



## A SPATIO-TEMPORAL ANALYSIS OF MGNREGP IN INDIA AND ITS MISCONCEPTIONS

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### INTRODUCTION

It is perhaps the largest and most ambitious social security and public works programme in the world. ... soundness and high potential of the MGNREGA are well established ... That, at any rate, is one of the main messages emerging from this extensive review of research on MGNREGA. It is also a message that comes loud and clear from the resounding popularity of MGNREGA—today, about one-fourth of all rural households participate in the programme every year. Meanwhile, the social audits in two Indian states highlight the potential of the law if implemented effectively.

*The Mahatma Gandhi NREGA story in numbers is a story worth telling... the scheme scores high on inclusiveness... no welfare scheme in recent memory has caught the imagination of the people as much as NREGA has ... under which ₹1,10,000 crore (about US\$25 billion) have been spent to pay wages to 1,200 crore (12 billion) people.*

A continuous process of social audit on NREGA works involves public vigilance and verification at the stipulated 11 stages of implementation: registration of families; distribution of job cards; receipt of work applications; selection of suitable public works; preparation of technical estimates; work allocation; implementation and supervision; payment of wages; payment of unemployment allowance; evaluation of outcomes; and mandatory social audit in the Gram Sabha or Social Audit Forum. The Gram Panchayat Secretary called 'Sarpanch' is designated as the authority responsible for carrying out the social audit at all stages. For some stages, the programme officer and the junior engineer is also responsible along with Sarpanch.

The statute designates the Gram Sabha meetings held to conduct social audit as the 'Social Audit Forums' and spells out three steps to make them effective: publicity and preparation of documents; organizational and procedural aspects; and the mandatory agenda involving questions verifying compliance with norms specified at each of the 11 stages of implementation.

An application under the RTI to access relevant official documents is the first step of the social audit. Then the management personnel of the social audit verify these official records by conducting field visits. Finally, the 'Jansunwai' or public hearing is organised at two levels: the Panchayat or village level and the Mandal level. The direct public debate involving the beneficiaries, political representatives, civil servants and, above all, the government officers responsible for implementing the NREGA works highlights corruption like the practice of rigging muster rolls (attendance registers) and also generates public awareness about the scheme.

These social audits on NREGA works in Rajasthan highlight: a significant demand for the scheme, less than 2 per cent corruption in the form of fudging of muster rolls, building the water harvesting infrastructure as the first priority in the drought-prone district, reduction of out-migration, and above all the women participation of more than 80 per cent in the employment guarantee scheme. The need for effective management of tasks, timely payment of wages and provision of support facilities at work sites is also emphasised.

To assess the effectiveness of the mass social audits on NREGA works in Andhra Pradesh, a World Bank study investigated the effect of the social audit on the level of public awareness about NREGA, its effect on the NREGA implementation, and its efficacy as a grievance redressal mechanism. The study found that the public awareness about

the NREGA increased from about 30 per cent before the social audit to about 99 per cent after the social audit. Further, the efficacy of NREGA implementation increased from an average of about 60 per cent to about 97 per cent.

### VIEWS OF THE CRITICS OF MGNREGA

The critics claim that the scheme leads to wastefulness and contributes to fiscal deficit of the Government of India.

### VIEWS OF THE PROPONENTS OF MGNREGA

Proponents of the scheme enumerate number of benefits. For example, Rejal Karim Laskar, an ideologue of the Congress party- the largest constituent of the UPA Government which introduced the scheme, claims that the scheme has multifarious benefits including "reduction in poverty, reduction in migration, women empowerment, improvement of productivity of agricultural land and regeneration of water resources".

### SAVE MGNREGA

'Save MGNREGA' is a set of demands proposed during the joint meeting of the national leadership of CITU, AIAWU, AIDWA and AIKS in New Delhi. The agenda was to discuss the dilution of MGNREGA scheme by the new government. Following demands were proposed:

- Government of India should increase the Central allocation for the scheme so that number of workdays can be increased to 200 and per day wage can be increased to Rs. 300.
- Job card to be issued for everyone who demands job, failing which, after 15 days employment benefits should be given.
- Minimum 200 days of work should be ensured to all card holders.
- Minimum wage act should be strictly implemented. Delay in wage payment should be resolved.
- MGNREGA should be extended to urban areas.
- Gram Sabhas should be strengthened to monitor proper implementation of the scheme and also to check corruption.

### NEW AMENDMENTS PROPOSED IN 2014

Union Rural Development Minister, Nitin Gadkari, proposed to limit MGNREGA programmes within tribal and poor areas. He also proposed to change the labour: material ratio from 60:40 to 51:49. As per the new proposal, the programme will be implemented in 2,500 backward blocks coming under Intensive Participatory Planning Exercise. These blocks are identified per the Planning Commission Estimate of 2013 and a Backwardness Index prepared by Planning Commission using 2011 census. This backwardness index consists of following five parameters - percentage of households primarily depended on agriculture, female literacy rates, households without access to electricity, households without access to drinking water and sanitation within the premises and households without access to banking facilities.

Both proposals came in for sharp criticism. A number of economists with diverse views opposed the idea of restricting or "focussing" implementation in a few districts or blocks. In the November 2014 cabinet expansion, Birender Singh replaced Nitin Gadkari as rural development minister. Among the first statements made by the new minister was an assurance that NREGA would continue in all districts. Around the same time, however, NREGA budget saw a sharp cut and in the name of 'focusing' on a few blocks the programme has been limited to those blocks.

## NEW AMENDMENTS PROPOSED IN 2017

Finance Minister Arun Jaitley announced Rs. 48,000 crore to be allocated to the MGNREGA as a part of 2017 Union budget of India.

## CONTROVERSIES AND CRITICISMS

A major criticism of the MNREGA is that a lot of money disbursed by the government gets siphoned off by middlemen, thus leaving a number of MGNREGA workers either with unpaid wages or less than standard wages. In Mahuadand, Jharkhand, most of the people who had worked under the MNREGA did not get paid, while some either got paid less than stipulated or were given 5 kg of rice by private contractors instead.

Another criticism of NREGA is that it is making agriculture less profitable. Landholders often oppose it on these grounds. The big farmer's point of view can be summed up as follows: landless labourers are lazy and they don't want to work on farms as they can get money without doing anything at NREGA worksites; farmers may have to sell their land, thereby laying foundation for the corporate farming.

Economists like **Jagdish Bhagwati** and **Arvind Panagariya** have described NREGA as "an inefficient instrument of shifting income to the poor" – the general notion being that it takes five rupees to transfer one rupee to NREGA workers. Economists including Surjit Bhalla have termed it as unsuccessful suggesting that schemes such as the NREGA need to be junked, saying that any scheme with 85 percent leakages can't be proclaimed to be "working successfully".

The workers points of view can be summed up as: labourers do not get more than Rs. 80 in the private agricultural labour market, there is no farm work for several months; few old age people who are jobless for at least 8 months a year; when farm work is available they go there first; farmers employ only young and strong persons to work in their farms and reject the others and hence many go jobless most of the time.

## CONVERGENCE GUIDELINES INCLUDES

- All lands including community lands, village common lands, revenue wastelands, wetlands, shifting cultivation areas, and private agricultural lands will be eligible for afforestation.
- Under MGNREGA for afforestation, forest works such as plantation, planting, watering and pit digging will be undertaken. Fencing, plant support and protection activities, mulching, weeding and manuring the plants will be also undertaken.
- Technical advice related to the plant species suitable for area and to raise nurseries will be provided by State Forest Development Agencies (SFDA).
- SFDA will also deliver information related to plant material to each gram panchayat before July each year meeting the cost from MGNREGA funds. Union Cabinet has approved the proposal of direct release of wages in to the accounts of the workers engaged under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). Direct release of wages system under the MNREGA aims to streamline the flow of funds and to empower state governments to deliver entitlements as per the objectives of the Act. Henceforth, the wage component of MGNREGA will be directly released to the worker's accounts based on a fund transfer order to be generated by states' implementing agencies of government.

The fund transfer order in case of wages of workers from implementing agencies will be based in accordance with procedures prescribed by Union Rural Development Ministry and the wage component will be given to the State Employment Guarantee Fund window for further transferring it to beneficiaries.

In the implementation of this scheme, the gram panchayats will be empowered to take up work according to the agreed labour budget and without struggling for release of funds. The proposed system will

- Improve overall efficiency of implementation and benefit all stakeholders.
- Lesser will be the levels of corruption in MNREGA by bringing greater transparency in movement of funds.
- State governments instead of bothering to manage funds for implementation of scheme will be able to spend more time in planning and improving the process efficiency.

## CONCLUSION

NREGA has been criticised for leakages and corrupt implementation. It has been alleged that individuals have received benefits and work payments for work that they have not done, or have done only on paper, or are not poor. In 2014-15, only 28% of the payments were made on time to workers. Following the allegations of corruption in the scheme, NDA government ordered a re-evaluation of the scheme in 2015.

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