

July 21, 2020

Centre needs to lift Covid information lockdown

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By Gajendra Haldea

Covid-19, a pandemic that is no less deadlier than a World War, cannot be fought successfully without people's participation. But that seems wanting in India. The government has neither shared the information required for inspiring confidence among the people in respect of its efforts to contain the pandemic nor has it taken any campaign-style measures to persuade them to join the war effort. As a result, people seem very confused about the nature and extent of the problem as well as the ways and means to fight it.

The government mainly uses its websites to disseminate information. However, if one visits the website of the Union health ministry, one can only find state-wise cumulative numbers of cases and deaths. The ICMR website is no better. It only indicates two numbers for the entire country—one is the cumulative number of tests, and the other is the number of tests conducted on the previous day.

The website of the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) does not even provide the break-up of different types of tests. It just adds up apples (RT-PCR tests) and oranges (rapid antigen tests) to give you their combined total. Quite unscientific indeed! The ICMR website also lists out the authorised laboratories, but does not indicate their respective capacities, so no one knows how many tests can be undertaken in a district, state or the entire country.

Further, every laboratory is required to upload, on the ICMR portal, detailed information relating to every person tested. Yet, a simple fact like the age profile of the infected, or of those who have died, is not in the public domain. Nor has any analytical or research work been published on the basis of this enormous data. So far as state governments are concerned, each one of them have a

different format that provides very limited information, some of it doctored. The Delhi government deserves a special mention, as much of its information has been doctored—be it the number of tests, deaths or vacant beds. Not only are there internal contradictions in its data, the information provided has also shrunk progressively.

Data can help us learn where and how the disease spreads. In contrast, data secrecy constitutes an insurmountable barrier to research and policy formulation for slowing down the pandemic. As we know, New York City was among the worst-affected in the world. It shared much of its data on its website and formulated strategic responses that ultimately helped in reversing the tide.

The directions issued by the central and state governments have invoked the Disaster Management Act (DMA) which provides them with very extensive powers for managing disasters. The complete lockdown imposed by the central government on March 25 was also the strictest as compared to other countries. One would have normally expected that the authorities exercising such powers under DMA would also undertake close monitoring followed by appropriate policy responses. Somehow, that role seems to have been abandoned.

While issuing wide-ranging directions, the DM Authority, housed in the Union ministry of home affairs (MHA), did not mandate any system of reporting that was necessary for monitoring and regulating the management of this disaster. It simply left this to the ministry of health (MoH). Anyone who has witnessed the management of a disaster, campaign or programme would testify that regular reporting and monitoring forms an integral part of the entire exercise, but has hardly been visible in the case of Covid-19.

There is no evidence of any institutionalised arrangement for data collection, analysis, monitoring and dissemination of information by MoH. It seems content in holding intermittent press briefings where selective information is provided—as if its primary objective is only to publicise the government's achievements. For example, its spokespersons frequently harped on low death numbers in the early stages of the pandemic, but stopped mentioning them when the numbers rose. Worse, there was a three-week long discontinuation of press briefings after the situation started deteriorating in mid-June. Clearly, MoH has been found wanting.

A healthy democracy takes pride in being responsive, open and transparent. Regrettably, we have seen none of these in the management of Covid-19 in India. Several communications sent by me in this regard to the authorities in MHA, MoH and Delhi government have been in vain. On May 15, I even suggested a format for this purpose. However, communication with the government seems a cull de sac.

Absence of timely information and policies not only leaves the citizens in doubt about their role and participation, it also causes various levels of government to function at sub-optimal levels, leading to inadequate and flawed responses, policies and strategies. This has been more than evident during the past few months.

Recently, no less than the prime minister of India stressed the need for spreading awareness about the pandemic and reiterated that there was no room for any complacency. He also said that real-time national-level monitoring and guidance should be provided to all the affected states and places with high positivity rates. Indeed, what he said was unexceptionable, and its immediate compliance is the only way forward.

Since there is neither a cure nor a vaccine for Covid-19 thus far, the mainstay of containment of the pandemic lies in preventive measures to be taken by the people, such as mask-wearing, social distancing and personal hygiene. People's participation is, therefore, the key to containing this disaster. I had elaborated on these measures in my article published in FE on June 30 (bit.ly/2WAYVCS).

For people's participation to be robust and vibrant, the levels of awareness will have to be raised through effective dissemination of information. In any case, inadequate information and monitoring constitute significant barriers to formulation of effective policies and strategies for waging this war successfully. As such, there is no substitute for a comprehensive and effective communication strategy coupled with meaningful monitoring and timely action. Failures on this front are bound to extract a heavy price in terms of more deaths and forced lockdowns.

One can only hope that the above words of the prime minister will soon be put into action by MHA and MoH. Without doubt, Covid-19 is a long haul war that must be fought in all seriousness for the good of India.

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