

## MNREGA: Initiatives and interventions

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### Abstract

Employment is the primary requirement for prosperous villages. Poverty and unemployment are inter related and form a vicious circle. Villages are unable to break it. Population, employment discontent and violence is on the rise, playing havoc in the villages. The remedies are not satisfactory. Right from the days of community development. This process is going on and the results are obvious. People are migrating from the villages and there is no space left in the cities. Villages are disintegrating and cities are turning into slums.

Key words: MGNREGA, unemployment, Panchayat Raj institutions, Civil society

### Introduction

The national rural employment guarantee act. MGNREGA has widely been acknowledged as pioneering legislation. However it is seen as a wage employment programme. The 'MGNREGA' is indeed the first tangible commitment to poor that they can expect to earn a living wage, without loss of dignity and demand as a right. The guarantee of 100 days of employment is the most important feature of the act. Never before in development history has there been an initiative of this nature and magnitude. In order to minimise unemployment in rural areas, the government of India launched a number of programmes and schemes from time to time but they did not achieve the desired quantum and became ineffective. India has a number of antipoverty programmes since the early 1960's. These include the national rural employment programme and the rural landless employment guarantee programme. The national rural employment programme evolved in the 1980 from the earlier 'Food for Work Programme' to use unemployed and underemployed workers to build Productive community assets. The rural landless employment guarantee Programme was instituted in 1983 to address the plight of hard-core rural poor by expanding employment opportunities and building the rural infrastructure as a means of encouraging rapid economic growth. To improve the effectiveness of national rural employment programme in 1989, it was combined with the Rural Landless Employment guarantee programme and renamed as 'Jawahar Rozgar Yojana'. The Ministry of Rural Development has been implementing various Programmes in rural areas for which it released central funds for policy formulation, over all guidance monitoring and evaluation. The Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh proclaimed of new name 'NREGA' as 'MGNREGA' on occasion of Gandhi Jayanti in 2009.

'NREGA' makes the government legally accountable for providing employment to those, who ask for it and thereby goes beyond providing a social safety net towards guaranteeing the right of employment. A very significant merit of this act. Is that if a worker, who has applied for work



under 'MGNREGA is not provided employment within 15 days from the date on which work is requested, an unemployment allowance shall be payable by the state government at the rate prescribed in the act. It is a unique weapon to activate and empower the Panchayats. It is a revolutionary step for India's rural poor. It has prevented distress migration and helped in empowerment of rural women. Moreover it is an integral part of rural development plan.

### **Initiatives and interventions**

MGNREGA is primarily a new initiative with an existing political will at the centre as well as in several states where MGNREGA is being operationalised. The monitoring result of MGNREGA implementation have highlighted several issues of concerns from different stakeholders' point of view. Therefore, it is pertinent to find ways of improving implementation of the programme and hence the following interventions are suggested :

#### **1. Build Large Scale Citizen's Awareness Campaigns or Generating Demand Side of MNREGA**

There are two ways to generate large scale awareness amongst citizens. The first is the model used in large scale education programmes, which involves building a cadre of volunteers and taking up village level campaigns to educate citizens on their rights and informing Panchayats on their responsibilities. The other kind of mass mobilisation is an intensive targeted campaign using electronic media, like the Pulse Polio programme that reaches out to almost every family in the country. The MGNREGA campaign could be a mixed approach where, on one hand, electronic media could be used to make the scheme popular while on the other, traditional communication methods padyatra village level meetings, street play, and local folk media could be used to reach the most disadvantaged sections of society, along with the support of civil society organisations.

The awareness campaigns not only provide basic information about the act as well as could holders rights for 100 days employment, but also provide guidance in exercising their rights. The on going efforts of the Government to popularize the scheme as well as of the civil society to reach out to the potential families need to be up scaled and intensified. The success of the programme will largely depend on the effectiveness of demand raised by the citizens.

#### **2. Improve Institutional Capacities of Gram Panchayat**

The panchayats has been identified as the key implementation organisation for MGNREGA. Under MGNREGA, a panchayat of 100 households willing to work under NREGS will receive around Rupees10 lakh as wages and material cost. Since this amount is almost 3 times more than what they usually receive. It has serious implications especially their capacity especially their capacity to use such a big amount meaningfully by generating employment as well as creating productive assets. Moreover, panchayats are required to maintain multiple registers keep records of



NREGS as presented by the Centre/State. It is imperative to build their capacity to handle the record keeping system as per norms, as many Panchayats continue to use the single entry system for their accounts.

In order to build Panchayats as an effective executing agency for MGNREGA, it is unessential pre-requisite to invest heavily on strengthening their perspective, knowledge and skills in the following areas.

Developing perspective/development plans of villages with Gram Sabha participation, Basics of civil engineering and preparing cost estimates of works Perspective on relevance of social audits / transparency in business transacted, Sensitivity and Vision in involving the disabled, women and other disadvantaged sections, and Skills in book keeping and accounts, maintenance of created assett. Including far collection,

### **3. Pro-active planning for effective engagement of block and district Panchayat :**

A clear role must be curved out for Zila Panchayats and Janpad Panchayats in order to involve them under MGNREGA. The higher tiers of PRIs need to be more actively involved in MGNREGA implementation for visioning districts as a unit of development. The piece meal approach of treating village Panchayats as units of development will affect comprehensive livelihood planning keeping in mind the advantages of economics of scale.

Increasingly, it is being realised that basic work that can he done within the boundaries of the panchayat will be exhausted in the coming few years, following which a majority of work will involve boundaries of multiple panchayats, viz. Link roads, large irrigation systems, common markets. Etc.

Consequently, the higher tiers of Panchayats will have amore important rule in receiving funds for multi Panchayat projects, and will have to actively engage households in partnership with the Concerned village Panchayat. The higher tier of Panchayats are also better suited to levy taxes, build mechanisms of operation & maintenance of large scale assets, and hire staff at the block level for more efficient & cost effective delivery of services. There is also a need to build mechanisms for handling joint responsibilities of the three tier system.

### **4. Adequate Attention to Strengthen Village Nigrani & samities**

The success of the programme will heavily depend on active engagement of the Gram Sabha to make elected Panchayats accountable for proper utilisation of available resources by effective monitoring. As the Gram Sabha is a broad assembly of all citizens, it is important to recognise the role of village/Panchayat Nigrani Samiti. Village monitoring committees need to be formed as per the guidelines in most of the panchayats to NREGS states. The member of such committees need to be oriented towards their rule and should be empowered to make their panchayats display basic information of NREGS implementation in the Gram Sabha. The committee can share some of the responsibilities of panchayats viz.



conducting social audits, identifying families deserving work under NREGS and resolving conflicts between beneficiaries and panchayats. A large training programme needs to be visualised to reach out to every Panchayat for strengthening village Nigrani Samities.

#### **5. Flexibility for Technical Sanction of Civil Works and Audit of Accounts through Competent Private Professionals :**

Efforts are being made in all states by the Government to appoint technical staff to support the planning of large scale civil works as well as technical audit of works done for the final payment. Similarly, accounts also need to be properly audited on a regular basis to maintain highest standards of financial accountability.

The proposed additional staffing under MGNREGA by the government will take a much longer period depending on the kind of effort being made by each state government. It has been observed that the government's technical staff harasses panchayats representatives in providing technical sanction or conducting financial audit. They also demand bribes to approve schemes even without visiting the site or reviewing the document. This results in effective supervision, corruption and delay in clearance of payments to Panchayats. Delayed receipts in Panchayats adversely affect payments of wages job-card holders.

There is a need to recognise professionals available at the district or nearby town, such as chartered accountants, civil engineering firms, architects, etc. who can be hired by panchayats on rates fixed by the government. This will help expedite the process of clearing projects and their evaluations. More over. It will also create competition and reduce dependence on the government system. The overall gain would be in terms of reducing corruption and addressing non performance by Panchayats on account of lack of available expertise/technical sanction. There should also be a time bound system of technical sanction and evaluation. The departments should be accountable to meet the fixed deadlines. In case of intended delays, the departmental staff should also be liable for punishment.

#### **6. Improved Technological Options for Performance and Monitoring :**

The website of MGNREGA is not regularly updated and provides inadequate information on employment generated, funds allocated, state-wise average utilisation etc. There is also a need to include break-up of the social category of families benefited. I.e. SC/ST and women-headed households under MGNREGA. This break-up is essential if the scheme aims to reach out to the poorest of the poor.

In aggregate terms such differentiated realities of vulnerable sections go unnoticed. There are several poor widow women and disabled persons who are not getting employment. They have a right to be employed as helpers etc. They will, be not able to avail of such jobs.

unless regular reporting formats create a space for getting official information on these parameters so that questions can be asked on



inadequate representation of such categories in the list of benefited individuals or families.

Currently, the available data is not provided below the district level i.e. Block wise and panchayat-wise details of funds transferred, families benefited and works completed. It is necessary to expedite the establishment of computerised system of data recording and enable its access at the distinct level as well as keep information below the district level so that more transparent ways of functioning may be developed as the lower level of decentralised governance.

#### **7. Establishment of Information Resource Centres and Helpline in Collaboration with Civil Society Organisations :**

There are many remote blocks of the MGNREGA districts, which have concentrated population of SC or ST families. Distance from the district / block as well as weak infrastructure and low levels of literacy leave deserving families helpless. Potential families have very basic queries related to various provisions of the Act and benefits of the programme, which are normally not provided to them either by the panchayat or by field level government functionaries.

The information centres will also be responsible for collecting basic issues highlighted by the citizens/families and panchayats, and provide such information to the district administration or concerned officials at the state level which is implementing MGNREGA for quick redressal. Voluntary organisation selected for each block to run information centres should be made responsible to build capacities of nigrani Samiti and strengthen panchayat or their improved performance, keeping a team of professionals available on call by the Panchayats. The professional will be mobile and reach the Panchayat site in case of any call for support.

#### **8. Broad basing State level MGNREGA Committee and Promoting Culture of Inclusiveness :**

Inclusion of some civil society representatives, district collectors, district level panchayat presidents, media representatives etc. In the planning process is essential so that diverse stakeholder concerns are expressed and incorporated. The meetings of the NREGS State committee must happen in a fixed periodicity, so that such committees do not remain as mere formality or a clearing house for policy decisions proposed by the executives. A culture of Sunwai on a six-monthly basis should be established at the State level as a collaborative programme of the State with civil society, along with a formal release of six monthly reports on the performance of MGNREGA by the Government through a seminar, where various stakeholder, including the media, academia and grassroots activists present their point of view. State level committee members should be present during the seminar so that the committee may contribute more in guiding meaningfully in guiding the operational framework of MGNREGA.



The action points mentioned above are based on the emerging issues from the experiences of the MGNREGA monitoring. The intensity of engagement of civil society with the implementation process will provide newer challenges and alternative ways MGNREGA should be treated as an evolutionary programme which will not only affect the fundamental right to live with dignity but also set standards and example for fulfilling many other promises and guarantees of a welfare state.

## Conclusions

It will not be possible to achieve the potential of MNREGA unless the structure of its implementation is adequately strengthened-particularly in the panchayats and Blocks. This has been one of the most important recommendations of the CAG report. It has also been the findings of several evaluations of earlier wage employment programmes.

Government should deploy the full-time professionals dedicated to MNREGA at all levels, but most crucially at the block level, which is at the cutting-edge of implementation of MNREGA.

There should be a provision of adequate resources and setting up systems for continuous monitoring and evaluation at every stage of the programme to ensure the quality of MNREGA. Training and capacity for each one of the stakeholder is also an important. If obvious priority the dimensions and process involved in MNREGA required a different kind of understanding-quite outside the realm of the development experience of the past. The design of suitable courses and orientation programmes is a huge task. The Government revise the schedule of rate of wages time-to-time in the light of price rise. Payments of wage through bank accounts is an important factor in this regard. But accounts have been opened in the name of male household members. This has significant draw backs, in terms of gender equality as well as transparency. The best alternative would be a system of individual accounts, though even jointly operated accounts would be preferable to the current system. The current practice is to club payments from different weeks and for different members of the family in to one entry. This makes it quite difficult for the recipients to verify that they are getting their due. It would enhance the transparency of the system.

There is also some evidence that middlemen are being able to withdraw money from the bank for group of people with simply the Signature of the labourers on the withdrawal slips. Protocols relating to the MNREGA wage payments must strictly disallow such withdrawals without the physical presence of the account holder. At the other end, some amount of information must be disseminated about to be followed at bank processes of deposit-withdrawal, and the importance of the various documents related to the bank (passbooks and withdrawal slips in particular).

It is only when people become more compatible with banks and banking procedures that there can be a reasonable expectation of savings. Evidence that the payment of MNREGA wages through banking is leading to savings has been quiet in so far. Either accumulated debt or manipulation by contractor has meant that most of the wages received by



labourers are withdrawn immediately. Nevertheless, if the system succeeds in the big term It would address some of the problems that seem to impede savings-contractors and indebtedness in particular. In that case the, system of bank payments may well come into its own. Banks can also be effective in solving the problems of storage of money that people in rural areas face. MNREGA wages are often received in large amounts, and it is likely that banks, as a safe way to store money.

Last but not least, it is important that bank payments should not be seen as superseding the other transparency measures that the MNREGA acts in place. In particular, accurate maintenance of Job cards and muster rolls must be strictly enforced. It is clear that bank payments. In and of themselves, cannot eliminate corruption. Improving the system of bank payments can only go away towards that end. Building a culture of transparency and accountability in the implementation of MNREGA remains extremely important.

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