

## VIKALP SANGAM CORE GROUP

### STATEMENT ON THE NEED FOR CREATIVE, LONG-TERM ALTERNATIVES IN VIEW OF COVID-19

28 March 2020

As India and the world face a completely unprecedented crisis due to the spread of COVID-19 virus, the first and immediate response must be health and treatment facilities, physical distancing, relief and basic needs packages to workers, basic need services, and other such measures that both reduce the risk of spread as also provide economic and survival security to those worst affected not only by infection but by the shutdown of ordinary life. Special attention needs to be given to the most vulnerable, including the elderly, the ‘disabled’, women and children, daily wage workers, residents of crowded urban ‘slums’, prisoners in crowded cells, sanitation and wasteworkers, transgender people, sex workers, and small farmers, pastoralists, fishers, and forest-dwellers.

In this, we support and reiterate the submissions made by several forums and networks, including by the Working Peoples Charter, Jan Swasthya Abhiyan, a large number of economists and other concerned citizens, and the Campaign for Environmental Justice in India.<sup>i</sup> Several countries across the world, and some states in India, have already announced pay packets, food and other essential deliveries, continued wages for out-of-work workers, etc; India must follow suit as a national response, building on but going much beyond the package announced by the Finance Minister on 26<sup>th</sup> March.<sup>ii</sup> It must also promote social solidarity and unity even as it promotes physical (not ‘social’!) distancing, encouraging citizens networks that can help the most vulnerable, many of which are spontaneously emerging across India. It must actively discourage the prejudiced, racist or classist responses that are being unfortunately seen in some areas, e.g. against people of north-east India because they happen to look like the Chinese, or against wastepickers, or against foreigners who happen to still be in India.<sup>iii</sup> It must protect fundamental human rights against violations caused by increased state surveillance and interventions in citizens’ lives, for it is easy to slip into forms of authoritarianism in such situations (especially when we use metaphors like ‘we are in a war-like state’); rather we need to empower communities and collectives to enforce the social norms needed to deal with them, with government support. And finally, all of the government’s resources that are going into expenses that are unnecessary or can be deferred<sup>iv</sup>, must go into the response to COVID-19.

***It is however important to also initiate longer-term measures, now or when the immediate crisis is over, that will (a) significantly reduce the possibility of more such disastrous spread of diseases and (b) significantly enhance the ability of communities to deal with such eventualities. We list these below.***

We believe that the survival and sustainability of this planet lies in the adoption of values of dignity, equality and justice for all species, genders and social categories. This should reflect in the rejection of all policies and practices that cause destruction, exploitation and discrimination and injustice against any living being. National

strategies and frameworks in all sectors must be focused on human and environmental health.

In particular, we urge consideration of the following:

**1. Put a moratorium on all diversion of natural ecosystems for infrastructure, mining, and commercial purposes**

There is a clear and scientifically established link between ecological destruction and the spread of diseases like COVID-19<sup>v</sup>. Even if COVID-19 originated in China, other such pathogens could originate in India, or spread more widely, due to the disruption of natural balances and inter-dependencies. An immediate moratorium on the diversion of natural ecosystems including forests and wetlands, for mining, infrastructure, and other ‘developmental’ projects is crucial; and instead to initiate other alternatives for meeting livelihood and development needs, given below.

**2. Prioritise and facilitate community health systems and public health sector**

Each settlement must have primary facilities combining multiple health systems, with barefoot and paramedics trained in essential care and cure, including in dealing with COVID-19 like situations. Highest priority must be given to strengthening public health including district level epidemiological units that can understand and monitor local health problems and their determinants, as well as put back public sector medical services in the driving seat, rather than the privatization encouraged in recent times (whose devastating consequences we are seeing even in ‘developed’ countries like USA, with millions unable to afford even basic check-ups). Traditional health knowledge that has stood the test of time must be used optimally in the present crisis and in long term development of health services in the country, including using AYUSH, amchi, and local health traditions to develop sound methods of prevention, such as use of herbal immuno-boosters (note that China has been able to use Traditional Chinese Medicine very effectively in both prevention and treatment of cases in the COVID-19 crisis<sup>vi</sup>).

**3. Promote ecological design and sensitivity in all development and livelihoods**

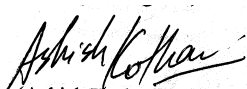
A clear policy and programmatic direction is needed for ecologically sustainable and equitable ways of generating livelihoods and jobs, infrastructure, communications, etc. There are hundreds of examples of people meeting their food, water, energy, housing, education, health and other basic needs, and securing dignified livelihoods, through such ways, which can be learnt from (see for instance [www.vikalpsangam.org](http://www.vikalpsangam.org)). Orienting existing schemes like MNREGS, housing, agriculture, and others towards this is eminently possible.

**4. Support farmers to shift to organic, biodiverse farming.**

Given the clear connections of industrial-scale, chemical-intensive agriculture with ecological disruption creating the conditions for such disease related disasters<sup>vii</sup>, urgent measures are needed to support all farmers to shift to organic, biologically diverse farming (including by transferring the chemical fertilizer subsidy), with special assistance to small farmers, pastoralists, fishers, and forest-dwellers. GMO trials and releases, with their great potential for ecological disruption, must be stopped immediately.

5. **Strengthen self-governance through gram sabhas, area/ward sabhas**  
Implementation of local self-governance to its fullest extent, a true people's democracy is crucial. Gram sabhas, area/ward sabhas, and other local governance institutions will need help to build capacity and generate resources, so that they can govern their lands and ecosystems, their economic and community lives, and to do this in a manner that ensures representation and participation of marginalised sections to ensure social justice.
6. **Strengthen local, self-reliant economies**  
It is now evident that a global economy, with resources, labour and products moving across the globe, is an extremely vulnerable system that is prone to collapse. Institutions of local self-governance must be provided with the resources, technical assistance and other forms of cooperation in order to grow their own local, self-reliant economies, using local and new skills and resources, catering first and foremost to local needs. Larger trade should build on this, and not undermine it. Through this, the necessity of mass mobility and trade could be reduced significantly. This could even help reduce and reverse rural-urban migration that is caused by economic and social distress, and leads to very high urban densities that are ripe for epidemics.
7. **Redesign urban and semi-urban settlements**  
We must redesign urban and semi-urban settlements in such ways that workplace and residence for most people are close by, self-governance through area sabhas is empowered, and urban natural ecosystems are regenerated and protected through citizens' forums.

These and other related measures have been laid out in more detail in the *People's Manifesto for a Just, Equitable and Sustainable India*, issued by the Vikalp Sangam process in early 2019 (<http://www.vikalpsangam.org/article/peoples-manifesto-for-a-just-equitable-and-sustainable-india-2019/>). We urge its full consideration as a context for the above recommendations.



(Ashish Kothari)

*On behalf of the underlisted organizational members of the Vikalp Sangam Core Group (listed alphabetically). The Vikalp Sangam process is a platform to bring together movements, groups and individuals working on just, equitable and sustainable pathways to human and ecological well-being. It rejects the current model of development and the structures of inequality and injustice underlying it, and searches for alternatives in practice and vision. Over 50 movements and organisations around the country are involved. For more information, pl. see <http://www.vikalpsangam.org/about/>*

ACCORD (Tamil Nadu)  
Alliance for Sustainable and Holistic  
Agriculture (national)  
Alternative Law Forum (Bengaluru)  
Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the  
Environment (Bengaluru)  
BHASHA (Gujarat)  
Bhoomi College (Bengaluru)  
Blue Ribbon Movement (Mumbai)  
Centre for Education and Documentation  
(Mumbai)

Centre for Environment Education (Gujarat)  
Centre for Equity Studies (Delhi)  
CGNetSwara (Chhattisgarh)  
Chalakupuzha Samrakshana Samithi / River  
Research Centre (Kerala)  
ComMutiny: The Youth Collective (Delhi)  
Deccan Development Society (Telangana)  
Deer Park (Himachal Pradesh)  
Development Alternatives (Delhi)  
Dharamitra (Maharashtra)  
Ekta Parishad (several states)

Ektha (Chennai)  
 EQUATIONS (Bengaluru)  
 Gene Campaign (Delhi)  
 Greenpeace India (Bengaluru)  
 Health Swaraaj Samvaad (national)  
 Ideosync (Delhi)  
 Jagori Rural (Himachal Pradesh)  
 Kalpavriksh (Maharashtra)  
 Knowledge in Civil Society (national)  
 Kriti Team (Delhi)  
 Ladakh Arts and Media Organisation (Ladakh)  
 Local Futures (Ladakh)  
 Maati (Uttarakhand)  
 Mahila Kisan Adhikar Manch (national)  
 Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (Rajasthan)  
 National Alliance of Peoples' Movements (national)  
 North East Slow Food and Agrobiodiversity Society (Meghalaya)  
 Peoples' Science Institute (Uttarakhand)  
 Revitalising Rainfed Agriculture Network (national)  
 reStore (Chennai)  
 Sahjeevan (Kachchh)  
 Sambhaavnaa (Himachal Pradesh)

Samvedana (Maharashtra)  
 Sangama (Bengaluru)  
 Sangat (Delhi)  
 School for Democracy (Rajasthan)  
 School for Rural Development and Environment (Kashmir)  
 Shikshantar (Rajasthan)  
 Snow Leopard Conservancy India Trust (Ladakh)  
 Social Entrepreneurship Association (Tamil Nadu)  
 SOPPECOM (Maharashtra)  
 South Asian Dialogue on Ecological Democracy (Delhi)  
 Students' Environmental and Cultural Movement of Ladakh (Ladakh)  
 Thanal (Kerala)  
 Timbaktu Collective (Andhra Pradesh)  
 Titli Trust (Uttarakhand)  
 Tribal Health Initiative (Tamil Nadu)  
 URMUL (Rajasthan)  
 Vrikshamitra (Maharashtra)  
 Watershed Support Services and Activities Network (Andhra Pradesh/Telangana)

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<sup>i</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=1115179215499243&id=172170336466807&\\_tn=KR](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=1115179215499243&id=172170336466807&_tn=KR;); <https://kractivist.org/statement-on-the-covid-19-pandemic-jan-swasthya-abhiyan-ja-and-all-india-peoples-science-network-aipn/>; <https://amitbasole.files.wordpress.com/2020/03/appeal-for-emergency-measures-to-deal-with-covid-19-crisis-26-march.pdf>; <https://esgindia.org/new/campaigns/ceji-statement-on-covid-19-and-indias-response/>

<sup>ii</sup> Which has been welcomed, but pointed out as being late and very inadequate, see <https://amitbasole.files.wordpress.com/2020/03/response-to-covid19-relief-package.pdf>

<sup>iii</sup> [https://www.change.org/p/the-coronavirus-is-not-discriminating-between-people-so-why-are-we-narendramodi-please-issue-strict-orders-against-racial-discrimination-corona-nocoronaracism?recruiter=91653651&utm\\_source=share\\_petition&utm\\_medium=abi\\_gmail&utm\\_campaign=add\\_ress\\_book&utm\\_term=5530f9116945401b954c91225810f81f&recruited\\_by\\_id=31d547f0-e241-0130-4e4b-00221967ea1d](https://www.change.org/p/the-coronavirus-is-not-discriminating-between-people-so-why-are-we-narendramodi-please-issue-strict-orders-against-racial-discrimination-corona-nocoronaracism?recruiter=91653651&utm_source=share_petition&utm_medium=abi_gmail&utm_campaign=add_ress_book&utm_term=5530f9116945401b954c91225810f81f&recruited_by_id=31d547f0-e241-0130-4e4b-00221967ea1d)

<sup>iv</sup> For instance, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/coronavirus-india-weapons-israel-covid-19-pandemic>

<sup>v</sup> <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/destroyed-habitat-creates-the-perfect-conditions-for-coronavirus-to-emerge/>

<sup>vi</sup> <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8131645/Can-body-energy-help-repel-coronavirus-TCM-experts-offer-tips-prevent-infection.html>. Note that we are not here supporting either the fake claims being made by many in the name of traditional medicine, nor the indiscriminate exploitation or slaughter of wild animals that some parts of TCM contain.

<sup>vii</sup> <https://climateandcapitalism.com/2020/03/11/capitalist-agriculture-and-covid-19-a-deadly-combination/>