

New Normal Cooking Solutions under Social Distancing

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The risk of unchecked spreading of the COVID-19 virus had shrunk people's horizons worldwide. COVID-19's devastating impact on lives and economies is painful. Social distancing has been advised as the most important thing we can adopt to mitigate the COVID-19 pandemic. In this period of crisis, society needs to rearticulate its action framework for keeping sustainable development progress on track.

The global clean cooking solutions sector, linked to SDG 7, evolved considerably, with LPG as the greatest current and historical scale-up activities around the world (Quinn et al., 2018)¹. Over the years, the Government of India (GoI) has also made significant efforts to enhance access to clean cooking energy and mitigate energy poverty. In this regard, the most prominent program has been Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY) under which over 80 million free LPG connections have been provided to poor households. PMUY scheme enabled an increase in the reach of LPG for cooking in poor households, especially in rural areas. Moreover, to protect the poor from the impact of the lockdown due to COVID 19, GoI had announced three free cylinders over the next three months to PMUY beneficiaries.

While demand for refills from PMUY consumers had remained subdued, with three free refills being announced, the demand may go up. The demand for LPG may also rise due to panic buying and increased cooking demand at home during a lockdown. The surge in LPG demand coupled with a drop in attendance of delivery personnel, due to infection apprehensions and lack of public transport, may lead to delivery delays during outbreaks. This may also force consumers to reach the distributor point for self-delivery. Probably a mix of these factors had forced the Oil marketing companies (OMCs) in India to regulate the LPG demand during the lockdown period through barring consumers from booking refills within 15 days of the previous purchase.

Cooking with LPG requires physical delivery of refilled cylinders which poses a risk of spread of diseases like COVID-19 through physical contact of consumers and delivery personnel. To ensure that the delivery person does not become carriers of the disease, they may be equipped with safety kits including masks, sanitizers, and gloves. However, monitoring the safety

¹ Quinn, A. K., Bruce, N., Puzzolo, E., Dickinson, K., Sturke, R., Jack, D. W., Mehta, S., Shankar, A., et al. (2018). An analysis of efforts to scale up clean household energy for cooking around the world. *Energy for Sustainable Development*, 46, 1–10.

practices of this delivery personnel at ground level is an area of concern. For instance, I closely watched each passing LPG delivery personnel in the city of Patna where I am stuck currently due to lockdown and realized that most of them were not wearing masks and none of them were having gloves on their hands. This is an alarming situation as it poses risk to both the consumers and the delivery person. Moreover, due to LPG delivery delays in urban areas and lack of doorstep delivery in rural areas, crowding at the distributors' point may defeat the very purpose of lockdown: social distancing.

What could be the clean cooking solutions for maintaining social distance during the COVID-19 like outbreak?

LPG cylinder delivery is an essential service that OMCs provide even during crises to keep the kitchens running. However, people need to maintain maximum physical distance from the outside world during pandemics. Therefore, it is time to consider clean cooking options from an added health perspective (SDG 3) i.e. social distancing. The government should focus on promoting pipe natural gas (PNG) and electric cooking (e-cooking) for meeting cooking energy demand in India as both PNG and electric cooking fits well in the context of maintaining a social distance during outbreaks.

Natural gas is an environmentally friendly, safer, and supplied through pipelines. It obviates the need of coming in physical contact and thus safeguards people from infectious diseases during outbreaks. In India, Petroleum & Natural Gas Regulatory Board (PNGRB) had authorized covering 406 districts spread over 27 States and Union Territories for the development of City Gas Distribution (CGD) network (PIB, 17 JUL 2019). With the expansion of the PNG network in the respective urban and peri-urban areas, a policy can be administered to switch all LPG consumers to PNG.

The use of electricity for cooking through specialized electric appliances has started in urban areas where power supply is reliable. The Gol launched SAUBHAGYA Scheme in 2017 to supply electricity to all villages and households. With the strengthening of electrification, e-cooking based on highly-efficient cooking devices could provide a sustainable and reliable option for clean cooking in rural India. A study by IRADe evaluated the level of e-cooking adoption at the household level through providing induction cooker intervention in rural Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh. The results were promising as the study suggested that 80% of households in Rajasthan and 11% in Chhattisgarh were willing to use electricity as primary cooking fuel and remaining as secondary cooking fuel.

Policy intervention for implementing e-cooking programs in rural India can provide twofold benefits during outbreaks: (i) lower demand of LPG to effectively contribute to maintaining social

distance and (ii) surge in electricity demand for cooking to counterbalance the lower industrial demand during a lockdown. Involving society heads in promoting e-cooking can be instrumental in bringing about sustainable change. **The government of India should formulate and households must become ready to adopt PNG and e-cooking as “New Normal” cooking solutions for social distancing and healthy living.**