WORLD HELP TO INDIA IN COVID CRISIS

International aid and covid-19 in India: a humanitarian catastrophe at risk of a familiar response

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Observing the unfolding tragedy in India is analogous to watching the news of a humanitarian disaster such as an earthquake or tsunami—the sheer scale necessitates an international response.1

Given this analogy to events such as the South Asian Tsunami of 2004 or the Haiti earthquake of 2010, will the “cluster coordination” approach be used to ensure that resources are distributed equitably?2 Will minimum standards of response, as outlined by Sphere,3 be followed to meet the needs of vulnerable communities? Will the right capacities and skills be recruited and scaled, as exemplified in the World Health Organization’s emergency medical teams “blue book,” while taking into account the operational needs of humanitarian action, ensuring that service delivery is implemented, monitored, and evaluated with transparency, accountability, and responsiveness to new challenges and needs?4 5

The failure to learn from humanitarian disasters ultimately costs lives; negatively affects women, children, older people, and other marginalised groups of society; and widens the divide between those who have and those who do not. In a country such as India, which has endemic societal inequality, the response will inevitably further exacerbate the divide, as seen in other countries, unless mitigating steps are taken.6

Saving lives is a priority, but we will lose the opportunity to do better unless there is rapid scale-up of operational capacity, substantial strengthening of structured coordination, and pooling of resources in the country to meet localised needs, with a clear plan of allocation, distribution, and evaluation of international aid and support. Applied learning from the humanitarian sector would help to ensure that we don’t fall into the trap of contributing to a shortsighted foray into chaos and secure the need for resilience and recovery. This is one way in which India could regain global leadership, thereby avoiding being relegated to another “lessons learnt” exercise and a familiar failed response.

Competing interests: NR is a trustee and volunteer of the medical charity Doctors Worldwide and is a member of the Royal College of Emergency Medicine’s Global Emergency Medicine Committee and Emergency Medicine and Public Health Special Interest Group.

Full response at: https://www.bmj.com/content/373/bmj.n1086/rr-2

1 Wise J. Covid-19: Countries rally to support India through “storm that has shaken the nation.” BMJ 2021;373:n1086. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n1086 pmid: 33903127