Over the last 3 months as we have been gripped by the COVID pandemic, FIAPO’s team has been busy supporting our 160 member organisations in their amazing and vital work for animals. To answer some of the commonly asked questions that are probably on everyone’s minds, we were in conversation with some of the leading members in the Federation. Here’s what they had to say.

**Ilona Otter**

is the Clinical Director, WVS (Worldwide Veterinary Service) International Training Centre.

**Dr. Chinny Krishna**

is the Chairman Emeritus for FIAPO and Chairman Emeritus of Blue Cross of India.

**Shakuntala Majumdar**

is a veteran animal rights activist and the President of Thane SPCA.

**Dr. Shiela Rao**

is a veterinarian and trustee of CUPA (Compassion Unlimited plus Action).

**Norma Alvares**

is the Chairperson of FIAPO and Founder of PFA Goa.

1. **How can we fundraise to sustain feeding animals during the lockdown?**

Ilona Otter - Shelter-resident animal feeding via systems has been in place even before lockdown. By and large shelter funding should not be based on visitors’ donations only. The number of permanent resident animals kept in a shelter should be feasible for the organization to take care of with the funding sources available. Emergency appeals can always be made via social media and extra support from existing donors can be requested also in kind.
Dr. S. Chinny Krishna- Methods of fundraising remain the same as in normal times.

Shakuntala Majumdar- For animal organizations, I think we should look at retail fundraising as meeting regular donors will be difficult. We are doing this with the people in our database who visit our hospital with animals. Also, now we are insisting on minimal OPD charges. We have also kept our conversations open with wholesale grocery merchants and dry food dealers to support us as and when needed.

2. Can FIAPO or another big organisation help us with funds/animal food till the lockdown ends?

Ilona Otter- Local collaboration with other animal welfare groups, individuals, Animal Husbandry department could be encouraged to assist. Pet shops that have stock of food expiring because of lockdown could donate that food for rescued dog feeding in shelters.

Dr. Shiela Rao- Many individuals and companies are ready to donate during difficult circumstances, such as the lockdown. Local organizations must be approached via social media, and appeals can be raised on FB and Instagram.

Dr. S. Chinny Krishna- The Blue Cross of India gave about 100,000 meals to street dogs in Chennai during the last lockdown. We are restarting on the 19th of June using the amazing team of about 150 community feeders and 5 community distributors but will be restricting this to under 1,000 per day as compared with up to 4,000 per day previously since eateries will be open till 2 PM during this stage of the lockdown.

Shakuntala Majumdar- We have already supported the feeding of more than 40,000 meals to dogs and cats, and 2 months worth of fodder for 168 equines. We are supporting our wildlife transit center with food. If the lockdown continues, it will be difficult for us to support it.

3. Should we go to the red zones to feed animals?

Ilona Otter- Sure, If these areas are in desperate need of food and have no other sources.

Dr. Shiela Rao- Would be good to identify feeders in the area, to whom the food can be given. Dry food (packaged feed) would be a good alternative, to minimise contact.

Dr. S. Chinny Krishna- Can certainly go in unless banned by the local authorities but ALL required precautions must be taken - a minimum of 2 meters distance from every one plus gloves plus mask should be worn. Avoid touching anything in the red zone.

Shakuntala Majumdar- We have left that option completely open to our feeders. They can go in at their own risk. Our role was to procure food items for them.
Norma- Goa recently has a few red zones. Access to them is blocked. So there is no question of anyone from outside going to feed the animals there. But we have a few feeders living within the zone. They are feeding wherever possible. We have assured them that we will reimburse the cost of the food.

4. When can we stop feeding animals? Should we follow an exit plan to stop feeding?

Ilona Otter- It isn’t that people have stopped eating. So there is some edible waste being produced. Exit strategy could take into consideration the body condition of the dogs, the available food sources, and whether the dogs have been operated or not and the characteristics of the area as a habitat for dogs. Feeding should be discouraged and stopped first in places where dogs are more likely to develop and maintain feral behavior and where they are not operated.

Dr. Shiela Rao- The exit plan could also include feeding on alternate days for about 10 days, then maybe, twice a week or so, so that the animals can be slowly weaned off.

Dr. S. Chinny Krishna- Stop as soon as normal sources of food are available.

Shakuntala Majumdar- We should wean them off as soon as the regular feeders can start venturing out, even for a few hours. Otherwise it will become our responsibility for the rest of the year.

Norma- We stopped feeding in most areas once the lockdown was relaxed in Goa. But we did it gradually. Reduced to one feed a day then once every two days. Then twice a week. At this time we were feeding basically old and infirm animals. Others were given little so they didn’t find it worthwhile to come chasing after the feeder. Some individuals are still feeding strays they have kind of adopted for a long while.

5. How can we rescue animals from these containment zones?

Ilona Otter- Veterinary services come under essential services so you need a vehicle pass but these can be issued and then it should be possible to access most areas for emergency rescue cases. For overall safety, it is important to be clear what kind of emergency requires rescue from a red zone and the involved human health risk. I would not think that a mild mange case or small wound needs to be rescued if it involves entering an otherwise sealed area, but an acute, open broken leg yes. We were not able to enter a sealed zone to attend horse cases but when the horses were brought to the checkpoint we could examine and treat them there.

Dr. Shiela Rao- Our ambulances were given a pass by the Police Commissioner. Online passes were issued for drivers which were stamped by the BBMP / Police.

Dr. S. Chinny Krishna- If permitted by the local authorities you can do rescues, like at any other time.

Shakuntala Majumdar- We have done 3 rescues along with the Municipality COVID team, from families who had been sent away to quarantine. The team has its sanitizing protocol, but it is very important to sanitize the animals as well, especially reptiles like tortoises.
Norma- Our shelter is in a red zone area. We have very few staff. So we have stopped rescue work except for accident cases.

6. Should we do ABC during these times?

Ilona Otter- If permission is given to go about feeding stray dogs, the municipality could be also requested to allow catching for ABC all non-operated dogs that come for feeding. The capacity to then operate these depends on the Ngo’s staffing etc and therefore of course it is understood that some groups are not able to operate because of less staff. Also, staff may not get permission to come to work if it is not essential services and spay/neuter can be seen as ‘non-essential’ and therefore not allowed. There are likely to be very different practices in this from district to district depending on the severity of the corona situation.

Dr. Shiela Rao- ABC services were discontinued because of the risk of catching an infection. During feeding, there is not too much contact with humans, but during catching and releasing, there is a greater chance of people coming out of their homes, hence the risk would be more.

Dr. S. Chinny Krishna- As long as it can be done maintaining all protocols as applicable, ABC can be continued.

Shakuntala Majumdar- We have continued from the second month that is mid-April.

Norma- Yes we are doing ABC at our shelters on a reduced scale, but we continue.

7. We have no staff during this lockdown to feed animals, can we get some volunteer help?

Ilona Otter- Staff skills development would be perhaps useful to ensure multi-skilled staff that could transfer from a driver to a catcher to a vet assistant as needed or from office assistant to a vet assistant or from an accountant to a field coordinator for feeding programs or vaccination drives. This is a good strategy because even with skeleton staff the essentials could still be done. Within a district, there could also be a bit of staff exchange as needed to see that staff who are paid would be fully utilized and not sitting idle. This could be done district-wise or any area as practical transport wise. It requires good relationships and collaboration. Also, coordination of adoption programs across a region can be explored.

Dr. Shiela Rao- Volunteer help is possible, but volunteers must be told that the organization cannot be held responsible if there are problems. Therefore, it is better to keep animal numbers low, so that staff can cope.

Dr. S. Chinny Krishna- Certainly - through your existing volunteers and through social media groups.

Shakuntala Majumdar- All feeding was done by volunteers only.
Norma- Since our shelter is in a red zone, we have discouraged volunteers from coming to the shelter. We are keeping work to the minimum and only regular staff are coming in.

8. How are the other animal NGOs working during this lockdown?

Ilona Otter- They are working by limiting activities, designing new programs (online learning), focusing on staff skills development, taking care of pending maintenance works possible to do with the available man power, publicity for adoption programs etc.

Dr. S. Chinny Krishna- The Blue Cross of India is fortunate in having a large volunteer base and many community feeders contacted us through our WhatsApp group for their requirements of food. I must tell you that coordination with over 150 feeders was a full time job carried out splendidly by one of our Trustees, Mr Tyag Krishnamoorthy, our Honorary Treasurer whose regular job is CEO of a manufacturing company. We were also fortunate in having the DGP who is also the head of Friends of Police ensure that our operations were not disturbed as long as all rules were followed. There was a senior officer designated as the coordinator and this gentleman was available 24 / 7 in case of any problems.

Shakuntala Majumdar- I guess in the same way as us.

9. Can we get legal help during this time from FIAPO, as we are not allowed to feed?

Dr. Shiela Rao- There were quite a few circulars and directions from AWBI and local authorities regarding feeding during the lockdown. Mrs. Maneka Gandhi also wrote directly to Animal Husbandry, Police and Municipalities to allow feeding and requesting them to prevent harassment of feeders.

Dr. S. Chinny Krishna- The PM himself in the first days of the lockdown asked people to continue to feed animals.

Shakuntala Majumdar- There is no restriction on animal feeding, it was there initially, but now the picture is very clear.

10. How do we deal with harassment that we face while feeding from the general public during this lockdown?

Ilona Otter- Be clear with what you are doing and why and where. Make sure your feeding efforts are connected with some program that provides vaccination and sterilization of stray dogs (even if it would not be happening during lockdown but only afterward). Encourage the dogs that you are feeding to come to you for positive human contact and encourage their socialization so that they can be more easily caught for vaccination afterward.

Do not spread food randomly and in places with many non-sterilized dogs or in places where people really don’t want to have dogs.
Dr. S. Chinny Krishna- With tact and gentleness. Reporting to the police is a last resort.

Shakuntala Majumdar- There is no harassment at present. General public has been quite aware about police support and relevant rules. Plus all feeders have been advised to keep all advisory and rule copies with them while going out to feed.

Norma- The Secretary for Animal Husbandry(AH) in Goa set up a Whatsapp group during COVID. If anyone has difficulties it is put on the group and the AH department informs the police. It doesn’t happen always, but it has worked on several occasions. We happen to have a very proactive AH Secretary at this time, so all is well.

11. How do we ask for help from the authorities for large animal rescues on an emergency basis?

Ilona Otter- Police can be asked as well as the AH department or Forest department like in normal times.

Dr. Shiela Rao- Veterinary services have been clearly mentioned as essential services, hence authorities can be approached.

Dr. S. Chinny Krishna- The local AWO and the Fire Department and Police can be contacted.

Shakuntala Majumdar- Disaster Management Dept. One needs to be in touch with them the whole year through.

12. What should we do to raise awareness about animals not spreading COVID in the general public?

Ilona Otter- Well-designed education/awareness videos to be sent and shared via Whatsapp. However, it is important to have facts clear and also be clear about what is not yet known.

Dr. S. Chinny Krishna- Constant repetition of the facts citing whatever WHO documents are available.

Shakuntala Majumdar- Social media is most effective.

13. What measures can we take to prevent animal abuse during the lockdown?

Dr. S. Chinny Krishna- Being locked down is a difficult experience and both animal abuse and domestic violence will be more widespread. We just have to use the police.

Shakuntala Majumdar- The same that we do throughout the year. Constant sensitisation on social media.