



Interdisciplinary Action Research: Conversations with Emerging Leaders

A collaborative initiative of Centre for Financial Accountability (Delhi) and Environment Support Group (Bangalore)

In this climate of despair induced by COVID-19, various young researchers and activists have been working on emerging trends in Interdisciplinary Action Research which address some of the most pressing issues of our times, and that from various sectors: urban planning, public health, sociology, ecology and environment, digital commons, public education, migration studies, entrepreneurship, informal economy, and more. CFA and ESG collaborate to bring to focus various exciting explorations by such young researchers, who conscientiously draw attention to some of society's biggest challenges through their interdisciplinary efforts.

Webinar 5: Migrant health: Perspectives and Challenges ***Introduction***

Despite the growing number of migrants into our cities over the last 3 decades, provisions to address their socio-economic health needs have remained largely inadequate and often neglected and have been low in the list of priorities.

This was very evident when the pandemic and the unplanned lockdown resulted in such chaos that crores who lived on the margins, as migrant workers, walked home braving harsh summer conditions with very little offered as part of the economic measures, to address the crisis of the poor and the marginalized. In an horrific instance, 16 migrant workers were run over by a cargo train while sleeping on the railway track on their way home, 47 died of exhaustion on their long walk home as they had no food another 96 died on the shramik trains and a total of about 900 migrant workers had lost their life. But a few days back in response to a question concerning migrant workers's death and loss of livelihoods in the parliament, the response has been that the centre had no data on migrant workers who died as a result of the imposition of the unplanned Covid lockdown.

This shows the systemic insensitivity that still exists towards migrants even as they are slowly returning to their places of work in some states. Although not nearly enough is known about their struggles, some brave researchers are trying to understand the challenges they face and pushing for policy level changes to improve their livelihoods.

Discussants



1. **Dr. Divya Ravindranath** is a researcher at the Indian Institute for Human Settlements where her work focuses on the intersection of migrant informal labour, gender and health. Her doctoral work looked at maternal health and child malnutrition in migrant households engaged in construction work. In this ethnographic study, she conducted field work at construction sites in the city of Ahmedabad to study workers' experiences and perceptions of maternal and child health status, households' ability to access healthcare and government programs.



2. **Dr. Abha Rao** has a PhD in Family Studies & Human Development with a concentration in Medical Anthropology from the University of Arizona. She has worked on migrant and refugee issues for two decades. Her current area of research is examining the sexual and reproductive health issues of temporary women migrant construction workers.

Ms. Bhargavi Rao, moderator for the session, set the tone for the discussion by pointing towards the decades long neglect of urban migrants in socio-economic developmental planning. "It took a pandemic and brutal lockdown to make these millions visible to the rest of the nation", she asserted.



Dr. Abha Rao, a researcher who has worked on migrant issues for two decades, began her intervention by drawing attention to the many challenges migrants face. "When compared to the rest of the population, migrants have higher rates of communicable diseases like tuberculosis and non-communicable diseases like diabetes. They are also at a greater risk of occupational hazards, social violence, alcoholism and STDs", she stated.

Dr. Rao's research on migrants has taken her to several construction sites in Bengaluru, where these migrants are employed as daily wage labourers. Particularly distressing was her account of the plight of women migrant labourers. "Women migrants face a range of challenges that men don't. Not only are they paid lower wages, they are also at a greater risk of Urinary Tract Infections and Reproductive Tract Infections. On construction sites, the sanitation facilities are minimal and sexual harassment is a real threat, several women have told me that they drink lesser water", she shared.

Dr. Divya Ravindranath, researcher at the Indian Institute of Human Settlements, revealed that the poor health of women migrant labourers has serious implications on the health of their children as well. "In our research, we have found that most migrant women are under-weight. When the mother is undernourished, this has an intergenerational effect on her children's health", she revealed. In an ethnographic study of migrant health she conducted in Ahmedabad, she found that of the 131 migrant children she met, around 40% suffered from stunted growth.

Despite having some of the poorest health indicators in the country, migrants struggle to access social support and public health programmes like the *Janani Suraksha Yojana*, mainly because a fixed domicile status is a necessary prerequisite for availing the benefits of many such schemes. "Migrant labourers are also reluctant to visit public health facilities or ration shops, as being perceived as outsiders, they are treated poorly in such places", Dr. Rao observed.



Mr Leo Saldanha, coordinator of Environment Support Group, narrated one of his experiences of providing aid to migrants during the lockdown. "About 1,000 workers within a mile of Bengaluru's Silk

Board had been without drinking water for more than 48 hours during the lockdown. And this was at the construction site of a mega-project being funded by multinational companies”, he recounted. Mr. Saldanha attributed a lack of governance, poor agricultural policies and limited employment opportunities as major contributors to the ‘pandemic’ of migration from rural to urban areas.



Mr. Joe Athialy, Director of Center for Financial Accountability, raised a question about how we can make the Government more accountable towards the struggles of migrant labourers, particularly in the context of the grave difficulties they faced during the lockdown. In response to this Dr. Ravindranath called for a strengthening of the MGNREGA, saying that it was this Act which really helped the migrants find some employment when they needed it most. Dr. Abha Rao advocated for a greater push towards unionisation of migrant workers, as this would allow greater representation of their interests, both to their employers and to the Government. “As of now, only 25% of migrant workers in Karnataka are a part of unions. And even of these, most are men”, she shared.

The conversation then steered to what steps can be taken towards improving the lives and livelihoods of migrant workers. Besides Dr. Abha Rao’s call for more unionisation of migrant labourers, both the discussants pointed towards the need for more research to be done on migrant issues. Citing the lack of data on migrants in India, Dr. Divya Ravindranath called for young researchers to enter the field on informal work sites. Dr. Abha Rao was quick to second her, “It takes commitment and time to enter the space of migrant labour research. But we definitely need a lot more people doing it”, she asserted.

ESG and CFA continue the **“Interdisciplinary Action Research: Conversations with Emerging Leaders”** series next Thursday, 24th September 2020 (5:00 - 6:30 pm on Zoom and Facebook) addressing the: **“Social and Economic Impacts of the Tata Mundra Project”** with **Anuradha Munshi** of **Center for Financial Accountability**. More details on this webinar series can be accessed on www.esgindia.org and www.cenfa.org. Recording of the webinar is accessible at:

[This report has been prepared by Ashwin Lobo Research Associate, Karthik Anjanappa Research Associate and Malvika, Satvika and Himanshu Interns, at ESG. Bhargavi Rao, Trustee, at ESG provided inputs.]

Environment Support Group (Trust)
1572, 36th Cross, Ring Road
Banashankari II Stage
Bangalore 560070, INDIA
Tel: 91-80-26713559 ~ 61
esg@esgindia.org
www.esgindia.org
Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/esgindia/>

Centre for Financial Accountability
R-21, South Extn II, New Delhi - 110 049
Tel: +91-11-49123696
info@cenfa.org
www.cenfa.org