

Undertaking rapid assessments in the COVID-19 context: Learning from UNICEF South Asia

Assessing the immediate impact of COVID-19 among the most vulnerable in the state of Uttar Pradesh, India



A Case Study

Context

Following the announcement of a complete national lockdown in India on 25 March 2020, the Government of Uttar Pradesh (hereafter State Government) immediately announced and implemented several short-term COVID-specific relief measures for the most vulnerable groups in the state. These included provision of free food ration kits and INR 1,000 cash support to migrant workers, and an immediate direct benefit transfer of INR 1,000 into the bank accounts of daily wage workers and below poverty line (BPL) persons registered with the State Labour Department.¹ The State Government also took steps to implement relief measures announced under ongoing Central Government schemes, including clearing pending wages of beneficiaries of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) by end March 2020; advance payment of two months pension (April and May 2020) in April 2020 to pensioners² under various welfare schemes; and provision of one month's free supply of food grain to families of MGNREGA

workers, *Antyodaya* beneficiaries, construction workers and small wage earners.

In order to improve the policy response to ensure the intended coverage of the COVID-specific social protection package and address implementation challenges, the State Government requested UNICEF Uttar Pradesh (hereafter UNICEF) to conduct a state-level rapid assessment. The objectives of the study were to assess the immediate impact of COVID-19 among registered beneficiaries of various social schemes in the state, and to provide insights on the knowledge and practices around COVID-19, experience of livelihood loss, coverage of the COVID-19 social protection package, and household wellbeing.

Implementation arrangements

UNICEF, in partnership with the State Government, conducted two rounds of rapid assessments at the beginning of the lockdown in quick succession: the first round took place between 11-14 April 2020

¹ Includes over 3.5 million construction workers, daily wagers and contract workers in urban areas, and carriage pullers, auto-rickshaw, rickshaw and e-rickshaw pullers, and destitutes in rural areas (Government of Uttar Pradesh).

² Includes over 8 million old age, destitute, disabled, leprosy patients and widowed pensioners (Government of Uttar Pradesh).

and the second from 23-27 April 2020. These cross-sectional assessments reached a total of 1,364 respondents aged 18 years and above: 603 in the first round and 761 in the second. Additionally, married women in beneficiary households (235 in round 1 and 282 in round 2) were interviewed to gain their perspective on gender and household relations. The cost of the two assessments was USD 2,500, excluding in-house resources. Use of Open Data Kit (ODK) not only helped in reducing the cost but enabled quick turn out of mobile enabled tools and real-time analysis.

The target population of the rapid assessments included three groups of beneficiaries registered with the State Government: i) MGNREGA beneficiaries, ii) pensioners,³ and iii) registered workers,⁴ who were supported under four COVID-19 social protection schemes: i) provision of free ration, ii) payment of MGNREGA arrears, iii) payment of two months of pension advance, and iv) payment of INR 1,000 as cash assistance to registered workers.

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected remotely through interviews conducted via mobile phones and computers,

which made it easy for interviewers to enter the data with either device available to them during lockdown. Interviews were conducted by enumerators from *Saajhi Duniya*, a reputed civil society organization, experienced in data collection among vulnerable groups. Verbal consent was taken prior to the interview.

Quantitative data were primarily collected; however, the option to enter additional qualitative information in open text boxes during the interview was also available. To ensure efficient entry, enumerators filled the information while interviewing the respondents using a web-based Open Data Kit (ODK) app/Enketo forms as a tool, which was easy to use and accessible from both mobile phones and computers. In order for results to be available immediately to both UNICEF and the State Government, the data collected in ODK were linked to automatically generate findings and reports through Google Sheets, using Infogram, UNICEF's corporate web-based tool for ICO.

The survey tools were designed through a collaborative process between UNICEF's programme teams and the State Government,



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³ Defined in footnote 2 above.

⁴ Defined in footnote 1 above.

and reviewed by UNICEF, *Saajhi Duniya* and Government officials. Web-based tools were used to monitor data quality (e.g. time stamps in ODK), and a WhatsApp group was created by UNICEF for ongoing communication with the enumerators. The codes to generate real-time reports were tested to ensure that the calculated results were correct. Personal IDs (names and mobile numbers) were removed from the data to protect the identity of respondents. Online data were stored on a password protected database and removed from the web after data collection.

Key areas of enquiry in the first round of assessment were receipt of the COVID-specific social protection package, livelihoods and awareness around COVID-19. In the second round additional questions on challenges and barriers to accessing the cash transfers, meeting daily needs and access to education during school closure were included. In both rounds, married women were asked about gender-related issues, including relations within the household, sharing of household work and child-care, and domestic violence. Given the sensitivity of inquiring about domestic violence, particularly through remote surveys, the question was asked in an indirect way inquiring from married women about changes in their husband's behaviour during lockdown.

Phone-based surveys have a limitation of time, which restricts the scope of questions that can be asked. Due to these constraints, the survey tool was designed to cover only a few key issues (12 questions were asked in round 1, and 20 in round 2). As the objective of the assessment was to provide state-level estimates for quick feedback to the programme, data on the socio-demographic profile of respondents were not gathered. Several topics of interest, including more detailed information around gender could not be included. Moreover, while questions on gender-related issues such as domestic violence were included in both assessment rounds, it was difficult to get detailed/complete responses on the phone from women. Such sensitive issues require probing and women in this context may have lacked the privacy to report on personal issues.

Sampling

A sample frame was constructed for both assessment rounds from a list of 10,000 beneficiaries (including mobile phone numbers) across the four schemes provided by each of the concerned Departments of the State Government. Respondents were randomly sampled from the list with stratification by each group of beneficiaries and by each of four socio-economic regions



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(Eastern, Western and Central Uttar Pradesh, and Bundelkhand). The sample size for the two rounds was calculated as 250 completed interviews for each group of beneficiaries (so the total required sample size was 750). This was calculated to estimate the coverage of the four social protection schemes, assuming around 30% to 50% coverage of these schemes based on anecdotal evidence and stakeholders' feedback, and 20% of relative precision in the estimate (95% level of confidence). Oversampling was done to account for the non-responses.

As information on gender representation was not available in the sampling list, gender was not taken into account in the sampling. However, across all sets of beneficiaries, an attempt was made to interview married women in the same household as the respondent. After interviewing the beneficiary, the enumerator asked the respondent if there was a married woman in the same household, and if so, if she would agree to be interviewed.

Overall, the response rate was about 32% for both rounds. Reasons for non-response included incorrect phone numbers listed in the database, mobile phones not working, phone numbers not reachable, respondents not answering the call, or not interested in participating in the survey or did not complete the survey.

This case is unique as it has drawn on contact details of beneficiaries registered in government programmes for the sampling frame. The lists were extracted by the State Government using the MIS of each scheme and beneficiaries were selected from the four socio-economic regions of the state to have a representation of households from each region. As the frames were extracted centrally, there was little likelihood of bias in inclusion of respondents. Getting the State Government partners to provide the listing/sampling frame was not difficult; there was government buy-in as the request for the assessment had come from the government. The lists were provided on the understanding that they would be used exclusively for this assessment. The lists were easy to use, and had the information needed for the selection of respondents and their contact numbers.

As different sampling frames were used in the two rounds of assessments, the data could not be pooled to generate a regional estimate for Uttar Pradesh. However, this level of analysis was not required by programme managers in the states. Moreover, since the two rounds were done in quick succession, there was not much change anticipated in service coverage. The second round mainly helped to unpack and highlight the barriers in access to services (e.g., access to the bank to withdraw cash from the account during lockdown) as well as gather information on access to daily needs and medicines, which had not been covered in the first round.

While the assessment covered beneficiaries of social protection schemes intended for the most vulnerable in the state (those earning a minimum wage, BPL families and those in the poorest income quintile), there were some limitations in the sampling methodology, which may have led to biases. Each of the State Departments shared with UNICEF a short list of contacts per programme from the huge MIS beneficiary list as the sampling frame; however, it is not clear as to how these beneficiaries were selected, other than representation by socio-economic region. Further, respondents who were not in the State Government database of registered beneficiaries, those without a mobile phone and those residing in remote areas without phone connectivity, likely to be among the most marginalized, may have been excluded from the assessment.

Moreover, the sample was not representative of the state's heterogeneity; the sample frame was selected from the state MIS, which did not include any auxiliary variables (e.g. gender, rural-urban, religion, caste) beyond contact details, beneficiary type and socio-economic zone, and was limited in size so the sample could not be stratified. Notably, as the required sample size for pensioners could not be reached as UNICEF could not get sufficient phone numbers of beneficiaries for the sample, round 1 was completed with a smaller sample frame to deliver results quickly; in round 2, additional pensioners were added to the list to achieve the required sample size. As the sample frame differed between the two assessment rounds for the pensioners group, findings on the

coverage of release of pension advance over the two rounds need to be interpreted with caution.

Partnership

A significant feature of the process of implementing this rapid assessment was its collaborative nature and the close partnership between UNICEF and the State Government. UNICEF's ongoing multisectoral engagement with the State Government and its past experience of establishing data gathering and real-time monitoring systems for several State Government flagship programmes, using mobile apps, infographics and data visualization tools, and developing analytics and dashboards, has built UNICEF's credibility in designing and implementing in-house surveys and suggesting policy recommendations based on the evidence. The request for the assessment came from the State Government, and the list of registered beneficiaries for sampling was provided immediately by the various Departments involved in the process, such as the Department of Revenue, Department of Labour and Department of Social Welfare, which ensured quick roll-out of the survey. Notably, a spin-off of using the State Government's sampling

list of beneficiaries for the assessment was their acceptance and ownership of the findings. The survey tools covered topics that were of interest to both the State Government and UNICEF. For example, while the State Government was primarily interested in the coverage of social protection schemes and awareness around COVID-19, UNICEF's focus was to also explore the gender-based impact of the pandemic and the lockdown, including issues of domestic violence and gendered household work.

UNICEF also capitalized on their ongoing relationship and past partnership with *Saajhi Duniya* to roll out data collection at short notice. Notably, *Saajhi Duniya* undertook the survey work on trust, and the formal contract was drawn up later.

A trade-off of this close partnership was that the primary audience of the assessment, beyond UNICEF, was the State Government, which did not want to disseminate the findings publicly; as a result, the findings could not be used more widely, as indications or lessons for other states or contexts or actors.



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Agility/timeliness

Another key feature of the assessment was its very rapid roll-out with the objective of providing the State Government quick evidence and feedback for immediate corrections in the implementation of the social protection package. Notably, each round of assessment was completed in just four days, from data collection and data analysis to report writing, during the peak of the lockdown.

UNICEF was able to quickly leverage available resources and mobilize capacity for data collection at a low cost, to ensure that survey findings would be available to the State Government almost immediately. Online mobile applications were used for quick collection and analysis of the survey data, and to generate the report in a pre-designed, limited-sized template with data visualization. UNICEF could develop the survey tool in-house within a few hours given the open-source nature and easy development of the forms, and their past experience of designing and using ODK for regular programme monitoring.

However, as the formats and templates in the sampling lists provided by the different departments were not standardized, and the contact details of several beneficiaries in the sample were incorrect, it took time to clean/organize the database so that it could be used for sampling and calling respondents.

An important trade-off was that a larger, potentially more representative sample frame was not constructed. Moreover, in the first round, it was not possible to get the required sample size of 250 pensioners and given the pressure to roll out the survey quickly, the survey was conducted with around 80 pensioners who could be accessed from the database. In the second round, however, the required sample size was achieved for all three groups. While both rounds of the questionnaire were reviewed by *Saajhi Duniya* and the government, another trade-off is that the tools could not be pre-tested externally with a sample of the survey target populations as time was a key factor in enabling use of the data.



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Use of findings

Working in close partnership with the State Government resulted in quick uptake of the evidence from the assessments. The assessment reports and their recommendations were presented to a high-powered committee set up to address COVID-19 related issues in the state by the Economic Advisor to the Chief Minister and officials of the respective State Departments. Confidentiality was necessary as findings on the gaps in the coverage of schemes were sensitive, and UNICEF shared the findings and recommendations of the survey with only the relevant Departments, which resulted in successful advocacy and the implementation of several of UNICEF's recommendations.

Based on the evidence the State Government took several immediate measures to address gaps in the coverage of social protection schemes. For example, the Department of Social Welfare prepared a detailed list of pension beneficiaries at the village level to track and support those who had missed the announcement of release of pension advance, to enable them to access their entitlements. The Department of Labour reconciled the bank account numbers and phone numbers of registered workers to ensure that all eligible beneficiaries received an alert from the bank for cash assistance. Based on the evidence that beneficiaries could not access their bank account during lockdown, the Department of Rural Development initiated the disbursement of entitlements/arrears to MNREGA workers in cash through the community level network of *Rozgar Sevaks*.⁵ Following UNICEF's recommendation to deploy more micro ATMs and business

correspondents in low bank density districts, the State Level Bankers' Committee submitted an action plan to the Chief Minister, which was implemented with immediate effect. Furthermore, based on UNICEF's evidence on bank density, the Department of Rural Development has selected one woman-business correspondent (BC Sakhi) per gram panchayat to support people at the village level with their banking needs.⁶

Evidence from the assessments on knowledge and practices around COVID-19 was also used by UNICEF for internal programming. Information gathered in round 2 on online education was shared with the Department of Education, which contributed to the Department initiating block level follow-up through teachers on access to online classes, and the dissemination of the *E-Pathshala* app through women's self-help groups.

The findings of round 1 led to the rollout of the second-round assessment. While round 2 assessment was not planned originally, based on qualitative feedback from round 1 survey indicating that beneficiaries had additional concerns during lockdown, such as barriers to banking access, lack of access to medicines/daily needs and issues related to continuity of education, UNICEF successfully advocated with the State Government to conduct a second round assessment among beneficiaries to include these critical issues.

Summary learnings

The strengths, challenges, learnings and innovations related to the implementation of this rapid assessment are summarized in the table below.

⁵ Government incentive-based village-level coordinators for the Employment Guarantee Scheme.

⁶ As of now, the state of Uttar Pradesh has over 58,000 BC Sakhis. Government services (subsidies, entitlements, pensions etc) and direct benefit transfer (DBT) payouts will be channelled through these Sakhis.

Table: Uttar Pradesh, India, rapid assessment: Summary Learnings

Strengths	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Rapid roll-out of two surveys in quick sequence (over two weeks) during the lockdown• Strong partnership with the State Government ensured the uptake of findings and recommendations to address implementation challenges• Agility, rapidness, within a strong partnership with the State Government, led to quick uptake of evidence• Use of innovative web tools allowed quick data collection and analysis, and professionally designed reports	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The sample was not representative; limited to those with a mobile phone and beneficiaries registered with the Government• Only limited questions could be included in the survey tool as phone-based surveys have a limitation of time• The questionnaires could not be field-tested with a sample of the survey target population due to time constraints
Learnings and innovations	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Partnership with the Government can facilitate quick roll-out of a survey and uptake of evidence; however if findings are considered sensitive, they may not be used more widely as indications or lessons for other states or contexts or actors• Freely available web resources and in-house expertise can be leveraged and capacity mobilized at a low cost to ensure real-time data collection and almost immediate evidence generation	



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UNICEF Regional Office South Asia website <https://www.unicef.org/rosa/>

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