the programme. It is, moreover, critically important to have proper inspection and monitoring in place to prevent potential unforeseen harm and increase of child labour by replacing adult workforce from agricultural activities (ILO, 2013).

- **Facilitate the participation of women.** During the COVID-19 pandemic PEP activities may be particularly biased against women due to their care responsibilities, which are accentuated by school closures and the additional burden of caring for the sick. Special measures need to be taken to foster the participation of women in public employment schemes, including through flexible work schedules and adjustment of workloads in the presence of care responsibilities, along with the provision of work that is accessible for women.

- **Provide alternative social protection for vulnerable groups.** Still, PEPs are not suitable for all vulnerable populations, especially during the pandemic. Alternative social protection measures should be implemented for those not suited for PEP work requirements, including elderly persons, those with disabilities or ill health, and women with mobility constraints, limited ability for physically demanding work or whose care responsibilities are bound to restrict their participation in PEP schemes. Alongside public employment, direct provision of cash or food will be needed to help especially vulnerable groups meet their most essential needs and thereby prevent a rise in destitution.

**Sustaining households through the recession and the recovery phase**

Once the immediate public health crisis begins to pass, there will still be a strong need for PEP provision on a large scale to stabilise the incomes of retrenched workers and help economies recover from the economic shock caused by the pandemic. Large-scale PEPs can perform several critical functions to soften the socioeconomic impacts of COVID-19 and ease the return to the new “normal” post-pandemic. These include:

- **Social protection.** The massive decline in both formal and informal employment resulting from the suppression policies adopted by countries to prevent contagion will take time to recover. Levels of economic activity, which took a sharp drop as soon as the coronavirus began to spread, are likely to remain depressed for months and an eventual return to pre-pandemic levels is beset with uncertainty. Some supply chains may face restructuring, which means that workers could be forced out of sectors, and millions of newly unemployed and vulnerable might have no work to go back to (ILO, 2020d). Already more than half of informal
workers in rural areas receive no social protection benefits of any kind. To these must be added the millions of formal workers who have lost access to social security and other employment benefits. Stepping up PEP provision can help ease the pain and mitigate the devastating effects of the pandemic and its aftermath. By acting as an employer of last resort, large-scale PEPs may partially compensate for the loss of income, provide vulnerable populations with a means of smoothening consumption and, by cushioning the shock to their livelihoods, prevent them from resorting to negative coping strategies that could make it even more difficult for these vulnerable populations to bounce back after the economic cycle eventually resumes.

- **Macroeconomic stabilisation.** Rural areas will be hit hard by the demand shock triggered by the coronavirus and the policies seeking to contain it. The longer the shock lasts, the more acute its impact on poor smallholder communities and the longer it will take them to recover. Large-scale PEPs can not only provide critical income support to these communities but also play a vital countercyclical role, stimulating demand to sustain levels of economic activity that could help shorten the span of the recession and speed up the transition to the recovery phase. In addition to their protective and stabilising role, PEPs as part of a public investment and employment creation strategy can contribute towards the formalisation of labour in rural areas. This requires coordination with other social protection measures, to ensure adequate coverage of work-related entitlements (healthcare, maternity and income protection in case of sickness, injury, disability or old age), as well as with public employment services and national training systems. PEP participants could be trained and certified in a particular labour skill as a way of facilitating their transition into gainful employment over the long term.

- **Climate change adaptation.** PEPs can create synergy between social protection and climate risk management interventions. They could be linked to early warning systems to provide temporary employment and income support to disaster-affected households, while at the same time creating community assets. PEPs, in fact, can contribute to sustainable natural resource management (through, for instance, afforestation, watershed management and ecosystem restoration) and to the implementation of climate change responses through the production of environmental infrastructure and the creation of green works and green jobs (FAO, 2019). Promoting synergy between public employment programmes and climate risk management bears great promise for not only cushioning the income shock suffered by smallholder families as a result of the pandemic, but building community resilience to future shocks (FAO, 2013; FAO & RCRCC, 2019). Large-scale public employment interventions will have a better chance of playing a major role in the economic recovery from COVID-19 and the efforts to reduce rural poverty over the long run if they are integrated into a coherent policy framework, in which climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies are part and parcel of broad territorial development processes at local level.

- **Rural transformation.** By creating new opportunities for farmers, digitisation could become a key driver for rural transformation. At present, however, the adoption of information and communication technologies among small producers remains low. Despite the high level of internet penetration in much of the developing world, rural populations continue to lag behind in terms of access to digital technology. Nevertheless, the pandemic is accelerating the digitisation process even in rural areas, and the digital transformation of agriculture and food systems offers great prospects for achieving productivity gains, along with social and environmental benefits, in both the farm and non-farm sectors (FAO & ECLAC, 2020). This,
in fact, could be an arena for innovating and expanding public employment provision beyond its traditional focus on physical infrastructure. The notion of Digital Public Works (DPW) offers a promising area for PEPs. DPWs offer the advantage of meeting physical distance requirements as well as the potential for providing opportunities for home-based work to rural unemployed youth and women, thereby helping address gender-based constraints to working outside home. Examples of DPWs could range from home-based manufacturing of PPE and contact tracing of COVID-infected patients in the short and medium term (Galloway, 2020) to such activities as digitising public services and health records in the longer run (McCord, 2020; Weber, 2020).

EXAMPLES OF COVID-19 PUBLIC EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMMES MEASURES

Over the past few months, a number of countries have adapted existing PEPs in response to COVID-19. While a few schemes had to be suspended where safety measures such as physical distance could not be enforced, most countries have succeeded in adopting a shock-responsive approach by flexing and scaling up PEPs as needed.

Consideration has been given to softening or lifting work conditions, to account for the fact that the crisis is imposing heavy burdens on programme participants and their families. Providing PEP workers with personal protective equipment has been a good practice, as is supplementing PEP provision with unconditional cash transfers or food rations where deprivation is too high or local food markets seem on the brink of collapse.

Countries have responded to the challenges imposed by the pandemic by:

- creating new schemes, as was done in Armenia (The Government of Armenia, 2020), Peru (Gestión, 2020) and Indonesia (DOLE, 2020);
- scaling up existing ones (horizontal expansion), such as in Mexico where the government announced the expansion of several public infrastructure projects aimed at creating jobs in rural and semi-rural areas of the country (Hogewoning, 2020);
- increasing benefits or duration (vertical expansion), as in the case of India’s nationwide rural employment guarantee scheme (Noronha, 2020);
- easing registration and work requirements, as it happened in Ethiopia where the PSNP has simplified administrative procedures for signing up applicants and exempted programme participants for the requirement to provide labour, at the same time that it was scaling up both horizontally and vertically (Bundervoet and Finn, 2020);
- producing individual and household goods and services rather than community assets, as in South Africa’s Community Based Public Works Programme;
- providing personal protective equipment and redeploying workers to carry out hygiene education, manufacture face masks and distribute hand sanitisers, provide chlorine-treated water or hand wash facilities, disinfect high-risk areas and conduct clean-up campaigns, as in the Philippines where workers are involved in the disinfection and sanitation of their houses and the immediate vicinity (DOLE, 2020);
- scaling up water conservation and other environmental works, such as in Pakistan where the Green Stimulus programme is tackling the impacts of COVID-19 while preserving nature by enrolling unemployed youth, women and return city migrants for planting trees, reviving protected areas and improving sanitation (Amin Aslam Khan, 2020).
India’s National Rural Employment Guarantee Act

Passed by an Act of Parliament in 2005, India’s Mahatma Ghandi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) offers 100 days of guaranteed wage employment per year, on demand, to any rural household applying to it. Work must be provided within 15 days of registration, or else an allowance is paid if no work is available. The fact that NREGA is a statutory programme codified in national legislation, and that it imposes an enforceable obligation upon the State to provide employment at the legal minimum wage to anyone willing to take it, sets the programme apart from most other social protection interventions around the world. It is also the world’s largest. Since the guarantee applies to unskilled manual labour, NREGA is largely self-selecting. Through its guarantee of wage employment, the scheme seeks to safeguard the ‘right to work’ enshrined in India’s Constitution, which itself is seen as pivotal for the realization of the ‘right to food’ (Grinspun, 2005).

Spending in, and the number of jobs created by, NREGA have fluctuated over the years since it reached nationwide coverage in 2008. Studies have shown that the programme is generally well targeted, benefiting poorer and scheduled tribe or caste households more than proportionately, has encouraged women’s participation at greater rates than men’s and at comparable wages, and has had a range of positive impacts on participants’ wellbeing, as measured by their protein and energy intake or their ability to accumulate non-financial assets (Liu & Barrett, 2013; Narayanan & Das, 2014; Narayanan et al., 2017). The welfare impacts of NREGA have been more pronounced among the poorer and have even spilled over to non-participating households, leading to positive effects on nutritional intake and consumption expenditure across India’s rural economy (Deininger & Liu, 2018). Yet disparities in implementation capacity have yielded disparate results across States. Staff shortages and implementation failures have resulted in late payment of wages and persistent rationing of jobs, which may have not only discouraged potential participants from registering but sometimes led poorer people to self-select out of the program altogether, thereby defeating its aim of providing work and income to India’s poorest through a demand-driven, self-targeted scheme. Evidence points to a ‘discouraged worker effect’ in NREGA, and to worker displacement during India’s two main agricultural seasons, despite an overall increase in household labour supply throughout the year as a result of the programme (Liu et al., 2020; Sheahan et al., 2016).

Despite these shortcomings, even before COVID-19 the programme was providing temporary employment to about 138 million farmers, 70 percent of whom depend on rain-fed agriculture and have no reliable income during the lean season. Included among NREGA participants are India’s landless labourers as well as members of its tribal and scheduled castes. Women account for the bulk of the work provided by the scheme (55 percent of person-days generated). As soon as the nationwide lockdown began, the programme saw an initial dip in applicants due to concerns over personal safety (Agarwal, 2020). NREGA reacted immediately by distributing masks and imposing physical distance in its project sites, raising the average daily wage rate by ten percent and selecting a menu of individual infrastructure works, such as constructing farm ponds, digging wells and even horticulture, that could spare programme participants the need to work far from their home. NREGA also simplified the registration process for new applicants, who could now apply based on self-attestation, in a move intended to accommodate the growing demand for work especially from return migrants from urban to rural areas, estimated at 80 million. The programme also placed heavy emphasis on ensuring on-time payment of wages and released the entire backlog of wage payments that were awaiting inspection and approval (Ahal, 2020).

After the initial dip in April, demand for wage work shot up in May, increasing by 43 percent over the previous month (from 12 to 27 million person-days) and 27 percent compared to the same month in 2019. Importantly, demand was higher in States that are home to migrants, such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Even in April 2020, NREGA had spent EUR 1.2 billion to generate 1.76 million person-days of work, which represented a massive infusion of capital for stabilising India’s rural economy. Because of COVID-19, NREGA received an additional allocation of EUR 4.8 billion, for a total budget of EUR 12 billion for the year, with the target of generating 360 million person-days.
of work. States like Uttar Pradesh complement the wage payments by providing free food rations to workers registered in the employment scheme. Apart from allowing programme participants to work on individual assets that require only 4-5 workers and allow for physical distancing, NREGA is placing great emphasis on the creation of durable livelihood infrastructure including irrigation canals, water conservation works and river rejuvenation to help cope with the impending drought in parts of India. About 65 percent of programme expenditure is on assets related to environmental and water conservation and management (Ahal, 2020).

THE ROLE OF THE FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION OF THE UNITED NATIONS

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) is working with Member States and with regional, international and intergovernmental partners to ensure that adequate provision of social protection services is available to vulnerable rural populations to help them confront the effects of the pandemic, preserve their assets and food security during the emergency, and be in a position to recover once the public health crisis has passed. Social protection is at the core of the response to COVID-19 and a range of measures need to be put in place and coordinated with other sector policies given the scale of the present crisis. Public employment programmes have an important role to play in this response.

In the short term, FAO will:

- Monitor and map policy and programmatic responses to meet the social protection needs of small farm households and rural informal workers, in order to disseminate information and lessons learned across countries.
- Advocate for the inclusion and expansion of public employment programmes as part of the array of policy responses that countries have at their disposal in addressing the social and economic impacts of the pandemic.
- Provide technical assistance to Member States so that they are better able to adapt existing PEP operations to the public-health demands imposed by the spread of COVID-19.
- Mobilise technical and financial resources and coordinate with other organisations of the United Nations system, in particular the International Labour Organization, the International Fund for Agricultural Development, the World Food Programme, the World Bank and the World Health Organization, to provide effective support to Member States in their efforts to respond to the crisis.

As part of its technical assistance to Member States, FAO will strive to ensure that the design and implementation of public employment programmes are aligned with other social protection interventions, particularly in terms of eligibility requirements, targeting criteria and benefits. FAO will also promote the use of common registration, payments and monitoring systems across social protection programmes in Member States. Coherence with agricultural and employment-sector programmes and services will likewise be pursued in order to increase the effectiveness of public employment measures in providing relief to distressed communities, delivering critical services during the emergency and easing the transition of households affected by COVID-19 into gainful employment.

In the medium and longer term, FAO will:

- Support its Member States in integrating rural employment promotion measures in the strategies and plans for economic recovery, as part of a coherent social protection system, with special attention to ensuring decent work conditions and promoting the transition of
informal rural workers engaged in temporary employment programmes to long-term gainful employment.

- Foster cross-sectoral collaboration and coordination between social protection and other sectors, especially agriculture, fisheries and forestry, to ensure that the needs of small-scale producers, fisherfolk and forest-dependent communities are addressed during the recovery phase and that impacts on poverty reduction and food security are maximised.
- Advocate for the articulation of social protection measures, including public employment interventions, with climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies, embedded in a territorial development approach, in order to strengthen the resilience of rural communities to future shocks.
- Coordinate actions with Member States, United Nations agencies and other key actors at the national, regional and international level to ensure that adequate and coherent long-term responses are put in place to speed up the recovery and build back better.

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