A planned exit is less risky than letting lockdown fatigue set in

This can be achieved by deploying testing protocols along cargo corridors and would also ease demands for fiscal support

**QUICK READ**

Lockdown fatigue could cause further uncertainty in the economy. If adequate testing strategies are put in place, we may be able to restore supply chains and revive commerce.

Procedures to test truckers along cargo routes and loading points can be laid down. The scope and pace of a recovery may depend on the reactivation of supply networks in India.

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Planning an exit sooner rather than later can be less risky because lockdown fatigue leads to violations that are unknown and therefore unmonitored. A planned exit is known, and therefore lends itself to better testing strategies and monitoring. If well designed, it can in the same time restore supply chains and reduce the fiscal stimulus needed.

The first design requirement is that government orders be totally free of ambiguity. Until 3 May, the strict lockdown is confined by home ministry guidelines to containment zones marked out by states. Manufacturing in industrial townships is permitted everywhere else. At the same time, the health ministry guidelines have colour-coded whole districts into red (hotspots), orange and green.

If a township in a hotspot (say, Solan in Himachal Pradesh) but not in a containment zone in that district, can it be given an irreversible go-ahead? No factory or activity will open up if there is even a small chance that they will be made to close down again. It is hard enough to get truck drivers and cargo loaders back to their jobs, harder still if they fear getting punished again. Uncertainty is a killer.

These issues are critical to the discussion on the quantum of fiscal support to compensate for the economic cost of the lockdown. In the above example, unless the rules are clearly defined, risk averse industry will opt to remain closed and add to the pressure for fiscal support.

Road and rail transport of all goods is permissible today everywhere except in containment zones. Even in the first phase of the lockdown, when truck transport of essential goods was fully permitted, grain- and produce-bearing trucks were frequently stopped at inter-state borders. This is the last mile problem in India, whereby decisions do not reach the operational point at the ground level, and risk-averse officials stop everything.

Let us assume we solve the last mile problem and trucks move freely. Truck routes are well-known to be disease-transmission pathways, right from the time of HIV. This is a risk we have already accepted. What we need to do going forward is to acknowledge it and deploy testing resources in a targeted way along truck routes as we see truck movement into and through hotspot districts (which is where manufacturing is concentrated anyway).

The e-way bill mechanism for monitoring intra and inter-state truck movement, operated by the National Informatics Centre (NIC), functions well. It should be easy to appeal the requirement that all personnel passing through should carry a passbook with records of swab tests, date and location. Not the same thing as an immunity passport, it will

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just be a documentation of test dates, with repeat testing needed every 14 days. Truck operators will be encouraged to remain duty if a testing protocol is worked into their duty structure. The big problem here is the delay in getting test results, which varies widely across states.

Once these testing protocols along cargo corridors are in place, they can similarly be deployed at ports and other loading points, and at newly opened up manufacturing centres, since the government directive to make employees reside on the premises is totally unenforceable. If this is effectively done, we can even open up manufacturing in containment zones. But these decisions do not reach the operational point at the ground level, and risk-averse officials stop everything.

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