Reach Alliance

Improving Access to Government Benefits for Internal Seasonal Migrant Workers in India

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Cover photo: Migrant workers carrying firewood in Rajasthan, India (iStock)
Contents page photo: Overcrowded and busiest market in Old Delhi area. (iStock)

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This case study reflects a collective effort, and it is through these partnerships and contributions that we have been able to bring light to important issues and propose meaningful solutions for internal seasonal migrants.

Authorship Contribution Chart

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Contents

Executive Summary 1
Context: Migrants in India 2
Benefits and Welfare Plans 4
Barriers and Challenges in Accessing Benefits 7
Bridging the Gap 9
Lessons Learned 20

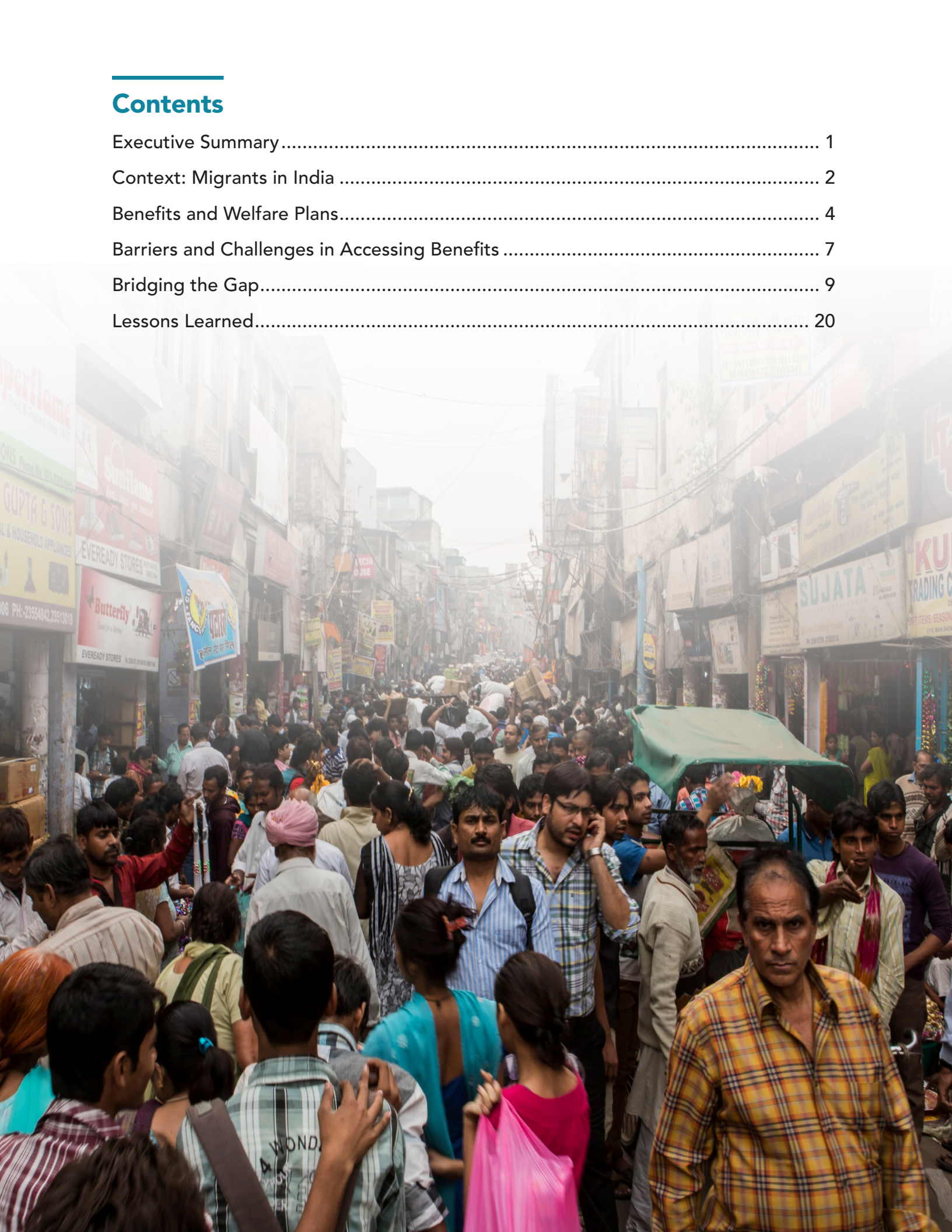

Figure 1. Research team engaging in a focus group discussion with women village leaders and *gram sakhis* in Ajmer

Executive Summary

> *Before COVID, no one cared about us migrant workers. During the pandemic, when people saw us walking across state borders to get food and go home during the sudden lockdown, it felt like we were finally visible. But now, we have been forgotten once more. And now we almost wish a pandemic were to hit us again, so people can remember our struggles and help us get the rights we deserve.*
>
> — Internal migrant worker in Mumbai

Hundreds of millions of internal migrants seek work in India. Despite government programs to provide support for this especially vulnerable segment of Indian society — from income supplements to access health care and food security to workplace injury compensation — many internal migrants do not benefit from them. Internal seasonal migrants are often significantly marginalized by poverty and without the resources or ability to access their legally entitled benefits. However, the barriers and obstacles to accessing social benefits are deeper and more structural than just their resources.

We examine the lived realities of precariously employed, seasonal migrant workers and their families in India, and the many barriers they face in accessing government-provided benefit entitlements. Although the Indian national government and subnational state governments have employed various innovative interventions to address these barriers, their efforts remain far short of adequate. Benefit schemes are fragmented, for instance, and providers are disincentivized from addressing migrant workers' distinctive needs. In short, the country's migrant workers are vulnerable and hard to reach, disconnected from the programs that are intended to benefit them.

Indian civil society organizations have stepped in to connect migrant workers with their social benefit entitlements. As our report reveals, migrant resource centres (MRCs) have emerged as a critical actor in facilitating access for migrants. We detail how several important civil society organizations are using a variety of strategies to raise awareness among migrants

about their entitlements to facilitate enrolment into government-provided programs and to advocate for migrant workers' rights. Many of their efforts are anchored within communities, cultivating trust between beneficiaries and the civil society organizations.

Context: Migrants in India

Seasonal migration is a significant feature of Indian society, with migration flows in both rural-to-urban and rural-to-rural directions.[1] Migration is driven by economic, social, and environmental pressures. Estimates suggest there are around 600 million internal migrants in India, but the true figure remains elusive. This uncertainty about their numbers both reflects and contributes to a lack of understanding of this especially vulnerable population.[2]

These daily hardships are not just individual stories but are deeply tied to the broader forces that drive migration in India.

While internal migrants are major contributors to India's economy, most migrant workers remain largely invisible to the government and politicians, to markets, and even to civil society. The definition of a migrant is broad and includes those who have recently changed their residence (i.e., since the last census conducted in 2011) and those who are long-term or permanent migrants. Such a broad definition fails to capture the nuanced experiences of short-term, distressed seasonal migrants who do not remain in one place long enough to be registered by local administrations.[3]

For example, Ramesh, a 35-year-old construction worker, travels seasonally from his village in Bihar to Mumbai.[4] This season, he has a short-term informal contract with a small construction firm tasked with building a residential complex. His contract guarantees him work for only three weeks, during which he lays bricks and mixes concrete for a daily wage, without any job security or benefits. Once this project is over, he faces the uncertainty of finding new employment, often having to scramble to secure another short-term arrangement or return to the *naka*, an informal labour market, in hopes of being picked for daily labour.

Short-term migrants move seasonally in search of temporary job opportunities, often in urban areas, whereas long-term migrants typically relocate permanently. While intrastate migrants move within the same state, interstate migrants face even greater challenges, crossing cultural, linguistic, and jurisdictional boundaries.[5]

The day begins early for most short-term migrants. Many, like Ramesh, wake up before

1 Benoy Peter and Liby Johnson, "Inclusion of Migrant Workers in India: What Works at the Grassroots?" *Labour and Development* 28, no. 2 (December 2021): 108–23; C. Upadhya, "Mapping Migration Within and From India: Mobilities and Networks," *Migration Studies* 1, no. 2 (June 2013): 247–52.

2 S. Irudaya Rajan, P. Sivakumar, and Aditya Srinivasan, "The COVID-19 Pandemic and Internal Labour Migration in India: A 'Crisis of Mobility,'" *The Indian Journal of Labour Economics* 63, no. 4 (November 2020): 1021–39; "Road Map for Developing a Policy Framework for the Inclusion of Internal Migrant Workers in India," International Labour Office, December 2020.

3 S. Irudaya Rajan and R.B. Bhagat, *Researching Internal Migration* (Abingdon: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2023).

4 Not his real name.

5 AIM Research Consultancy, "COVID-19 Impact on Internal Migration, Labor Markets, and Urbanization in Mumbai, India – Mumbai Quantitative Results Report," KNOMAD, World Bank, Washington, DC, 2023.

dawn in crowded, makeshift settlements with no access to clean water or sanitation. They pack a meager lunch, usually a few rotis and some pickles, before heading out to the naka or their worksite. For those with families, the concern of leaving children behind in such precarious environments adds another layer of anxiety to their daily struggles. These daily hardships are not just individual stories but are deeply tied to the broader forces that drive migration in India.

A migrant's life is shaped by a constant negotiation between these daily realities and the broader push and pull factors that brought them to the city.[6] Push factors typically include poor local job opportunities, socioeconomic instability, and a lack of agricultural productivity for those living in rural areas. Pull factors involve the promise of better economic prospects in distant urban or peri-urban centres and the existence of migrant worker networks that draw workers in with the promise of better employment opportunities.

Migration corridors are delineated between "source" and "destination" states. Seasonal migrants from poorer source states, such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, and Odisha, are often from economically disadvantaged groups and lower-caste communities (despite casteism being abolished in India). Seasonal migrants tend to relocate to more developed urban destinations like Mumbai, Delhi, or Kolkata to work.

While these corridors provide a sense of community for migrants and easier access to employment, they can also become sites of exploitation. Migrants endure considerable health risks as well as disruptions to their families as a result of their precarious living and work conditions. Many are forced to reside in informal settlements such as urban slums without basic infrastructure, compounding the challenges related to poor sanitation, inaccessible healthcare, and limited access to education for their children.

Table 1. Types of migration

Location	Time	
	Short Term (Seasonal/Cyclical Migrants)	Long Term (Settled Migrants)
Interstate	They move seasonally in search of temporary job opportunities, often in urban areas from one state to another.	They have permanently relocated to the urban centre, often bringing their families with them and filing for domicile in the new state.
Intrastate	They migrate within the same state often from rural and peripheral areas to urban centres in search of work opportunities for short periods of time.	They migrate within the same state primarily to areas with work opportunities for long periods of time, oftentimes relocating with their families.

6 Ravi S. Srivastava, "An Overview of Migration in India, Its Impacts and Key Issues," 2003.

Seasonal migrants are constrained in exercising their voting rights, since local state-level elections require domicile of that respective state. The separation from their families and their perpetual state of mobility impose considerable psychosocial stresses.

We focus specifically on internal seasonal migrants — the most vulnerable class of migrants — and their access to social benefits entitlements. They are among the most invisible and hard-to-reach populations in India. Their voices are not heard politically. Living on the margins of society, internal seasonal migrants tend to be underrepresented in national data and policy planning.

Despite government commitments to extending social benefits to seasonal migrants, delivering these benefits to them remains a serious challenge. We examine some of the ways that these individuals attempt to access social benefits, including vital services and legal protections that they are entitled to as Indian citizens.

Benefits and Welfare Plans

The government of India offers a variety of welfare programs to support the country's diverse population, including benefits for internal seasonal migrant workers. These plans encompass benefit entitlements to healthcare services, education subsidies, food rations, housing assistance, and social security payments, all aimed at improving migrant workers' living standards and their economic stability. Social benefits are categorized and offered by different levels of government, including both state- and national-level benefits.

At the national level, several policies aim to provide social welfare and support for migrant populations. For instance, the Indian Parliament passed the *Interstate Migrant Workers Act* in 1979, landmark legislation designed to address and improve working conditions of migrant labourers who have migrated to different states. *The Building and Other Construction Workers (BOCW) Act* specifically targets construction workers, the majority of whom tend to be seasonal migrants, offering them health insurance and educational support for their children.

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) provides rural livelihood security from the government, guaranteeing at least 100 days of wage employment annually to households engaged in unskilled manual work.[7] The One-Nation One-Ration Card (ONOR) scheme, launched by the Department of Food and Supplies and Consumer Affairs in 2018, aims to improve food security by enabling portable ration benefits across India, ensuring that beneficiaries receive entitlements regardless of where they are living and working.

The Ayushman Bharat project is a national program to provide healthcare to support financially marginalized and vulnerable families. It provides up to 500,000 rupees (around USD 5,800) per family each year for secondary and tertiary care (i.e., hospitalization) to alleviate the financial burden of direct medical expenses.

Several state governments provide social welfare programs for migrant workers and their families, as well. For instance, Kerala's Aawaz Health Insurance specifically supports migrant workers, covering them for injuries and accidents. Rajasthan's Jan Aadhaar Card initiative simplifies access to various government benefits by providing a single identity card that links to multiple services, enhancing service delivery

7 Ravi Srivastava, "Understanding Circular Migration in India: Its Nature and Dimensions, the Crisis under Lockdown and the Response of the State," Centre for Employment Studies Working Paper Series WP 04/2020, Institute for Human Development, New Delhi, 2020.

Table 2. Key government schemes for migrant workers in India

Administrative Complexity of Migrant Welfare Schemes

Below is an overview of key government schemes for migrant workers in India, highlighting the administering agencies and levels of administration. Despite the diversity of these programs, the complexity of their management often complicates access for migrants.

Scheme	Administering Agency/Department	Level of Administration
Interstate Migrant Workers Act	Ministry of Labour and Employment	Federal, state-enforced
One Nation One Ration Card (ONORC)	Department of Food and Supplies and Consumer Affairs	Federal, state-implemented
Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY)	Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs	Federal, state-implemented
Ayushman Bharat (PMJAY)	Ministry of Health and Family Welfare	Federal, state-implemented
National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP)	Ministry of Rural Development	Federal, state-implemented
Atal Pension Yojana (APY)	Ministry of Finance, Department of Financial Services	Federal
Pradhan Mantri Shram Yogi Maan-Dhan (PM-SYM)	Ministry of Labour and Employment	Federal, locally facilitated
Building and Other Construction Workers' (BOCW) Act	Ministry of Labour and Employment	Federal, state-implemented

for migrant families across the state. Rajasthan's e-Mitra digital platform similarly integrates state-level social benefits enrolment to make access simpler for migrant families.

There is no shortage of social benefit entitlements designated for vulnerable migrant workers. However, policy intentions fall far short of actual outcomes. Given the myriad challenges they face, migrant workers often don't receive their benefits. In fact, significant gaps persist with respect to migrants' ability to register and enrol in benefit programs, even though they are technically entitled to them. Registering for, enrolling in, and benefiting from government schemes pose significant challenges for short-term migrant families. The lack of awareness of the various schemes is another problem when it comes to connecting social benefits entitlements with migrant families.

Migrant Resource Centres (MRCs) have emerged in recent years to bridge these gaps. These centres, often created and operated by civil society organizations (CSOs), play a crucial role in facilitating access to benefits. They are not direct providers of benefits but they raise awareness among migrant workers about available programs and assist them with the registration and enrolment processes in order to access benefits.

To register for many government-provided social benefits, migrant workers must meet each program's eligibility requirements and produce documents such as official proof of identity, record of employment status, and in some cases, proof of residence, which the MRCs

assist migrants in securing. In short, CSOs and intermediary organizations such as MRCs connect workers to programs.

The Indian government has attempted to simplify accessing benefits for migrant workers, recognizing the dire and distinctive challenges they face every day. One migrant worker originally from Uttar Pradesh but working in Rajasthann noted the lapses in government-run centres aimed at registering migrant workers to social schemes. She expressed dismay at the lack of transparency regarding registration fees and the nonportability of schemes across states. This situation often necessitates her return to her village in Uttar Pradesh to file documents and register for benefits that are not accessible in Rajasthan, her state of work

Notably, the recent introduction of digital enrolment portals has aimed to streamline the registration process for migrants to access a variety of welfare schemes. Common service centres (CSCs), for instance, are government-run kiosks intended to serve as accessible delivery points for various government-to-citizen internet-based services. Described as a "one-stop-shop," CSCs attempt to bridge the digital divide, especially for those without access to the internet or broadband data. CSCs are often small offices, equipped with computers, desks, chairs, printers, and scanners.[8] CSCs and e-Mitras (Rajasthan state's version of the CSC digital solution) play a vital role in helping individuals navigate the enrolment processes for social welfare schemes by providing a physical point of contact and digital access for those who may not otherwise have access to online resources.

Despite their widespread implementation across India, however, CSCs alone have failed to connect all migrant workers and their families to social benefits.[9] Again, gaps persist when it comes to service enrolment and delivery. Part of the problem is that CSCs are not specifically tailored to the needs of migrant populations; after all, they are not intended to service only migrant workers. Rather, each CSC is operated by village-level entrepreneurs (VLEs) who manage the centres like a small business, for which migrant workers are just one customer they serve. To start up and operate the service centre, entrepreneurs incur the initial costs, which they need to recover. Licensed VLEs must also undergo specific training and obtain the necessary certifications to ensure they meet the operational standards set by the government.

The government has implemented other digital initiatives such as the Aadhaar biometric ID scheme to make it easier for citizens to access their benefit entitlements. Launched in 2009, Aadhaar gives every citizen a unique 12-digit ID number to simplify their access to all government services. Despite its near-universal coverage, Aadhaar's effectiveness has proven to be limited in aiding mobile populations such as seasonal migrants because of data gaps and inefficient information-sharing across states.[10]

In another effort to overcome the challenges that seasonal migrants experience, the national government introduced the eShram portal in 2021, a comprehensive national database specifically for unorganized workers. Linked to their Aadhaar ID numbers, the eShram platform is intended to streamline access to social security

8 Yogesh K. Dwivedi, Ganesh P. Sahu, Nripendra P. Rana, Monika Singh, and Rajesh K. Chandwani, "Common Services Centres (CSCs) As an Approach to Bridge the Digital Divide," *Transforming Government: People, Process and Policy* 10, no. 4 (October 2016): 511–25.

9 Sujeet Kumar Sharma, Bhimaraya Metri, Yogesh K. Dwivedi, and Nripendra P. Rana,, "Challenges Common Service Centers (CSCs) Face in Delivering E-government Services in Rural India," *Government Information Quarterly* 38, no. 2 (April 2021): article 101573.

10 Ashif Shaikh, Aarya Venugopal, Parvathy J., Evlyn Samuel, and Ameena Kidwai, "Voices of the Invisible Citizens: A Rapid Assessment on the Impact of COVID-19 Lockdown on Internal Migrant Workers," Jan Sahas, New Delhi, India, April 2020.

programs for informally employed workers, including migrants. However, as with the Aadhaar system, challenges such as data mismatches and coordination issues across state jurisdictions have continued to impede benefit delivery.[11]

Barriers and Challenges in Accessing Benefits

Identifying the barriers and challenges that migrant workers encounter in accessing government welfare programs is crucial for understanding why, despite government efforts and digital innovations to extend social benefits to vulnerable people, many migrant workers and their families still don't receive them. Key among these challenges are (1) incentive misalignment, (2) invisibility, (3) the lack of portability, (4) the digital divide, and (5) the political marginalization of migrant workers.

Incentive Misalignment

The operational structure of common service centres (CSCs), which are intended to assist people in connecting with government programs, in fact disadvantages marginalized populations, especially when it comes to registering short-term migrant workers for government benefit schemes. Given that CSCs operate like businesses, village-level entrepreneurs (VLEs) who own and manage them are remunerated through commissions and fees.

Because VLEs are incentivized to process simpler and faster transactions to maximize their revenue and earnings, they sometimes disregard or deprioritize more complicated transactions, such as those involving poorer migrants seeking to access their social benefit entitlements. Our field research suggests that VLEs may also overcharge or seek bribes to process complex cases, creating a disincentive for migrant workers to access their benefits.

Although many of the social benefit schemes are national in scope, state-level governments are not incentivized to prioritize the welfare of migrant workers who come from other states. Source states that migrants leave expect the destination state will assume responsibility for their welfare. Outbound migrants thus face significant bureaucratic hurdles and a lack of support from their home states. Conversely, destination states, which are incentivized to focus on the welfare of their own residents, often neglect out-of-state migrant workers. Destination state governments often perceive migrants as an additional burden on their already-strained resources.

Figure 2. A common service centre (CSC)

11 S.N. Sangita and B.C. Dash, "Electronic Governance and Service Delivery in India: Theory and Practice," Working Paper Series, WP 04/2020, Institute for Social and Economic Change, Bangalore, India, 2005 🔗;K. Rajput and S.I. Rajan, "Visibilising Invisible Population: E-shram Portal and Essentiality of Internal Migration Database in India," *Journal of Social Inclusion Studies* 9, no. 1 (June 2023): 82–94.

Invisibility

Policymakers in India, as elsewhere, tend to think of workers in very general terms, often mobilizing political support among formal-sector workers. Policymakers are thus less likely to cater to the specific needs of short-term seasonal migrants. Moreover, without precise estimates of the number of migrants in addition to accurate and timely information about their movements, governments struggle to plan and deliver social benefits effectively and efficiently.

The invisibility of migrants poses logistical challenges to delivering social benefits effectively. Tracking migrants on the move who are employed for short-term periods presents significant challenges for government authorities trying to allocate resources intended for interstate migrants. Maintaining up-to-date and integrated databases across different administrative jurisdictions (i.e., state and national) and their social benefit schemes is an especially complex task.

Lack of Portability

Migrants are supposed to be able to access national social benefit plans regardless of where they're living; in other words, social benefits are intended to be portable. Yet, in practice, benefits portability remains elusive, especially for seasonal, short-term migrant workers.[12]

The lack of portability reflects the absence of, or inconsistency in, interstate database integration. It also stems from poor administrative coordination and the misalignment of welfare programs across different jurisdictions. Migrants are often subject to different eligibility criteria and documentation requirements depending on where they are trying to claim their benefits.

Without a unified infrastructure to track and manage migrant data, government departments at the state and national levels essentially operate in administrative silos, each with its own set of rules, database records, identity cards, and digital enrolment portals. The sheer number of enrolment processes makes it difficult to ensure seamless and accessible service provision to migrants.

For example, the One-Nation One-Ration card, part of a national government-run program, is supposed to provide every member of an eligible household with monthly food entitlements, regardless of where the family members themselves are located. Members of split families (i.e., a migrant wage-earner living in one state while the rest of the family resides in another) are entitled to access to this scheme. In practice, however, information about families in the state-level Public Distribution System (PDS) database is often not synchronized with central government records or with other states' PDS databases. As we learned in the field, members of a beneficiary family are often denied the ration benefit because, according to state-level records, they would appear to have accessed their entitlement elsewhere.

Digital Divide

Although the introduction of digital technologies and enrolment platforms is intended to simplify and thus increase access to government social benefits, India, like many developing countries, suffers from a significant digital divide that poses significant barriers for short-term migrant workers to enrol and receive government benefits.

Many migrant workers don't have the technological literacy required to navigate various, sometimes complicated, online

12 Ravi Srivastava, "Vulnerable Internal Migrants in India and Portability of Social Security and Entitlements," Centre for Employment Studies Working Paper Series, WP02/2020, Institute for Human Development, New Delhi, 2020.

registration portals. Digital enrolment portals can be overwhelming for individuals who have limited experience with online technologies. The lack of access to digital technology hardware is another critical barrier. Short-term seasonal migrants often don't have the devices to access online registration portals. Consistent access to reliable internet connections is also a challenge. Digital exclusion means that even the most well-intentioned digital initiatives will often fail to reach the populations they are intended to serve.

Language barriers further complicate migrant workers' access to online portals. Many digital platforms are not available in regional or local languages, making it difficult for those who are not literate in either Hindi or English to navigate and complete the registration processes. As we learned in the field, the lack of multilingual support in these online platforms excludes significant portions of the migrant population.

Digital enrolment portals can be overwhelming for individuals who have limited experience with online technologies.

Political Marginalization

Although there are hundreds of millions of migrant workers in India, collectively, they lack a strong political voice. Because they are constantly moving, migrant workers are unable to politically organize and mobilize, a political challenge experienced by informal workers throughout the developing world. They are also less likely to cast ballots in elections given they are often unable to return to their voting district.

Generating political will among elected officials is therefore very difficult, despite the fact that endemic poverty is common among seasonal migrants. The image of millions of migrant workers walking home during the COVID-19 pandemic was seared in the minds of voters and politicians, though as many activists in India shared with us, the plight of migrant workers as a political issue proved ephemeral once the pandemic was over.

Bridging the Gap

Civil society organizations (CSOs) have intervened to address the many obstacles impeding access to social benefits for internal seasonal migrants, focusing their efforts and resources on providing tailored and comprehensive services to migrants. The following five Indian CSOs have dedicated their efforts to connect migrant workers to social benefits entitlements.

Of the five CSOs we examined, four have established Migrant Resource Centres (MRCs), which are essentially intermediary organizations that facilitate migrant workers' access to government social benefits. MRCs are crucial support hubs to address the obstacles that migrants face, including overcoming digital illiteracy, the lack of scheme portability, inefficient or ineffective common service centres (CSCs), and low levels of political will to support migrants. Although the CSOs operate MRCs in different ways and employ different operational models, they share the goal of facilitating access to social benefits.

To reiterate: MRCs, and the CSOs that operate them, do not directly provide social benefits to migrant workers. Instead they function as an important intermediary to connect otherwise marginalized migrant workers with the social benefits that they are entitled to.

Migrant Resource Centres

Raising awareness among migrant workers of the various benefit programs available to them is critical to the work of MRCs. For instance, through door-to-door campaigns in rural villages and urban slums, MRC workers inform migrants about their benefit entitlements provided by the government and how the MRCs can connect migrants to those programs. Grassroots approaches ensure that even the most isolated or marginalized migrant workers are at least aware of the support options available to them. The importance of this awareness-raising activity cannot be overstated because it is the first step in empowering migrants with the knowledge needed to claim their rights and access benefits.

The operational and financial models of MRCs vary, reflecting how the centres address the specific contexts of the migrant populations they serve. For instance, some CSOs conduct focus group discussions to identify specific problems that migrants face and tailor their services accordingly. This participatory approach aligns the services provided by the CSO-supported MRCs to be relevant and responsive to the actual needs of the local migrant community. Other organizations leverage digital tools to register workers and digitize their information, making it easier for the MRCs to enrol, track, and manage the provision of social entitlement benefits.

CSOs have adopted different financial models to sustain their work and their support of MRCs. For example, some MRCs are financed through a membership or subscription model, in which migrants pay an annual fee. This approach, we learned in the field, is expected to create a sense of ownership among the migrants and encourages them to use the services offered by the MRCs. Meanwhile, other CSO-supported MRCs rely on philanthropic grants and don't charge fees to the beneficiary nor do they pay commissions to the

Silicosis and Mineral Grinding: Health as an Entry Point for Labour Rights

Silicosis is a prevalent occupational disease for workers in the mineral-grinding industry, particularly in regions like Beawar, where many migrants face exposure to silica dust without adequate safety measures. Despite the health risks, workers often continue in these jobs because they lack alternatives and need the income.

MRCs run by CSOs like GSVS are pivotal in raising awareness about silicosis and advocating for worker safety. They conduct outreach campaigns in mineral-grinding units to educate workers about their rights and the available health schemes, such as those provided under the *BOCW Act*.

Health initiatives serve as an effective entry point for advocating broader labour rights. By focusing on immediate health concerns, MRCs can build trust with workers and employers, laying the groundwork for promoting legal rights and safer working conditions. This approach has led to increased recognition of migrant workers' issues, driving policy changes such as the silicosis policy in Rajasthan, which offers financial compensation and healthcare support to affected workers.

Figure 3. Female migrant worker at Silora mineral-grinding site

MRC workers. Other organizations are opposed to membership-based financing or any user fees at all because they see their role to serve migrant workers and their families without any financial barriers.

In addition to facilitating access to social entitlements (i.e., enrolling workers into the programs and monitoring them to ensure they receive their benefits), many CSOs and the MRCs they operate address other issues that often affect precariously employed migrant workers specifically. For instance, the enforcement of workers' legal rights and workplace safety are critical areas of focus for many MRCs. By advocating for better working conditions, MRCs help migrants access specific benefit schemes such as those provided through the *Building and Other Construction Workers (BOCW) Act*.

Connecting migrants to healthcare benefits is another significant area of intervention for civil society organizations. MRCs provide healthcare-related connective support, such as facilitating migrants' enrolment in the Ayushman Bharat scheme in addition to offering tailored schemes for occupational diseases like silicosis. These interventions address workers' immediate health needs but also contribute to the overall well-being and productivity of the workers and their families.

Some MRCs operate education centres, especially for the children of short-term seasonal workers who otherwise find it difficult to register and enrol their children in school or preschool programs. Many MRCs have developed gender-specific programs for women and female migrant workers to address their unique needs and challenges at home and in the workplace. Programs include access to health services, legal aid, and advocacy for women's rights. While the five CSOs that we focus on have various strategies to support migrant workers, we found key strategies that are common across the CSOs.

Civil Society Organizations

The five organizations we focus on have operations in Mumbai and the state of Maharashtra, as well as in various cities and rural villages in Rajasthan.

The Gramin evam Samajik Vakas Sansthan (GSVS) originated in the rural area of Ajmer, Rajasthan. It partnered with the Tata Trusts from 2008 to 2018, when the GSVS expanded its network of MRCs to 35 centres. Because the partnership with Tata Trusts ended in 2018, GSVS currently operates three MRCs and has scaled back its operations to three core services: facilitating access to social entitlements, supporting programs for occupational health for migrant workers employed in the mining industries, and policy advocacy for labour rights.

Youth for Unity and Voluntary Action (YUVA), a Mumbai-based nonprofit organization, supports marginalized communities in the city. Founded in 1984, YUVA provides a broad range of support, including assisting migrant workers gain access to housing, legal aid, and advocacy for informal sector workers. Like other CSOs supporting migrant workers, YUVA facilitates enrolment into the government's many social benefit schemes. As an organization with deep ties with migrant worker communities in Mumbai, YUVA has worked to collectivize and organize informal sector workers, even creating formal unions dedicated to mobilizing and advocacy for migrant workers.

Aajeevika Bureau (AB) operates in multiple states, including in Maharashtra and Rajasthan. Similar to other CSOs that support migrant workers, AB facilitates access to and enrolment into social benefit programs. Some of AB's *Shramik Sahayata evam Sandarbh Kendras* (worker support centres) are licensed CSCs, meaning they are able to directly connect workers to government benefits through their digital platforms. AB operates in both source

and destination sites, supporting workers as they traverse migration corridors. In 2011, AB established a telephone hotline, the LabourLine, which provides legal advice and support for workers in various regions in India, and operates in several languages. Committed to realizing migrant workers' legal rights, Aajeevika Bureau, like YUVA, mobilizes workers into collectives with the aim of forming legal migrant worker unions.

MRCs and Cultural Initiatives: Building Community and Awareness

MRCs are not only pivotal in facilitating access to government programs but also play an important role in promoting cultural and educational initiatives that enhance the social and economic conditions of migrants. A notable example is YUVA, which organizes cultural events where migrants articulate their experiences through poetry, songs, dance, and art. These events serve multiple purposes: they raise awareness about the challenges migrants face, help dismantle stigma, and foster a strong sense of community among participants.

Figure 4. Migrant workers performing a musical play at YUVA's cultural event centre

Jan Sahas, supported by several international foundations, is a key partner in the Migrants Resilience Collaborative. Like AB, Jan Sahas operates across migrant corridors, providing services at both source and destination sites. Currently, it oversees 128 district MRCs, made up of over 1,000 field staff and, importantly, around 11,000 community volunteers. Like other CSOs focused on supporting migrant workers, Jan Sahas's key objective is to facilitate enrolment and access to social benefit entitlements for migrant workers. Leveraging deep community connections through its network of volunteers, the Migrants Resilience Collaborative recently introduced a mobile digital app enabling effective monitoring, verification, registration, and ultimately receipt of government benefit schemes for nearly 6 million migrant worker households.

The Centre for Advocacy and Research (CFAR) was established in 1988 and currently operates in seven major cities and surrounding areas across the country. More recently, CFAR has turned its attention to serving marginalized migrant communities in rural areas, including in Ajmer, Rajasthan. Beginning with its campaign to address gender-based violence in rural villages, CFAR developed a community-based approach to supporting local development. Similar to the other organizations we examined, CFAR is committed to connecting migrant worker households to government benefit programs.

Taking what we describe to be an "analog" approach (e.g., person-to-person, door-to-door engagement) — in contrast to Jan Saha's digital app — CFAR has implemented village help desks to support migrant workers. As "single window" operations, CFAR's help desks draw on community volunteers to work directly with households and families to assist them in enrolling in government benefit schemes as well as follow-up to ensure they receive their benefits.

Support Hotlines for Migrant Workers

Various phone hotlines have been established to support migrant workers, offering legal advice, social benefit information, and dispute-resolution services. These hotlines often serve as the first point of contact through which workers engage with CSOs and learn about their services, thus playing a crucial role in expanding their reach. Given the high rate of cellphone ownership in India, these hotlines are an accessible and effective means of communication.

- **LabourLine by Aajeevika Bureau:** A nationwide 24/7 helpline providing legal aid and support for wage disputes and workplace accidents, it operates in multiple languages across India. Aajeevika Bureau pioneered this initiative, setting a standard for other organizations to follow.
- **Jan Sahas Helpline:** Part of the Migrants Resilience Collaborative, offering multilingual support for legal and social benefit issues. Integrated with a case-management system for effective tracking and resolution.
- **YUVA Hotline:** Focuses on connecting migrant workers with housing, legal aid, and social benefit schemes in urban areas like Mumbai.

These hotlines play a crucial role in bridging the gap between migrant workers and their entitlements, ensuring access to necessary support and legal recourse.

Common Strategies

Common strategies among each of these CSOs and their MRCs include a focus on (1) interventions designed for specific target populations; (2) advocacy for workers' rights; (3) efforts to collectivize and organize migrant workers; (4) employing different models for operational and financial sustainability; and (5) leveraging digital platforms.

Tailored interventions to meet migrant needs. Migrants and migrant communities are not homogenous. Delivering benefits to diverse target populations has proven to be especially challenging. India's vast cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic diversity significantly affects migration patterns and migrant needs. Migrant communities require tailored programs to address their specific needs and challenges and to be effective in specific local contexts.

According to India's 2011 census, there were approximately 54 million interstate migrants and 139 million intrastate migrants in India at the time. Interstate migrants often face unique challenges that intrastate migrants are less likely to confront. Notably, interstate migrants deal with challenges related to their domicile status (i.e., where they live and work versus where they are from), access to their formal documentation (such as identification), and navigating different state jurisdictions and their specific regulations, all of which can impede their access to essential services and entitlements.

Interstate migrants frequently encounter difficulties obtaining necessary documentation, such as proof of residence and identity cards. Formal documentation is critical to enrolling in and accessing government schemes in destination states. Not having domicile status exacerbates these challenges, since many welfare benefits and services are tied to local residency. CSOs such as CFAR and YUVA target interstate migrants at the destination in order to bridge these gaps. For instance, CFAR assists interstate migrants to obtain formal domicile

status in destination states, which is the first step in accessing essential services such as sanitation, water, electricity, and housing. CFAR's single-window centres and help desks offer legal assistance, help with filling out application forms, and they also provide information about the necessary documentation required.

Similarly, YUVA supports interstate migrants to secure their domicile status. Rather than focus on individual migrants and their families, YUVA facilitates the formalization of informal settlements — entire communities — in which many migrants live on a short-term basis. Through community mobilization and advocacy, YUVA advocates for these settlements to be officially recognized, thus giving the community of migrants domicile status. In addition, YUVA directly supports migrant households in the documentation process, offering legal aid and guidance to ensure that all required papers are in order.

The experiences and needs of long-term migrants differ significantly from those of short-term cyclical or seasonal migrants. Long-term migrants, who often relocate permanently or for extended periods, are more likely to receive domicile status, thus increasing their access to local benefits and services. Organizations such as CFAR and YUVA support these migrants at their destination by helping them integrate into their new communities and secure their rights and entitlements.

In contrast, short-term cyclical migrants, who move seasonally based on job opportunities, struggle to access benefits. Frequent relocation makes it challenging to obtain the necessary documentation and to maintain their access to social services. For short-term migrants, the solution often involves providing support at their source locations.

MRCs established in source areas, such as those run by GSVS, play a critical role in preparing short-term migrants before they embark on their journeys. GSVS migrant resource centres at the source provide pre-departure orientation, including sharing information on migrant workers' rights and entitlements as well as assistance with necessary documentation. By addressing the needs of migrants at both their source and destination, Indian CSOs are contributing to a more cohesive support system that follows migrants throughout the migratory cycle.

Targeted approaches or strategies are not limited to where migrant workers are from or where they are migrating to, but also who the migrant workers are and what kind of support they require. Several CSOs stress that a gendered approach is essential because women face specific challenges and vulnerabilities. YUVA and CFAR, for example, have targeted programs to support female migrants. YUVA's self-help groups empower women by working with them to generate economic opportunities, provide social support, and facilitate access to government schemes. Women's self-help groups foster a sense of community and efficacy among female migrants, enabling them to collectively advocate for their rights more effectively.

CFAR relies on female *gram sakhis* or "village buddies" — local women trained to raise awareness about gender-based violence, child marriage, and sexual harassment within migrant communities. They conduct door-to-door campaigns, educating their peers and fellow community members about available support services and referring them to crisis centres when needed. GSVS has established women-only collectives, which are registered unions that address critical issues such as reproductive health and overall healthcare for female workers. They are an effective platform for women to advocate for better working conditions and women-specific social protections.

Advocating for workers' rights. Labour rights advocacy has proven to be an important strategy

Understanding *Nakas:* Informal Labour Markets

Nakas (also known as labour chowks) are crucial points in urban areas where migrant workers congregate regularly, seeking short-term employment. Often located near busy intersections, these informal labour markets are essential for day labourers, particularly in the construction and manual labour sectors, as they offer direct access to potential employers. Workers typically arrive early in the morning and wait for contractors to negotiate wages and terms on the spot.

Organizations like YUVA and Aajeevika Bureau frequently engage with migrants at nakas to build trust and inform them about available social benefits and legal rights.

- **Role:** Serve as informal hubs for job seekers and recruiters
- **Challenges:** High competition, lack of job security, potential exploitation
- **Relevance to CSOs:** Ideal locations for engaging with target populations, mediating with employers, raising awareness, building trust, and facilitating access to government schemes

Nakas can vary greatly in size: many are huge, highly visible, and not hiding from the law. They represent a microcosm of the larger challenges faced by migrant workers, where daily uncertainties and the struggle for fair wages highlight the need for targeted interventions and support systems. Essentially, nakas demonstrate how migrants constitute an invisible strata of Indian society, relegated to searching for work opportunities in extremely competitive environments and hoping to catch the attention of CSOs or government agencies working toward uplifting migrants.

One worker at YUVA told us how migrants at these nakas are often wary of volunteers claiming to be part of CSOs that help facilitate access to benefits for migrants because of prior experience of being exploited or bribed. However, YUVA volunteers explained how reaching out to one worker at a naka and actually following up to ensure benefit delivery after registration helps build trust and expand outreach at nakas through word of mouth and testimonies of each migrant worker.

Figure 5. Migrant workers searching for work at a naka in Rajasthan

to advance workers' rights and facilitate access to social benefits, including those that are unrelated to workplace safety or wage disputes. Advocating for workers' rights affects the day-to-day lives of migrant workers in myriad ways. Access to legal aid and workers' rights education, for instance, empowers migrants with knowledge about their entitlements and protections. Awareness is crucial for self-advocacy and preventing exploitation. Legal rights advocacy also builds trust and credibility between the vulnerable migrant populations and the CSOs working on their behalf.

AB anchors its activities in a rights-based approach, strategically leveraging labour rights advocacy as the key entry point to improve the conditions of seasonal migrant workers, including facilitating access to social benefits. AB's legal approach involves a comprehensive strategy that includes access to physical MRCs, operating a labour hotline, and providing legal rights education modules.

To deal with the high volume of wage disputes and workplace accidents more effectively, AB established the LabourLine in 2011, a nationwide 24/7 helpline where workers can seek legal aid and dispute resolution. Given their precarious work status, migrant workers struggle with workplace dispute resolution. AB collaborates with employers, contractors, and paralegal community volunteers to pursue legal action in complex cases. Trained staff at the helpline use an integrated management information system to collect workers' personal data and assign case IDs for efficient follow-up.

Operating out of Mumbai, AB's LabourLine services three language-based regions (west, north, and south India). Its 14 counsellors have handled approximately 19,000 cases to date, advising over 10,000 migrant workers, most of whom are seasonal short-term migrants.

AB's comprehensive legal support strategy entails educational modules for migrant workers to teach them about their rights to equal wages, workplace safety, and the various social benefits they're entitled to. The organization deploys AB staff to provide these rights-based modules at migration "transit points" and in informal housing settlements, where they are most likely to encounter larger numbers of migrant workers.

As a result of the success of the LabourLine and its other initiatives, AB has collaborated with other nongovernmental organizations, such as YUVA, to similarly employ a legal rights approach to their work. YUVA's is a more community-driven strategy to reach migrant workers, so it disseminates information about workers' rights through grassroots self-help groups within communities. YUVA will also dispatch teams to "nakas," informal labour markets where migrant workers congregate regularly seeking temporary or short-term employment opportunities.

GSVS provides legal aid for workers employed in the construction, brick kiln, and mining sectors. The GSVS migrant resource centres emphasize occupational health and safety alongside legal aid, directly facilitating access to health benefit entitlements through labour rights advocacy. GSVS's work has been especially effective in helping migrant workers in the mining sector get access to silicosis compensation, a major source of relief for migrants, as well as BOCW benefits.

Promoting collectivization. Collectivization and mobilization are vital strategies to address the needs of internal migrants in India. Various organizations have employed a collectivization approach to empower marginalized migrant worker communities, allowing them to gain access to government benefits, to secure their rights, and improve their living conditions. Collective voice and mobilization are stronger than individual action. Collectivization has proven to be an effective way to foster solidarity,

advocacy, and self-reliance among migrant workers.

YUVA has played a leading role in collectivizing female migrant workers through the creation of self-help groups, enabling women to sign up for benefits collectively rather than as individuals. By organizing collectives, YUVA empowers women to lobby for other benefits, such as the formalization of housing settlements. YUVA staff members regularly visit naka markets to build trust with migrant workers by sharing information about available benefits. YUVA leaders explained to us that without this trust, it would be very difficult to establish collectives.

YUVA has also established migrant worker unions, which migrants can join for an annual membership fee of 250 rupees (about USD 3). Union membership provides workers with a kit that includes shoes, a backpack, a mat, and importantly, a union membership card. The union currently boasts 700 members. By uniting these workers, YUVA aims to strengthen their collective bargaining power, increasing migrants' voices in political and labour negotiations.

Similarly, AB has formed multiple unions of migrant workers. Recognizing the complexities in unifying and mobilizing a highly heterogeneous group, with differences in caste, language, and religion posing significant barriers, AB supports smaller collectives tailored to specific issues, such as wages and sanitation for women, rather than forming a single union organization. Like YUVA, AB has facilitated collectivization through trust-building initiatives, including regular visits to nakas and operating a labour hotline. Unions are self-sustaining and able to operate independently, with AB providing support. By empowering these unions to operate on their own, AB fosters a sense of ownership, collective efficacy, and resilience among migrant workers.

Adopting an issues-based approach, GSVS, similar to AB, successfully collectivized 700 female construction workers by emphasizing the unique challenges women face in the male-dominated industry. According to the GSVS, mixed-gender unions often marginalize women workers' concerns. The union fees, set at 200 rupees (about USD 2.40) per year, are determined by the labourers themselves. Although the union is primarily made up of nonmigrant workers, GSVS views it as a promising model for seasonal migrant workers and looks to adopt a collectivization approach for migrants.

Improving operational sustainability. CSOs use various financial models to sustain their MRC operations. These financial strategies include grants, membership fees, commissions, and informal partnerships with other CSOs.

Many CSOs rely on grants from national and international donors to fund their activities. Such grants are often aimed at promoting social entrepreneurship and innovation to address migrant issues. CFAR has been successful in obtaining grants from the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation, for example. GSVS initially received grants from Tata Trusts, as did AB, which still operates entirely on a grants-based model and does not charge fees to service beneficiaries. However, reliance on grants can be precarious because donors sometimes change priorities or reduce funding over time. When Tata Trusts reduced funding for GSVS, the organization shifted to a membership-based model to sustain its operations.

Some organizations such as GSVS have adopted a membership fee model, in which migrants pay an annual fee to access the services provided by the MRCs. This model not only provides a sustainable revenue stream but also fosters a sense of ownership among the migrant community. GSVS and YUVA charge 200 to 250 rupees per family annually (three to four Canadian dollars), respectively. Despite its promise, however, membership models are difficult to sustain over the long term, especially for migrants

who are constantly moving. We learned through our interviews that migrant families often stop renewing their membership once they receive their benefits. Many drop their memberships once they've moved.

Forming informal partnerships with other CSOs is another strategy for operational sustainability. Through collaboration, organizations pool resources, share expertise, and expand their reach. Partnerships also enable CSOs to offer a broader range of services without significantly increasing their operational costs. For example, GSVS relies on the legal expertise and reach of AB in Mumbai to service migrants associated with the GSVS. By working together, organizations offer a more comprehensive support system for otherwise hard-to-reach and vulnerable migrants.

Organizational fragmentation exacerbates the challenges in navigating multiple enrolment systems from the migrant worker's point of view.

Implementing digital platforms. CSOs have attempted to use digital tools to improve access to services. While migrant workers often lack digital literacy, India's strong technology sector, combined with very affordable data plans, nonetheless offer significant opportunities to bridge these divides.

The "Digital India" campaign has catalyzed this effort by making government benefit schemes and social services more accessible through improved online infrastructure and increased internet connectivity, including plans to connect rural areas with high-speed internet networks. The initiative supports the digital empowerment of all citizens, including marginalized migrant workers, and provides a solid foundation for CSOs to expand their impact.

However, a persistent challenge for migrant workers and the CSOs that support them is the fragmented nature of benefit schemes. Dozens of government-run benefit programs operate independently of one another, each requiring a separate registration process. Organizational fragmentation exacerbates the challenges in navigating multiple enrolment systems from the migrant worker's point of view. Fragmentation also reveals the as-yet-unaddressed need for improved data integration and government coordination on the part of the benefits provider.

Getting an E-Mitra licence in Rajasthan promises to be an innovative approach adopted by several CSOs to simplify the process of accessing and coordinating government benefits for migrant workers. E-Mitra is the state government of Rajasthan's initiative to enrol workers in a wide range of government services through digital kiosks. CSOs like CFAR and GSVS, for instance, have obtained E-Mitra licences for their operations, allowing them to connect benefit schemes and services directly to migrant workers. By integrating the E-Mitra platform into their operations, MRCs are able to offer quicker and more efficient access to essential documents and social benefits, thus reducing the burden on migrants. Digital integration promises to increase trust among beneficiaries as well, since CFAR and GSVS do not charge commissions, unlike independently operated E-Mitra kiosks.

Other CSOs have adopted technological innovations as a way to improve connectivity between migrant workers and government benefits. Jan Sahas, as part of the Migrants Resilience Collaborative, introduced the Jan Saathi mobile application in January 2022.

Designed to streamline data collection and enhance access to otherwise fragmented government programs, the app reflects an innovative approach by CSOs to leverage digital tools for broader outreach and service efficiency.

The Jan Saathi app integrates information about government projects and eligibility with household-level data for nearly 6 million migrant families. Importantly, data integration allows field workers to access and update information in real time. The app supports end-to-end tracking, enabling field workers to input into the app and then monitor each step of the data collection and application processes directly. The app organizes data for each family member, listing the programs for which each individual is eligible, rather than for the entire household. Simply put, the app customizes service delivery according to each individual's needs.

The Migrants Resilience Collaborative, of which Jan Sahas is a member, has also implemented a case management information and database system to manage and track exploitation cases reported through its multilingual national toll-free helpline. This system facilitates registration, tracking, and case closure. Plans are currently underway to integrate this system with the Jan Saathi app. The impressive scale and effectiveness of the Migrants Resilience Collaborative's digital solutions have significantly expanded the collaborative's data collection capacity and improved the efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery to migrants.

Likewise, CFAR emphasizes digital empowerment and community engagement through its Gram Sakhi program, through which local women are trained to use digital platforms to conduct detailed community surveys and map the entire village to identify where migrant workers are. CFAR trains gram sakhis, or "village buddies," to use their mobile devices to connect workers to social benefit schemes, enabling quick uploads of documents and completion of enrolment into the various programs. While visiting Ajmer, Rajasthan, we met several of these "village buddies" who shared their experiences with us. One enthusiastic gram sakhi described how her training had transformed her ability to assist her community. She passionately detailed her role in building trust, expanding access to services, and empowering women, highlighting how this work not only simplifies government service access for migrants but also fosters community advocacy and strengthens her connection to the village. These village buddies bridge the digital divide, especially in rural areas, by bringing local insights to their roles to effectively engage and empower their communities.

Summary of Strategies

CSOs confront a range of challenges in their efforts to effectively connect migrant workers to their social benefits entitlements. These challenges include documenting, enrolling, and following up with migrants; integrating and managing data from a variety of sources; and tracking enrolment to the actual delivery of the benefits that migrant workers are entitled to.

Recognizing and addressing the diverse needs of migrants from different source and destination regions is crucial, as exemplified by organizations like GSVS, which tailor their services to meet these regional differences. Additionally, integrating services with local platforms such as e-Mitras in Rajasthan, as CFAR and GSVS have done, can enhance service efficiency and reach.

CSOs and the MRCs many of them operate have developed several strategies to facilitate access for migrant workers to social benefits. CSOs like Jan Sahas leverage digital tools and apps for data management and service delivery. MRCs focus on community engagement through extensive fieldwork and mobilization, with organizations such as CFAR training local volunteers to

improve service delivery and build trust within communities.

Establishing trust among migrant workers is critical, achieved not only through the presence of community volunteers but ultimately by delivering tangible, beneficial services that directly affect migrants' lives. Raising awareness and providing accessible information through helplines are crucial. Finally, the power of collective mobilization, especially among otherwise precarious and unorganized workers, can influence policy and effectively advocate for migrant rights.

Lessons Learned

Benefit Delivery

Ensuring benefits are actually delivered is crucial for building trust among vulnerable migrant workers. Receiving benefits validates the programs' effectiveness and builds confidence among beneficiaries and belief in the programs' efficacy to reach them. Trust is essential for the sustainability of these programs because it encourages more workers to register and participate in them.

Community Trust

Relatedly, community trust is fundamental to the successful registration and participation of migrant workers in benefit-entitlement programs. Trust is cultivated through consistent, transparent, and community-focused engagement. Community outreach, such as door-to-door campaigns or regular visits to informal labour markets, informs workers about their entitlements and assists them with processes to register for their benefits. By addressing the immediate needs of the workers and providing reliable support, outreach helps build a sense of security and trust, essential for encouraging migrants to take up the available benefits.

Digital Strategies

Digital strategies must be designed to be accessible and user friendly. Initiatives like the Jan Saathi app, intended to simplify access to government benefits, must consider the digital literacy and technological accessibility of target users. By integrating digital solutions within organizational structures rather than imposing them directly on the end users, such strategies can streamline processes.

Collectivization

Collectivization is a powerful way to mobilize and advocate for the rights of migrant workers. By forming unions or self-help groups, migrant workers amplify their voices and negotiate better working conditions and benefits. Organizations like Youth for Unity and Voluntary (YUVA) and Aajeevika Bureau (AB) have successfully used collectivization to empower workers, enabling them to collectively demand their rights and facilitate their access to benefit entitlements.

Networks and Partnerships

Building networks and partnerships among civil society organizations (CSOs) is vital for enhancing the support system for migrant workers. Collaborations enable CSOs to pool resources, share expertise, and extend their reach. For instance, partnerships between Gramin evam Samajik Vakas Sansthan (GSVS) and AB have contributed to the introduction of comprehensive support systems that provide legal aid and connect migrant workers to benefit programs. Collaborative networks create a robust support framework that addresses the multifaceted and distinctive needs of migrant workers more effectively than any single organization could manage alone.

Integrated Access

Simplifying the access to multiple benefits through a single portal could significantly improve the efficiency of benefit delivery to migrant workers. The fragmented organization and delivery of different government schemes and registration portals point to the need for greater systems integration. Notably, facilitating access to benefits programs through fewer enrolment portals could achieve greater efficacy and efficiency. Integrated access, however, requires seamless synchronization of databases across different programs.

Research Team

Sami El Sabri graduated with an HBSc from the University of Toronto, specializing in health studies, computational cognitive science, and statistics. He has experience in research, data analysis, and community engagement at the WHO, Dalla Lana School of Public Health, and the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in Toronto. His current work focuses on leveraging data-driven insights and evaluating artificial intelligence solutions to advance equitable public health initiatives. He is passionate about supporting marginalized communities globally, particularly at the intersection of migration and health.

"Researching the challenges of seasonal migrant workers and the solutions by local NGOs has been both humbling and inspiring. My key takeaway is the critical role of health as an entry point for broader human and labour rights, reinforcing my belief that access to healthcare is essential for securing the rights these workers deserve."

Noah Khan is a third-year PhD student in social justice education. His research focuses on the emotional labour of artificial intelligence development. He examines experiences of love, grief, fear, etc. and how they shape the technologies that get made. Prior to graduate school, he was a professional video game player and a ghostwriter.

"Getting to conduct this research in person was vital to my development as a researcher. It allowed me to learn how to use material conditions to enrich interviews, making connections to objects, emotions, and other integral elements that online interviews might often miss. I'm very grateful to have had the Reach experience as I believe the skills learned will transfer generatively to my dissertation research."

Alazne Qaisar is a fourth-year HBA student specializing in South Asian studies; political science; and peace, conflict, and justice studies. Her research interests include developmental politics, geostrategic conflicts, violence, and populism in South Asia. She is a Laidlaw scholar, having researched gendered violence in Delhi, India, and also serves as an international fellow at the Centre for the Study of the Presidency and Congress, where she engages in domestic and foreign policy analysis of the United States.

"This project was an incredible learning opportunity. An important insight for me was how grassroots collectives, built on the spirit and resilience of local communities, were instrumental in enabling access to government benefits. Personally, this project reshaped my understanding of how bottom-up initiatives, when supported by trust and collective action, can address structural issues that often seem insurmountable at scale. It was a journey that reinforced the importance of local agency in driving sustainable solutions."

Alyssia Sanchez is an MASc candidate in biomedical engineering at the University of Toronto and a KITE trainee at the Toronto Rehabilitation Institute. Her graduate research involves developing smart cognitive support technologies for dementia care, created through human-centred design processes and validated in community settings. Passionate about technology for social impact and promoting healthy aging, Alyssia aims to apply engineering innovations and influence policy to address global challenges equitably and sustainably.

"Engaging directly with NGOs and communities in India transformed my understanding of how technology can serve as a bridge to accessing essential services. This experience was a profound reminder of the power of community-driven solutions, reinforcing my commitment to integrating empathy and innovation in my approach to complex societal issues."

Joseph Wong is the University of Toronto's vice-president, international. He is also the Roz and Ralph Halbert Professor of Innovation at the Munk School of Global Affairs & Public Policy, and a professor of political science. He was the director of the Asian Institute at the Munk School from 2005 to 2014, and held the Canada Research Chair in health, democracy, and development for two full terms from 2006 to 2016. Professor Wong is the founder of the Reach Alliance.

"One of the key challenges we faced in our initial research was nailing down the actual number of seasonal migrants in India. Is it 200 million? Or is it 500 million? Being in the field, however, confirmed that no matter exactly how many vulnerable migrants there are, the fact is there are too many who are being left out, without access to their social benefit entitlements. Our fieldwork illuminated the human side of migrant workers' lives, from their everyday challenges to grassroots, innovative efforts to attain justice."

TATA TRUSTS

Tata trusts India plays a significant role in driving social development across India by funding and supporting initiatives in areas like education, healthcare, rural development, and women's empowerment. The Trusts focus on improving the quality of life for marginalized communities through partnerships with various NGOs and government programs. Their work spans a wide range of sectors, including water and sanitation, agriculture, urban poverty alleviation, and health innovation.
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Reach Alliance

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