The current lockdown situation has been challenging for all, and access to financial services remains more difficult for some than others. Post offices now have an even more important role to play for financial services delivery, especially for those living in remote areas and with poor access to financial services.

Most recently, the Times of India reported a surge in "doorstep banking" across the country with citizens in rural areas still able to access financial services, such as cash withdrawal and pension payments, even in the challenging lockdown circumstances. Between 24 March and 23 April, post offices in India delivered 4.1 billion Indian rupees (or 54 million US dollars) in over 2.1 million transactions, mostly in rural and unbanked areas. This was done through a network of 136,000 post offices equipped with 186,000 hand held devices. The numbers more than doubled in the next three weeks and 50 days of the lockdown marked 10 billion Indian rupees (133 million US dollars) in cash being delivered by postmen to account holders at their doorstep.

The India Post Payments Bank uses its network of post offices and handheld devices to reach out to customers all over the country. Regardless of the bank of which people are a customer, they can call the local post office and receive cash delivery at short notice. Importantly, post offices deliver services in the most remote locations, where there is no access to a nearby ATM the post office’s handheld technology for remote and secure identification. The Times of India article includes the experience of a villager in the state of Uttar Pradesh, living two kilometres away from the nearest ATM, and who quickly had to arrange 3,000 Indian rupees (40 US dollars) past banking hours. Thanks to his local postmaster and the post office’s handheld technology for remote and secure identification, the customer was able to receive the cash at his doorstep.

The growth of doorstep banking and use of available infrastructure such as post offices is another example of how technology can be used for realizing last mile connectivity and financial inclusion, also in the era of COVID-19. This development also reinforces the role that traditional institutions such as post offices can play in the delivery of financial services. Our earlier paper "Advancing financial inclusion through access to insurance: the role of postal networks" covered the experience of numerous postal services worldwide in using business models for postal insurance to foster financial inclusion through insurance access.

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