LOCAL FORTRESS FOR FIGHTING THE PANDEMIC

Preparedness and Prevention activities undertaken by the local government institutions of Kerala

Functions of the local authority\(^1\).—

(1) Subject to the directions of the District Authority, a local authority shall—

(a) ensure that its officers and employees are trained for disaster management;
(b) ensure that resources relating to disaster management are so maintained as to be readily available for use in the event of any threatening disaster situation or disaster;
(c) ensure all construction projects under it or within its jurisdiction conform to the standards and specifications laid down for prevention of disasters and mitigation by the National Authority, State Authority and the District Authority;
(d) carry out relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction activities in the affected area in accordance with the State Plan and the District Plan.

(2) The local authority may take such other measures as may be necessary for the disaster management.

Introduction

India’s first case of Covid 19 case was reported in Kerala by the end of January 2020. The reported case was of a student who returned from the University of Wuhan. Control room was opened and alert was send to all the government and private hospital right from there. Kerala the land which always has an international character, with high mobility. Number of positive cases increased by February and March.

As of now (11/04/2020) India has the reported cases of over 7000 and death around 250. On the positive side around 650 positive cases were recovered from the virus. Out of this Kerala has the positive cases around 240, death around 3. Interestingly 123 cases were recovered in

\(^1\) Chapter VI, Disaster Management Act ,2005
Kerala, which is around 50%. Statistics clearly defines that there has been a strong efforts taken by the state of Kerala in fighting the pandemic.

The state has been fighting different ranges of disasters for the past consecutive years like 2018 flood, Okhi cyclone, 2019 flood and effectively fought Nippa Virus. From then on the three sphere governments of Kerala has been taking various measures for fighting a disaster. The key initiatives taken by the State includes:

- Early detection using case mapping
- BREAK THE CHAIN campaign, to promote personal hygiene in regular intervals
- Social Distancing, for keeping physical distancing
- Relief funds
- Daily press meets by the government leaders, which immensely helped for the spread of right information at the right time
- Vigilance

The model has received international attention. “The state faced a potentially disastrous challenge: a disproportionately high number of foreign arrivals. Popular for its tranquil backwaters and health retreats, the coastal state receives more than 1 million foreign tourists a year. One-sixth of its 33 million citizens are expatriates, and hundreds of its students study in China.” – Washington Post

**Preparedness and Prevention- Local governments of Kerala**

Kerala has a well decentralized structure of governance since 90s. The state recently achieved ISO certification for all its local bodies. The local government institutions have been taking the lead in fighting all the previous disasters and now the novel corona virus as well. Here lets us analyse the preparedness and prevention activities taken up by Kerala in fighting the novel corona virus.

A unique initiative that aims to make disaster management at the local level more inclusive and citizen-centric was launched in Kerala on November, 2019 under the Rebuild Kerala initiative. Every local governments were provided with trainings and was guided to prepare a local disaster management plan.
The massive plan has all the information regarding the ways to fight a disaster. Many Panchayats and Municipalities prepared efficient plan. The current pandemic emerged as the local governments were preparing and planning the respective plan.

Majority of the local governments in Kerala are running community kitchens. The initiative is on a mission to ensure everybody is hunger-free during the lockdown. The community kitchens chiefly cater to the weaker sections including migrant laborers, homeless people and the destitute rehabilitated. A large number of the food packets given free of cost. Community kitchens in Kerala are now cooking and distributing 2.5-2.8 lakh of food packets a day. Across 1,255 community kitchens are running in 14 districts. The districts with the most community kitchens are Ernakulam, Malappuram, Palakkad, Thiruvananthapuram and Thrissur.

Panchayats/Municipalities/Corporations that are having guest laborers who live under congested and low maintained areas are accommodating them in specials camps or giving special attention and providing medicines and food as well.

Online control rooms have been setup by many local governments. In which they coordinate the community kitchen activities, food delivery, grocery delivery to households etc.

Sanitizers and mask manufacturing initiatives have been taken up by many local governments, youth organisations, residential associations etc.
Since shops and markets are closed down, there are high chances of stray dog attacks as they would be starving. Several local governments and other organisations are feeding the dogs throughout the state.

Disinfecting public spaces are also one common initiative taken up by several local governments.

Apart from the above mentioned common initiatives taken up, there are many local governments those who have taken exemplary steps in the fight against novel corona virus. Few of them are as follows:

**Model set by Vadakkekara Grama Panchayat**

Vadakkekara Grama Panchayat in the Ernakulam district of Kerala has taken many initiatives during this times of pandemic. Over 6800 households in the Panchayat have joined an initiative of vegetable farming under the leadership of the Panchayat. Saplings were provided by the Panchayat during the time of lockdown. Households have been plating those in their yards and terraces. Other local governments have also been replicating this model.

The Panchayat has also formed an emergence response team and opened a local control room via WhatsApp. Recently the Panchayat has launched its own official web portal for fighting the novel corona virus.

Special care and attention is given to the guest laborers in the Panchayat. Food and clean ambience is provided by the Panchayat for the guest laborers.

Panchayat also took initiative for feeding the stray dogs in the premises of the Panchayat.

**CHENGAAYI (Friend) APP for getting groceries and medicines delivered**

The Eranjoli Panchayat has created an APP called CHENGAYI for the distribution of groceries and medicines. The households under the Panchayat are divided into clusters and the needed services will be delivered through this particular APP. Anyone using a smart phone can easily order their needs through this platform. The APP was developed by youngsters including Anoope Narayan, Avinash and Aslam. Taking this as a model other local governments are also following the lead.
Counseling services delivered by local governments

Panayam Grama Panchayat in Kollam district of Kerala has started a phone counseling programme during the lock down period.

Pariyaram Grama Panchayat in the district of Kannur has started online therapy programmes exclusively for the differently abled children. The sessions are provided through an online platform called ‘Ilakal Pacha’ (Green are the leaves).

Apart from these local governments, others have also implemented/replicated such initiatives in their local governments.

Entertainment is important

Pariyaram Grama Panchayat in Kannur district has started an online interaction programme called ‘Thanichalla, Koodeyund’ (You are not alone) during lock down period. This initiative aims to avoid the problems of loneliness through entertaining the public.

Valapattanam Grama Panchayat in Kannur district has started a virtual programme called ‘creative home’ to enhance the creativity among children during the period of quarantine.

Fighting the domestic and child abuse during the times of pandemic

In the wake of reports that domestic violence is likely to increase during the lockdown, the state has taken measures to prevent them. A 24 hour helpline number and online portal has been setup for the needy.

Even though local level measures have not been initiated much. The scope of setting up local level help line system could’ve looked into. Local governments along with schools are other organisations can explore such arena to reduce possible abuses and violence.

Lock down effects on alcoholics and drug users

For maintaining the social distancing, liquor shops have been shut down in Kerala. Within three days of non-availability of liquor due to lockdown, more than six people, mostly youngsters below 40, have committed suicide. Many are also admitted in de-addiction centres. To deal with the situation, the state government has directed the excise department to serve liquor to chronic alcoholics based on doctor's prescription.
When the pandemic is well fought by all the spheres of governments, issues like this are correlated or interconnected are unsettled.

Though many local governments are providing therapy sessions and counseling, the issue hasn’t been attended at grass root level.

Special web portals and communication spaces can be created at local level for such families or individuals to connect with Panchayat/Municipality/Corporations.