

A Webinar on Financing Critical Social Services during Covid-19 in Bihar

For favour of Publication

Patna, September 29. A State level webinar on “Financing Critical Social Services during Covid-19 in Bihar” based on the study “Socio-economic Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Children and Women in Bihar” was organized on 29th September’20 by Finance Department, Government of Bihar in collaboration with UNICEF and ADRI.

The study was conceptualised and commissioned by UNICEF Bihar Field Office and developed by ADRI jointly with the Government of Bihar and UNICEF. The study aimed to review the known early impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children in the state. The study has two broad parts. The first part maps the impact of COVID-19 on the health and social sector, with particular focus on children and women. The second part assesses the impact on the economy and state resources as key considerations on the state’s capacity to respond to the protracted crisis. The study reviewed the available published data and studies and government MIS data from implementing departments.

The webinar was convened by Dr. S. Siddharth, Principal Secretary, Finance Department, Government of Bihar. The welcome address was provided by Prof. Prabhat P. Ghosh, Director ADRI. He provided the background and development process of the paper. He also thanked the leadership provided by Government of Bihar in undertaking the effort. He appreciated the technical and financial collaboration with UNICEF towards strengthening child budgeting mechanisms.

Sri. Asadur Rahman, Chief Field Office, UNICEF Bihar in the opening remarks congratulated the team for vigorously conducting the study and producing the valuable report in a challenging situation. The report highlights the grave impact of the pandemic on the most vulnerable and marginalized children and the simultaneous negative impact on the economy and government finances. He congratulated the government for their efforts in adapting their service delivery mechanisms to effectively support communities during this time. He further urged the Government to ensure that health, nutrition, learning, WASH and protection services for children continue unabated.

Principal Secretary, Dr Siddharth set the objective and gave the overview of the webinar.

Dr Urvashi Kaushik of UNICEF and Prof. Barna Ganguly of ADRI gave presentation on the study, “Socio-economic Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Children and Women in Bihar”. They outlined the objective and methodology of the study and explained the findings in detail. The broader socio-economic impact of Covid-19 on Bihar was elaborated with special focus on women and children. In particular, the presenters described the analysis of the impact on livelihood, continuity of social services on women and children and the impact on Bihar economy and finances. Dr. Urvashi said “COVID-19 has posed a grave impact on children and all departments of government have come together in response. District vary in their ability to cope and this should be taken into account. It is vital that health, nutrition and protection services are ensured during this time for children. Government of Bihar’s effort to ensure continuity of learning through digital and TV mediums is highly relevant. Concerns on livelihood and hunger and malnutrition need a scaled-up response, even as new types of vulnerabilities emerge for example the migrant laborers.”. Dr. Ganguly said “PDS and ICDS

SNP programs have been reaching communities, but coverage should be strengthened. Demand for work under MGNREGA doubled during the lockdown as compared to last year and so did the work generated. However, the number of households that requested for work but did not actually receive it has been increasing. PDS has reached majority of ration card holders but the ration supplied often falls inadequate. Remittances which are really important to Bihar are projected to go down. Bihar suffered revenue loss during the lockdown and there was a loss of 11.5 percent GSDP”.

The presentation was followed by panel discussion, which was moderated by Dr. S. Siddharth. A thought provoking and informative discussion focused on considerations for ensuring continuity of services for children. The panel discussion was followed by the question and answer session. A range of questions related to the findings and observations of the report was asked by the participants and answered by the panelists.

Sri. Atul Prasad, ACS, Social Welfare Department- “Apart from women and children, senior citizens and transgenders were also affected by the crisis. Government created digital registration dashboard which has been a silver lining that helped in sustaining supplementary nutrition and other services of social welfare department. Timely government responses smoothened the severity of the crises”. He acknowledged that the crisis is for the long haul and we need to prepare and plan accordingly.

Sri. Sanjay Kumar, Principal Secretary, Education Department- “Although software is there but lack of hardware has restricted the access of online classes by students.” He also said that health services were affected which may impact some key indicators and need long term response.

Dr. Subrat Das- “India is facing serious issue of purchasing power, which is negatively impacting the economy. Bihar’s response was commendable given the deep fund crunch”. He urged that the central assistance will be vital to support Bihar in effectively meeting the challenge as this crisis is expected to be protracted.

After the panel discussion, Dr. Siddharth thanked the panellists and broadly emphasised various aspects of Government responses, particularly the Finance Department’s response to mitigate the crises aroused by Covid-19 induced lockdown.

He also explained the way forward in detail. Finally, Prof. Prabhat Ghosh of ADRI thanked all the participants for participating in the webinar and making it an informative event.

The webinar was attended by Government officials, civil society members and researchers from various fields.

(Anjani K Verma)