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Effect of Covid on Urban and Rural Poor

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Why in News

Recently, a report by **Hunger Watch** claimed that **Covid-19 has left the urban poor in India poorer**, more hungry and with less nutrition than their rural counterparts.

- **Hunger Watch** is a loose collection of social groups and movements.
- Earlier, a **study from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** had found that an additional **207 million people could be pushed into extreme poverty by 2030** due to the severe long-term impact of the **coronavirus pandemic**.
- Also a **new research conducted by Pew Research Center** has found that the **Covid-19 has pushed about 32 million Indians out of the middle class and increased poverty in the country**.

Key Points

- **Economic Effect:**
 - The food insecurity has prompted **more people to enter the labour force (55% increase** in the labour force among the respondents).
It also noted a **silent rise in child labour as well**.
 - The **economic crisis was deepening as people who lost their jobs were yet to find replacements** and little had been accomplished after the **lockdown** for the revival of livelihoods in the informal sector.
 - Incomes **reduced by half or a quarter for more than half the urban respondents** while it was a little over **one-third for rural respondents**.
- **Public Distribution System & Social Sector Scheme Coverage:**
 - A large section of rural residents could cushion the blow of pandemic-driven economic disruption due to foodgrain via the **Public Distribution System (PDS)**. The urban poor's access to such ration, however, was minimal.
 - The **social security schemes also had relatively better coverage among the rural poor** as rural areas had better access to PDS rations.
 - A larger proportion of households **in urban areas did not have access to ration cards**.

- **Nutrition and Hunger:**
 - A **decline in nutritional quality and quantity was more among the urban respondents** as was the need to borrow money for buying food.
 - Overall, **levels of hunger and food insecurity remained high**, with little hope of the situation improving without measures specifically aimed at providing employment opportunities as well as food support.
 - Even when **India had a record food grain production at 296.65 million tonnes in the 2019-20 crop year** (July-June), beating the target of 291.1 million tonnes and 4% higher than 2018-19, the **net of hunger became more widespread as more people had to start skipping some meals in a day.**
 - **Things were much worse for socially vulnerable groups** such as households headed by single women, households with people having disabilities, **transgender** people and old persons without caregivers.
- **National Family Health Survey (NFHS) data:**
 - The figures in the Hunger Watch report are alarming, especially when seen in conjunction with the recent rounds of **NFHS data.**
 - The NFHS data has shown **either a worsening or stagnation in malnutrition** outcomes such as **prevalence of stunting and wasting among children** and **high levels of anaemia** among women and children.
- **Government Initiatives to Mitigate the Effects of Covid:**
 - **Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana.**
 - **Reserve Bank of India's Covid-19 Economic Relief Package.**
 - **Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan (self-reliant India).**

Way Forward

Since the majority of the poor already had low incomes to begin with, a **further reduction in household income is akin to taking a bullet train to hunger.** This **calls for special attention on social protection measures** including schemes for provision of subsidised food and employment guarantee in urban areas.

Source: DTE