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# WORLD ANTHROPOLOGY CONGRESS-2023

BHUBANESWAR, INDIA | 9-14 AUGUST 2023

## ROUND TABLE TITLE:

### THE POWERLESSNESS OF LOCKDOWNS: MIGRATIONS, DISPLACEMENT, CLIMATE JUSTICE AND LIVELIHOODS IN A POST-COVID-19 WORLD

#### CONVENOR/CO-ORDINATOR:

**PROFESSOR ANAND SINGH AND DR. BOBBY LUTHRA SINHA**

#### ABSTRACT

Local and global displacements during COVID-19 impacted the livelihood of the most vulnerable sections of society such as women, tribal communities, and semi-skilled workers in the unorganised sector in India and the world. At the same time, it made racial categories in developed countries such as the USA, and migrants, displaced peoples, and refugees in countries such as Brazil, India, South Africa, China discriminated against and vulnerable in newer ways. The crisis of COVID-19 revealed the irony of the modern state's control mechanisms that were often characterised by confusion, lies, greed, accusations, and counter accusations between the powerful and powerless. While European and American pharmaceutical companies toyed with the fear psychosis and inaccessibility to vaccines that gripped the entire world, countries in the African continent such as Zambia, Ghana and Zimbabwe remained sceptical about rolling out vaccines that were not adequately tried and tested before being made public. Vaccine affordability and access to more than 50 deprived countries was made available by the Indian state, subtly exposing the American and European stranglehold on production and distribution of life-saving medication. In South Africa, vaccines from the UK, produced in India, were deemed inappropriate for the alleged prevalent strain there. But they were apparently good enough to be redirected to the African Union by medical administrators whose engagement in the confusion about how to treat the Covid virus was no less ambiguous than the American pharmaceuticals that influenced them.

While governments, imposed hurried lockdowns to assert their powers of hyper vigilance, they remained powerless in terms of reaching to communities who are isolated, remote, non-mainstream and neglected in terms of voice. Although for a good cause, COVID-19 lockdowns clamped down and restricted movement and mobility of one and all, but the government programmes and policies failed to support or reach those living in remote as well as isolated circumstances or pertain to the unorganised sector.

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As a result, the powerless on the other side of lockdowns came to the fore. Reverse migrations of the urban labour and the resultant hunger, chaos, death, and disease was juxtaposed to undernourishment, scarcity, and confinement of those who rely on movement such as nomads, tribes, and particularly vulnerable tribal groups (PVTGs) to and for into the forests to collect minor forest produce (MFP). In India the Essential Services Maintenance Act (ESMA) was imposed as the disaster was announced. But it committed various follies owing to its hurried imposition. For instance, oxygen supplies in Delhi were heavily politicised between the provincial ruling party and the central government. While the latter accused the former of wasting resources, allocated for construction of oxygen production plants, on party advertisements, sanitary pads were omitted from the ESMA provisions in numerous parts of the country. The supply chains gave in an immediate response and struck it out of their emergency plans of mobility. Within a week, owing to the hue and cry from women’s welfare bodies and activists, in India the faux pas were lifted.

Globally, job losses and business cum production shutdowns took its toll on homeowners even in the wealthiest of countries. But the victims, according to numerous reports in the USA for instance, were allegedly from mainly minority groups. Reverse migrants all over the world were homeless for months and those such as cross borders migrants and refugees as well as displaced people, who are often the hidden, dark, and unseen side of modern state became more subjugated, yet in a sinister way, their plight became visible to conscious citizens, media professionals, civil society and NGOS. COVID-19 became as much implied in social and environmental justice debates as much as it was in discussions on safety and security of women and migrants.

Post-Covid conditions therefore beg the singular question with a twin objective: “How and why do migrants, refugees, displaced peoples and women cope under such stressful conditions at individual, household and community levels, and continue to be vulnerable despite national and international laws; and how do their vulnerabilities manifest to trample their wellbeing across inter-sectoral contexts of formal and informal labour, transnational and forced migrations as well as climate change are the two questions that this round table discussion will engage with?”

**Keywords:** Migration, Covid-19, Vulnerable populations

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