

## **FIGHTING COVID-19 & PROTECTING THE HEALTH & WELL- BEING OF ULTRA- POOR COMMUNITIES**

India has never seen a catastrophe like the Covid-19 pandemic before. With millions of families already in deep distress due to the first wave in 2020, the consequences of the second wave in 2021 drove more people into poverty and hunger, and exacerbated the suffering of those already struggling with food insecurity. People living in extreme poverty are the most vulnerable to the instability the pandemic has caused. Their lives came to a standstill because of India's months-long lockdown. Without the ability to earn their livelihoods, families faced a hunger crisis.

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*“When we were unable to make both ends meet during the lockdown, Trickle Up supported us with ration, hygiene and seed kits. Now my children will not go to sleep on an empty stomach.”*



*Lalita Chhura*

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### **Crisis exacerbates poverty and hunger**

Lalita, a Trickle Up project participant from Mundpadar village in Balangir, Odisha, and her family were not the only ones experiencing these conditions. Most project participants were also struggling to cope with the effects of the lockdown.

Ultra-poor people who were earning their livelihoods from small shops, selling their vegetables in the local market, running errands, doing small-scale trading, or working as daily wage laborers were the most affected by India’s shutdown, because they had to suspend their activities. At the same time, a lack of access to credible information left the most vulnerable without the knowledge they needed to properly understand the virus and implement safety measures like social distancing, proper use of masks, and hand sanitization. A vicious cycle of “pandemic-driven acute poverty” loomed large for this impoverished community.

“We were being confronted with the twin burden of surviving against the deadly Covid-19 as well as battling hunger on a daily basis. The pandemic had made

hunger an ominous reality for many families like us,” said Urbashi Bhoi, a project participant from Bongamunda in Balangir district.

### **Supporting ultra-poor communities during the pandemic**

Trickle Up works with women living in ultra-poverty to ensure their social, economic, and financial inclusion. Understanding that participants could be left unreached by government and other pandemic relief efforts, we decided to address the crisis. Before starting our Covid-19 response, Trickle Up carried out a rapid assessment phone survey in our five project locations in Jharkhand and Odisha. We gathered information in order to make appropriate decisions regarding provision of relief support to the families of project participants who were facing multiple vulnerabilities.



Trickle Up came up with a two-pronged approach: support families with immediate relief and educate them about Covid-19 to safeguard them against the deadly pandemic and promote public health guidelines. Our team created and distributed a kit with basic food rations, a hygiene kit with materials for protection from Covid-19 and other essential items, and a seed kit for developing home gardens.

## Trickle Up's Covid-19 response

With support from partner organizations, Trickle Up reached out to vulnerable communities in rural and remote areas that lacked access to amenities and facilities. Together, we provided immediate relief to ultra-poor families in Bongomunda, Muribahal, the Balishankara and Sukinda blocks of Odisha, and the Maheshpur, Litipara, Mahuadar, Garu, and Manoharpur blocks of Jharkhand.

"Trickle Up intervened at the right time when the families from ultra-poor community were struggling to access food and rations during the lockdown. These relief materials brought solace for them by which they can manage food at least for another two to three weeks," said Babi Suna, Community Resource Person for Odisha Livelihood Mission, a government agency and Trickle Up partner.

To ensure fairness and transparency, the participants were selected in consultation with Trickle Up self-help groups, local

members of village institutions, and local government councils. Priority was given to the most vulnerable participants.

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*Babi Suna*

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During distribution of relief materials, Covid-19 guidelines and safety protocols were strictly followed. The venues were sanitized prior to, during and after distribution. Volunteers at entry points ensured that every participant wore a mask properly. Some volunteers were entrusted with supervising to ensure



instructions were followed throughout the process.

During the relief operations, Trickle Up distributed food ration kits to 2260 of the most vulnerable families. A total of 4525 households were given hygiene kits containing masks and sanitizers to help prevent the spread of Covid-19. We also supported 1375 households with seed kits, which contained locally adapted varieties of vegetable seeds to restore lost livelihoods and promote a balanced supply of protein and micronutrients grown in home-based nutrition gardens.

“With this seed kit, Trickle Up is also inculcating a practice among these women to cultivate vegetables in their backyards for nutritionally diverse food,” said Babi Suna of the Odisha Livelihoods Mission.

Additionally, Trickle Up transferred cash in the amount of Rs 800 (\$10.89) through direct benefit transfers to 1582 vulnerable households not covered by any existing social assistance programs. With these relief packages, we have been able to swiftly meet urgent needs and ensure the well-being of families during the pandemic.

Abani Mohan Panigrahi, Member Secretary of Lokadrusti, one of our partner organizations, said about the relief operations: “With support from Trickle Up, we have helped thousands of ultra-poor families live through the uncertainties. As we continue our focused work for vulnerable families, especially women, we are working to ensure food and health as the first priorities and create an interim safety net for them.”



### Promoting Covid-19 public health guidelines

“People had false notions and ideas about what the pandemic was. We made an effort to spread the correct information so that people do not discriminate against those who may have contracted the virus. At the same time, we are also facilitating them to register and arrange vaccination for them,” said Anjali Chhura, Smart Sakhi (a Trickle Up community mentor), Bangamunda, Odisha.

In rural and tribal villages, it is essential to collaborate with the community leader — an influential decision-maker in all aspects of village life — on any outreach effort. To promote Covid-19 public health guidelines and ensure villagers or tribal community members would practice the safety measures being taught, Trickle Up trained community leaders on the project objectives and positioned them as potential change agents, including to motivate project participants to take vaccines.

For instant communication with the staff and volunteers, Trickle Up created WhatsApp groups to share information provided by the government and other agencies, as well as advisories about Covid-19 safety guidelines.

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*Anjali Chhura*

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## Conclusion

Trickle Up's Covid-19 response was a timely intervention providing access to immediate relief and necessary public health information to the ultra-poor communities we serve. While addressing immediate food insecurity, which could have pushed participants back into extreme poverty, we were also able to provide livelihood opportunities with distributed seed kits. As we look to the future, we eagerly anticipate reigniting our robust coaching and mentoring efforts with participants as they initiate or reinstate sustainable income-generating activities, which will help them plan for the future and build resilience.