

‘Social Distancing Is the Most Potent Vaccine Available Right Now’: Health Minister Dr Harsh Vardhan

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NITI Aayog today organized an interactive live session with Health Minister Dr Harsh Vardhan and non-governmental organizations and civil society organizations. The session was moderated by CEO Amitabh Kant.

All NGOs registered on NITI Aayog's Darpan Portal participated. Some of the leading ones were: Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, represented by Hari Menon; HelpAge India, represented by Mathew Cherian; Tata Trusts, represented by HSD Srinivas; Piramal Swasthya, represented by Ashwin Deshmukh; CYSD, represented by Jagadananda; Prayas, represented by AmodKanth; Red Cross, represented by Yahia Alibi; SEWA, represented by Chaya Bawasar; Mann Deshi Foundation, represented by Prabhat Sinha; Sulabh International, represented by Lalit Kumar; Lal Pathlabs, represented by Arvind Lal; Public Health Foundation of India, represented by K Srinath Reddy; Care India, represented by Manoj Gopalakrishnan; Working Women's Forum, represented by Nandini Azad; and Akshay Patra, represented by Vijay Sharma.

The NGOs/CSOs mentioned a number of issues: combating stigma and discrimination against Covid-19 patients and frontline workers; flagging shortage of medicines in rural areas; seeking help for e-passes; provision of more PPEs and N95 masks; seeking a data-driven response to the crisis; help in reaching entitlements to migrants and easing digital payments; financial and policy support to informal entrepreneurs after the lockdown is lifted; sending essential items to remote areas of the country; proposal to open up income-generating programmes in the green zones; more health workers for rural areas; promoting virtual care in rural areas; pooling of RT-PCR tests; capacity-building of medical staff; upgrading quarantine and intensive-care facilities; and need for more decentralized community surveillance mechanism and community nutrition centres, among others.

Lauding the excellent, selfless work done by NGOs and CSOs in battling the Covid-19 war, the Health Minister appealed for their assistance in the continuance of the lockdown. He appreciated their meticulous efforts to ensure the well-being of Indian citizens.

Dr Harsh Vardhan mentioned that India took immediate proactive steps within days of knowing about the outbreak of the novel coronavirus in China. The Central Government immediately issued advisories to the states, undertook rigorous community health surveillance and started thermal screening at airports, borders as well as seaports.

He spoke at length on the issue of stigmatization of Covid-positive patients and frontline workers who are engaged in battling this war. The government recently amended the Epidemic Diseases Act to protect healthcare workers against violence during health crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic. However, he said not everything can be solved with the help of law and sought the assistance of NGOs and CSOs to battle the menace of stigmatization. He also sought their help in the seamless assimilation of migrant workers in their hometowns and villages. He said there might be some resistance when they go back home, which is where the NGOs can step in. 'These people will require help from society to reorganize them, to ensure they are adequately tested and get the right guidance.'

He also spoke on the classification of districts, whereby 129 districts have been identified as

hotspots, around 297 as non-hotspots, and over 300 as unaffected. 'We have three categories—red, orange and green. We are helping the red zones get into the orange zone if they don't have a single case for the next fourteen days and same for the orange to get into the green zone. We know very accurately where our enemy is in the country and we know how to deal with this enemy. Using all our forces, we will defeat it,' he said.

On PPEs and masks, he said, 'We have enabled and handed 108 manufacturers in the country, who are now producing over 1 Lakh PPEs every day. For N95 masks, we are producing more than a lakh every day now. There is adequate supply of these essential items and we are distributing the same to the states.'

He also mentioned that the AYUSH Ministry has issued guidelines about natural things that can boost one's immunity.

Imploring everyone to download the AarogyaSetu app, the Minister insisted on its vital role in the fight against Covid-19. He said the app provides us much-needed protection. He also mentioned that, 'The government has launched @CovidIndiaSeva, in collaboration with TwitterIndia, and citizens can reach out with any specific problem or solution that they want to communicate with us. And I assure you that we will resolve your issues in the shortest possible time.'

Lastly, Dr Harsh Vardhan said, 'Regularly washing your hands and faces and wearing a mask at all times will protect you and your loved ones from getting this infection. These are simple precautions. Take care of elders at home, especially because they are more vulnerable. Stay at home, work from home. Till the time we find a vaccine for this, social distancing aided by the national lockdown is the most potent social vaccine for us.'

VRRK/KP

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