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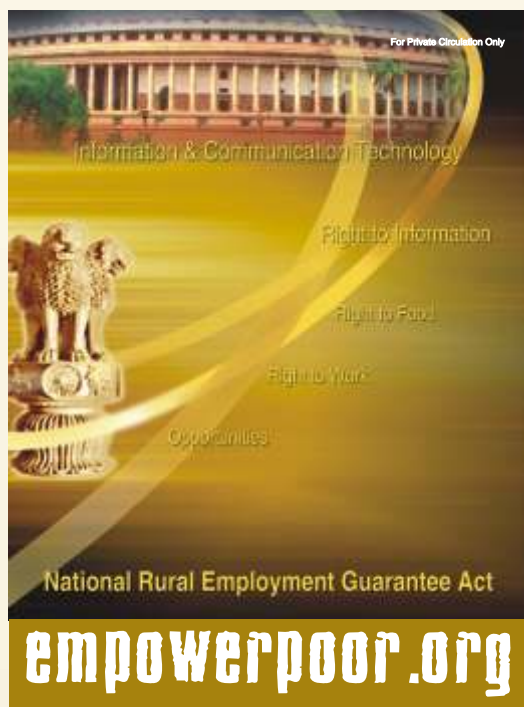
Right to Work

Opportunities



National Rural Employment Guarantee Act

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Tel. : 91+11+2689-0380, 2613-4103
 Fax : 91+11+2613-0817
 Email : pacsindia@devalt.org
 Website : <http://www/empowerpoor.org>

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Editorial

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) is the Government's gift to the people of India. Coupled with the Right to Information (RTI) Act, the NREG Act assumes tremendous significance.

Lack of rural employment has a major impact leading to the social imbalance in the rural area due to migration. The enactment of NREG Act could go a long way in mitigating rural poverty, deprivation and starvation.

The NREGA provides a legal guarantee of 100 day's work in a year to India's 60 million rural households whose adult members are willing to do unskilled manual labour. Corruption is obviously a major danger. This is why the demand for an Employment Guarantee Act is inseparable from the demand for a strong Right to Information Act. Of course, a Right to Information Act on its own cannot be expected to eradicate corruption but it will give the people a powerful tool to fight against corruption and claim their due.

On the other hand the Right to Information Act (RTI) Act provides citizens the right to access government-held information from "public authorities." (Those bodies or institutions of self-governance which are established by the Constitution, by any law made by Parliament or State Legislature).

Information and Communication Technology too has a major role to play in the effective implementation of NREGA, and will help in bringing in greater transparency.

Civil society organisations can play a proactive role in the success of the programme. Tools like right to information, jan sunwai, ICT activities, accounting systems, charter on rights under NREGP, enforcing minimum wages and support in maintaining information system at the village level can be done.

PACS's commitment to the various social issues leads towards the exploration of all aspects of NREGA and gearing up to enable the partners to take up the challenge of effective implementation. But this goal cannot be met effectively without considering the needs of all people including the disabled, who are among the poorest of poor.

The PACS network of over 500 Civil Society Organisations is already gearing up to respond to the NREGA and look forward to the challenge of ensuring success in its implementation and also most importantly, ensuring access to the Entitlements provided by the Government, for the Rural Poor.

Kiran Sharma

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Rural Employment Guarantee

Opportunities for Civil Society

Context

The concern with rural livelihood promotion is to be understood as a manifestation of our concern with rural poverty, empowerment and social security. UNDP in its 1997 report introduced a human poverty index (HPI) as a concept by integrating the multiple dimensions of human poverty. The indicators for measuring dimensions of human life relates to survival, knowledge and decent standard of living.

Poverty and employment have an obvious relationship. Over the past three decades, the employment scene in India has undergone some important changes. The Rural Labour Enquiry reveals that between 1993-94 and 1999-2000, average number of days of employment has declined. The unemployment rate has increased from 5.2 %in 1993-94 to 7.2%in 1999-2000 specifically in rural areas. And employment rate has fallen from 2.03% (1987-88) to 0.58% in 1993-2000. In particular, the decline was much sharper in wage employment and more so among women workers¹. In an exercise to find out the association between employment and poverty, it was found out that the female members of poor household accounted for half of the total person days of female wage employment in public works in rural India while corresponding share for males was 28% (ibid). This state has been further aggravated by slow growth in agriculture.

An average rural labour household in India has a family size of 4.67 with 1.74 earning members (1.4 men and 0.6 women) .The agricultural wage rate reported were Rs. 40.58 for men and Rs. 28.57 for women. [55th round of NSS (1999-2000)] .As per the Nanavati report of 2002: 'as a matter of policy, the Indian government has concentrated its investment (and therefore, employment

Broad Features of the Act are

- Guaranteed provision of minimum 100 days of work in a year to any adult in rural area
- A national minimum wage of Rs 60 per day to be paid for this work
- Unemployment compensation of Rs 15 per day to be paid if employment is not made available as per demand. This compensation has to be paid from state budget.
- Work has to be provided within 5 kms of place of residence
- Panchayats are the principal authority in planning & implementation of this scheme

opportunities) in cities to the neglect of rural areas.

Lack of rural employment has also attributed imbalance in social facet of the rural area. Rural migration has increased tremendously. There are instances where migration of family members has caused social and psychological stress. This has led to

increase women's economic burden in the household.

The Indian Parliament passed a historic legislation on 25th August 2005, which guarantees rural employment in the country. Called the NREGA, its operation has begun on February 2, 2006. In its initial phase, it is expected to cover 200 districts. The central government has allocated Rs 14,300 crores during the budget for the fiscal year 2006-07. The programme will be extended to all 600 districts by 2009.

Why NREGP is an Opportunity?

Productive absorption of under-employed and surplus labour force in the rural sector has been a major focus of planning for rural development in India. In order to provide direct supplementary wage-employment to the rural poor through public works, many employment programmes were initiated by the Government of India, namely, National Rural Employment Programme (NREP), Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme (RLEGP), Jawahar Rozgar Yojana (JRY) and Sampoorna Gramin Rozgar Yojana (SGRY). It has been observed that the scale of employment generation under these schemes was barely adequate. And secondly there was no guarantee that employment will be available to the rural households on demand as there were allocation-based programmes.

NREGP is an opportunity for rural

¹ Desarda.H.M, 'Guaranteed Employment for the Rural Poor: A Conceptual Framework And Operational Strategy'; Working Paper Series No-22, NCAS

India because it guarantees one of the crucial rights, *right to work* envisaged in the Article 41 of the Indian Constitution.

Panchayats are having central role in the implementation and monitoring of the Schemes under NREGA. The Act has made Panchayats the principal authorities for planning and implementation of Schemes and Gram Sabha and Ward Sabha as monitoring bodies that will conduct social audit. District Programme Coordinator and Programme Officers will assist Panchayats in discharging their functions.

NREGP has also provided an opportunity to all the actors of civil society engaged in playing catalytic role for micro level social transformation, economic advancement and for furthering democratic governance. Successful launch of a process of implementation of this Scheme can result in several significant outcomes:

- a) If employment is provided to the deserving households, and if wages are paid fully & timely, then it can have a major impact in reducing hunger, and poverty.
- b) When local assets are built up around water conservation and land improvements, it will have a major impact on livelihood and drought over a period of time.
- c) The capacities of Gram Sabha and Panchayats would have been enhanced to function effectively as institutions of local self-governance; their credibility in the eyes of the people, as well as state

government, would be significantly enhanced.

- d) Local civil society organizations would have gained a cooperation mechanism among themselves, and enhanced credibility in the eyes of the community and district administration.

What NREGP offers?

- Every State Government shall make a scheme, within 6 months from the date on commencement of this Act, for providing not less than 100 days of guaranteed employment.
- The wage rate will not be less than sixty rupees a day. Until such time a wage rate is fixed, the minimum wage fixed by the State Government under Minimum Wages Act, 1948 for agricultural labourers, shall be considered as the wage rate applicable to that area.
- If an applicant is not provided such employment within fifteen days of receipt of his application seeking employment, he shall be entitled to a daily unemployment allowance. The state government will be accountable in case of not providing employment within stipulated time. This is also applicable in terms of sharing 25% of the total burden of the cost of implementation
- Panchayats shall be responsible for planning, implementation and execution of the programme together with programme officer at each level.
- The Gram Sabha shall conduct

regular social audits of all the projects under the Scheme taken up within the Gram Panchayat.

- State Government shall determine appropriate grievance redressal mechanisms at the Block level and the district level for dealing with any complaint by any person in respect of implementation of the Scheme and lay down the procedure for disposal of such complaints.
- Central Government and State Government shall establish national Employment Guarantee Fund and State Employment Guarantee Fund respectively.
- All payments of wages in cash and unemployment allowances shall be made directly to the person concerned and in the presence of independent persons of the community on pre-announced dates.
- The Scheme shall not permit engaging any contractor for implementation of the projects under it.

Issues from Grassroots:

NREGP has been formally launched on 2nd February 2006. So far in 181 districts of 17 states, 2.23 crore people have registered². But at implementation level the experience of past several weeks has begun to create an impression that NREGP may also suffer from the usual implementation hurdles. Several myths and assumptions at the grassroots level have started emerging. Some of the prevalent myths about the Act in various states are:

²March 22, 2006, The Hindu

- It is meant for BPL household (*it is open to anyone who is willing to work as an unskilled labourer*)
- It is based on the existing BPL list (*anyone in the village can demand work*)
- Limited number of job cards will be issued after the registration (*there is no limit on job cards*)
- Works can be planned as and when the demand arises (*a shelf of projects have to be prepared in advance based on five year perspective plans for the district, with primary focus on water*)
- The concerned officials will determine eligibility of registrants and feasibility of works (*the Gram Sabha is the basic unit responsible for ensuring registration and planning of works, with Gram Panchayat playing an executive role*)
- The identified works can then be implemented by local contractors (*Gram Panchayat must be responsible for implementation of at least 50% of the works; others allowed to implement are government agencies, NGOs, SHGs etc, but no contractors*)
- There is a small registration fees to be paid to secure job cards (*this service is free, and any consideration being demanded is illegal*)
- Once an initial set of works are approved, other works will follow depending on availability of funds (*there is no limit on funds, and all demands have to be met*)
- After registration, works will be made available as per local plans (*employment has to be made available within 15 days of receipt of such a*

demand being made, failing which unemployment allowance will have to be paid).

Role of Civil Society

In light of the above myths, and previous experiences of Food for Work and SGRY schemes, it is imperative that the entire burden of implementation of employment guarantee is not left to the government alone. It is important that civil society plays several roles:

1. Enabling role

Of the two hundred districts chosen, some are covered under the Act relating to scheduled areas. These are areas where governance is not very strong; extremist activity in some other areas poses problems. There are yet other areas where Panchayats are simply non-existent or are not fully empowered.

CSOs can contribute in creating an enabling environment and support system at the village/district/state and national level for NREGP. NGOs can strengthen the absorption capacity of the system both at the local and state level for NREGP. This can be a hand holding support at initial level. Enforcement of *Right to information act* and establishing its relationship with NREGP at the local level especially in the context of ways to get the information and its usability is important.

It is imperative to publicize heavily about the rules and procedures of the act. This will ensure and encourage participation, especially of marginalized section. Capacity building initiatives at both supply side and demand side needs

to be taken to strengthen the existing system for proper implementation of the programme

According to Census 80% of rural women are engaged in farm and non-farm agricultural activities. This probably due to migration of men to urban areas. EGS is important to women, as 70% of rural women are poor. CSOs can play major role in ensuring that the provisions given in the act for facilitating women participation should get implemented. Their representation at district and Panchayat committees and gram Sabha should be ensured. Social inclusion is another area. As in many places stories of excluding widows, dalits, diseased from the programmes have been reported. *Ensuring participation of marginalized is an area where CSOs can contribute substantially.*

2. Planning role

Civil Society can assist Gram Panchayats and other tiers to develop a five-year perspective plan and to identify appropriate works to be implemented during the coming year. This may entail assistance to block and District Project Officers as well, so that selected works meet the priorities listed in the Act, and focus on water and land improvements.

3. Monitoring Role

CSOs can play meaningful monitoring role. Panchayats and different councils/committees are entrusted specific roles for planning, monitoring, budgeting and evaluation of NREGP. CS has to act as a watchdog at the level of practical implementation. It has to ensure that various provisions of the Act, and the spirit behind it, are authentically implemented on the

ground. Such a role also entails assisting Gram Sabha to undertake Social Audit of the works.

Challenges For Civil society

Getting Involved

The scale of the demand for civil society action is huge; it is desirable that a group of CSOs get together in each of the 200 districts to engage with the implementation of rural employment scheme in a serious and sustained manner over the next 2-3 years.

Getting Ready

CSOs have to get themselves ready to effectively perform all three types of roles mentioned above. A process of orientation of CSO staff and volunteers has to begin at the earliest.

Getting Organized

In each state, a few CSOs have to come together to constitute a state level coordination unit. It has to take responsibility to prepare campaign and training materials. It has to be organized to assist district level teams to be trained and organized to engage. It has to work out an operational linkage with state government through the State Employment Guarantee Council. Its linkages with media have to be forged in order to highlight the Scheme, as well as report on its inadequate performance, whenever it arises.

Getting Operational

In each of the covered districts, a task force of a few CSOs should be formed. All CBOs (like SHGs etc) should be mobilized to join the initial campaign. This initial campaign should be focused

upon registration and job cards, in addition to providing basic information on the key features of the scheme. Assistance to Panchayats and Project Officers in planning a shelf of works to be undertaken is key to immediate success. Each CSO in the district can cover their own field area, and beyond, to ensure as full a coverage as possible. Task Force at the district level can facilitate information flow and linkage building with the district machinery.

Civil society organisations can play a proactive role in the success of the programme. Tools like right to information, *jan sunwai*, ICT activities, accounting systems, charter on rights under NREGP, enforcing minimum wages and support in maintaining information system at the village level can be done.

Resources:

CSOs would also need to mobilize resources to undertake these roles effectively over time. Some existing project resources can be easily utilized towards this end, specially those earmarked for poverty reduction and strengthening panchayats. Some additional resources would be needed for district level and state level joint actions. CSOs need to have independent provision of resources apart from the District Administration if effective monitoring and watchdog roles have to be performed; certain amount of autonomy and freedom to speak out is crucial in this regard.

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By Dr. Rajesh Tandon and
Priyanka Dale, PRIA

Strengthening grassroots democracy through the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act and the Right to Information Act

The year 2005-2006 can be considered to be a historic one as far as India's socio-economic development is concerned. This year witnessed the enactment of two revolutionary pieces of legislation namely, the Right to Information Act (RTI) and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA). These enactments if implemented effectively can have far reaching consequences on the rural populace who comprise nearly 60% of India's population. This article discusses the importance of these two landmark Acts and their complementary role especially at the level of Gram Panchayats in India. In fact, the RTI Act can be considered to be an important tool to monitor the effective implementation of NREGA. This is particularly relevant in a country like India which is considered to be over legislated and under-performing as far as implementation of the laws is concerned.

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act is one of the country's most ambitious anti-poverty programmes ever, which provides a legal guarantee of 100 day's work in a year to India's 60 million rural households whose adult members are willing to do

unskilled manual labour. The scheme was launched by the Indian Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh in the remote village of Bandlapalli in Anantpur district of Andhra Pradesh on 2 February 2006. At present, a total of 200 most backward districts have been identified across the country for the first phase of implementation of NREGA¹. On the other hand, the Right to Information Act which was passed by the Indian Parliament in May 2005 became fully operational throughout the country from 12 October 2005². The Act provides citizens the right to access government-held information from "public authorities"³. Citizens can inspect works, documents, records; take notes, extracts or certified copies of documents or records; take certified samples of materials; and obtain information in electronic form. The Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) which have been established as per Part IX of the Indian Constitution are covered by the Act, thereby giving citizens an additional tool to access information from local bodies.

PRIs, especially the Gram Panchayats have been made the main implementing agencies of the employment guarantee

scheme. The works to be carried out under this scheme have to be decided in the Gram Sabha after which applications have to be made by the adults (who wish to enroll themselves for this scheme) to the local Gram Panchayat⁴. In many states the Gram Panchayats have also been notified as "public authorities" under the RTI Act. Public Information Officers (PIOs) have also been appointed at that level to receive applications for information from citizens, process the ad then provide the requested information within a stipulated time period. For example, states such as Uttaranchal and Chhattisgarh have designated the elected '*Sarpanchs*' as PIOs, whereas States such as Rajasthan have appointed the Panchayat Secretary. This means that citizens can now directly obtain information from the Gram Panchayats.

RTI can monitor implementation of NREGA

The Right to Information Act is being considered to be a powerful tool in the hands of the people to ensure the proper implementation of the Employment Guarantee Programme. It will enable the people to know how their money is being spent by the

¹There are five crucial components of this scheme:

- 100 days of work to earn a livelihood
- Payment of wages once a fortnight
- Equal wages for men and women
- Only works approved by gram sabhas will be undertaken.
- Works related to water conservation, watershed management, drought and flood proofing, forestry, land development, rural connectivity and wasteland development will be carried out under this scheme.

²The RTI Act does not apply to Jammu and Kashmir.

³Section 2(h), *The Right to Information Act*, 2005. This section specifies that public authorities are those bodies or institutions of self-governance which are established by the Constitution, by any law made by Parliament or State Legislature.

⁴The Gram Panchayat is responsible for verifying the application mainly the applicant's place of residence and whether he or she is an adult. After the authentication process a job card must be issued by the Gram Panchayat to the applicant household after which the registered household may apply for work.

government. The Prime Minister of India while addressing the Rural Development Ministers in a meeting in September last year was of the opinion that the methods of estimation and measurement of works and rates of payment for each task should be made transparent. "The labour that seeks work must understand what is offered, on what terms and demand its full entitlement. Similarly, there should be complete transparency and maintenance of muster rolls and payment of wages. "He further said that the RTI Act would cover every aspect of the implementation of NREGA. People will have general access to public records and information pertaining to NREGA⁵."

A key provision of the new RTI Act is Section 4, which requires proactive disclosure of a range of information. Proactive disclosure refers to the obligation on the government (in this context the PRIs) to publish key information on an ongoing basis, without being requested to do so by citizens. Some of the information which have to be proactively disclosed include the budget allocated to each PRI, indicating particulars of all plans, proposed expenditures and reports of disbursements; and detailed plan of the implementation of subsidy programmes, including the amounts allocated and the details and beneficiaries of such programmes. Thus, details of sanctions and expenditures of all works are to be painted on the walls of the panchayats as well as on boards at the worksites. In addition, the Panchayati Raj Acts of all states also indicate the proactive disclosure of information through

Gram Sabha meetings or by putting up information on notice boards. The other way of obtaining information under the RTI Act is upon request, wherein citizens have to apply for information from the PIO who is then duty bound to handle requests provide the information sought within 30 days. Citizens have to pay nominal charges for obtaining these documents, whereas all those belonging to "below poverty line" families have been exempt from paying any fees for obtaining information under the Act. From the above discussion therefore it is clear that:

- Citizens can now obtain all documents re the NREGA under the RTI Act;
- All NREGA related documents will be available for public scrutiny;
- Copies of the documents will be made available at nominal costs;
- Muster rolls will be pro-actively displayed at the Panchayat Bhavan;
- All relevant documents will be provided to the Gram Sabha by Gram Panchayats and other implementing agencies and
- Gram Sabhas may conduct social audits of all works taken up within the Gram Panchayats.

In the past there have been several instances of villagers demanding information related to various schemes of the government. The information thus obtained and verified has then been used for demanding greater accountability and transparency in the functioning of panchayat bodies. One

Muster Roll fraud exposed⁶

On 17 October 2005, five days after the national Right to Information Act came into force; local residents conducted a public hearing in relation to the recent construction of a "talab" (pond) under the National Food for Work Programme. A sum of Rs. 3.5 lakhs was sanctioned to the Irrigation Department for the project, of which Rs. 3.1 lakh was spent on labour, tracked in three weekly "muster rolls".

The muster rolls were obtained with difficulty only after a sit in was conducted at the local office of the Irrigation Department. The public hearing immediately showed that the muster rolls had been fudged. Although there were 320 names on the rolls, it emerged that only 63 of the 320 names were genuine. That means that the wages of nearly 80% of the labourers was appropriated by corrupt officials.

Additionally, it was found that all the thumbprints in the muster roll were false, even in the case of "genuine" labourers. They had put their thumbprint or had signed on a different document - the "kaccha" muster roll, an informal register maintained at the worksite to record attendance and make wage payments. This practice of maintaining two muster rolls, one for wage payments and one for securing the release of funds, has been widespread and is a convenient means of siphoning money from public works programmes. This method has been successful because muster rolls have historically been inaccessible to the public.

At the end of the public hearing, a delegation was sent to the District Collector of Surguja and the evidence was presented to him. The villagers were promised that action would be taken against the culprits. However, earlier experience in Surguja and elsewhere is not encouraging in this respect: corrupt officials are rarely caught, let alone punished. It is to be hoped that the new RTI Act will change this culture of secrecy and immunity.

⁵www.thehindubusinessline.com/2005.

⁶Jean Dreze (2005) "Another muster roll fraud exposed", India Together on-line resource: see www.Indiatogether.org/direct/2005/cdr-000088.html.

such instance has been illustrated in the box below.

In another instance, in 2001, in Janawad panchayat (Rajsamand district, Rajasthan) the information of public works expenditure was painted on a panchayat wall. This awareness amongst the people led them to mobilize and protest, exposing fraud and ghost works amounting to Rs.70 lakh, at a public hearing. This was later substantiated by a special government investigation leading to a number of institutionalised measures for transparency and accountability. Landmark events like these, facilitated by people's use of the right to information, have had a profound impact.

NREGA and RTI will strengthen grassroots democracy and bring about good governance

Information is the oxygen of democracy. If people do not know what is happening in their society, if the actions of those who rule them are hidden, then they cannot take a meaningful part in the affairs of that society. Information is not just a necessity for people it is essential part of good government.

Some of the key determinants and core values of democracy and good governance include inclusiveness, political participation, public accountability of democratic institutions, transparency, responsibility, responsiveness (to the needs of the people) etc.

Both the Acts will help in strengthening

grassroots democracy and will make the government more responsible, transparent and accountable. The Panchayati Raj institutions, with the assistance of government agencies, are central to the implementation of the NREGA.

The NREGA has a provision for Gram Sabhas to conduct social audit of all the works taken up by the Gram Panchayats. This can be made possible if the citizens know how much money has been allocated for a particular project, how decisions have been made, how the money is being disbursed and so on. Using the RTI Act, citizens can get hold of this information from the panchayats and hold them accountable. Meaningful public participation requires informed citizens who then have the capacity to take joint action. The greater the access to citizens to information, the greater the responsiveness of government to community needs. Without information people cannot adequately exercise their rights as citizens or make informed choices. People need to know about the goals of the various programmes, the resources that have been invested and the achievements that have been made. Thus, in other words for democracy to function as "government of the people" it is necessary for ordinary citizens to have access to official information so that they 'know' and therefore can 'ask' if developmental work or other aspects are not proceeding in the right direction.

NREGA and RTI Act will help in reduction of poverty

The NREGA can be considered to be a visionary attempt to remove poverty in

India. It is expected that this scheme which is meant for the rural poor will help in raising families above the poverty line and also break the vicious circle of poverty. The public works programmes provide an indispensable lifeline to the rural poor. With the rise in income of a large section of the population, there will automatically be an increase in their purchasing power and thereby give a big push to the overall economic development. Along with the rural employment guarantee scheme the RTI Act will also give a push to the economic development of the nation as "liberation from government of information that would otherwise have remained unutilized increases economic opportunity for the less powerful".⁸ With this Act a construction labourer working under the NREGA can now ask for information about labor regulations and their entitlements; or farmers can get hold of land records, market trend analysis and pricing information.

By way of conclusion it can be said that the enactment of the NREGA and the RTI Act in India is indeed revolutionary. It is hoped that with time and with proper implementation of these two legislations, many of the obstacles in the way of India's overall development will be removed and will pave the way for a more peaceful, corruption-free, and economically vibrant country to live in.

Sohini Paul
Project Officer
Right to Information Programme
Commonwealth Human
Rights Initiative
New Delhi

⁷The concept of social audit has become popular in recent times after the functioning of constitutionally mandated panchayats. Social audit in the context of the present discussion is the scrutiny and analysis of the working of PRIs from the perspective of the vast majority of the people in whose name and for whose cause this institutional system has been promoted and legitimated.

⁸CHRI (2003). Open Sesame: Looking for the Right to Information in the Commonwealth.

Making National Rural Employment Guarantee Effective Promising Potential of Information Technology

The National Rural Employment Guarantee (NREGA) is a unique guarantee of employment for one hundred days, a massive task funded by the central govt. involving huge investments and set to develop the rural infrastructure for improving livelihood and factor endowments of the poor. To get NREGA right for the poor calls for finding innovative and autonomous pathways that could cascade to motivate for harnessing all stakeholder capacities and commitment to address rural distress, especially as the bureaucracy carries a baggage of failed and corrupt practices in similar efforts as under the MEGS, NFFW, SGRY etc. Thus an opportunity beckons civil society and NGOs involved to "Make Poverty History", as our task of social value addition, the context is the king.

The key problems of the old ways are corruption and fudging of muster rolls, improper selection and poor quality of the works taken up, delays in providing work to the worker and denials and distortions in payment, and monitoring to need the needs of *Babus* and not citizens. To serve its potential and intent, NREGA needs meticulous and decentralized planning, a shelf of locally suited "works" with cost and technical estimates to be rolled out within a fortnight of the demand for employment, scheduling the works along with men and material, information sharing for prompt decisions by those in the delivery chain, timely measurement of work and its progress leading to corresponding payments, transparency, capacity building and monitoring at the level of the officials, workers and the citizens.

To find ways to overcome the serious limitations in existing approaches and thinking we need to new instruments for planning, implementation, decision-making, delivery mechanisms, transparency and monitoring. In this task information technology and connectivity can make the difference. Our proposals are not utopian as we at the Centre for Environment Concerns are validating and evaluating them on the ground and officials such as in the Ministry of Rural Development is seeking wider adoption.

The first activity in NREGA is of the community deciding at Gram Sabha on a priority of the list of "works" to be taken up in the village. Experience is that gram sabha meetings are poorly attended and largely ignored by the poor. We have an IT solution to having real participatory democracy in making the choice on the "works". Have a biometric thumb impression of all adults and link it to an electronic voting machine (EVM) that we use to cast our votes. The villagers look at the list of works and mark their choice putting their thumb impression reader into the biometric and then their choices into the EVM. This equipment can be kept for sometime allowing people to suit their convenience of time. By including in the biometric details such as caste, gender, disability or age group, we could also restrict voting to particular groups for certain types of works. The same IT application can be used for people to vote on the quality of services rendered by various officials in the NREGA machinery and could be a way of authentic and quick social audit and is a component in the NREGA.

After choosing the works, engineers

prepare a technical plan and financial estimate for each work. This is the basic source of corruption involving a 'negotiation' between the engineer and the contractor or Sarpanch. This source of corruption can be simple eliminated by putting in the details of technical plan into a query based IT software and it instantly provides the cost estimates. The software also checks quality parameters in the proposed technical plan. The output from the computer can be tailor made providing details of the number of days of work it creates for skilled and unskilled labour, gender wise break up for the unskilled labour, costs for materials and transport, benchmarks indicators in progress on work based on the estimated number of people coming for work so that progress measurement can be done accordingly to ensure that workers get biweekly or weekly payments. And based on the workforce and its gender strength it can list out what worker facilities must be created and even allocates the budget for it in the estimates. Take a print out of all this and place in on the walls in the village and this provides transparency on the biggest black box. If necessary the data can be generated even before works are identified so that people can make better choice among various works that are proposed.

Payments are made on the basis of check measurement. As benchmarking is done any trained villager can record measurement and only when the final payment is to be done the engineer needs to inspect the site and write the measurement book and certify the works as completed enabling the release of the last installment. Based on the record measurement the computer generates

payments for various categories and by feeding the muster roll data can list out who will receive what. Thus the decisions on payments are made easy reaches the worker on time and is fully transparent. Such IT application enhances efficiency and reduces costs by reducing the workload of an engineer (such personnel are scarce in panchayat offices) while NREGA is expected to have hundreds of parallel works under progress. It uses local educated youth to undertake some tasks thus de-mystifying technical knowledge and expertise. CEC and Satyam Foundation, a major IT technology institution is working on the software for making estimates and are under field tests for validation in practice.

The planning of "works" can be improved upon through IT. For instance, the emphasis in NREGA is on water conservation. By combining satellite imagery data and Geographical Information Systems (GIS) we can identify areas of potential for water conservation, manipulate different development scenarios and then do planned investments. Compare this with our experience - we have spread watersheds all over and the results are not commensurate to the investment and fact often seen as wasted. Development Alternatives which has done pioneering grass root work on water conservation is considering to adopt such an approach for water resources planning and the development of natural resources including conservation in NREGA.

The next area in NREGA is ensuring that payments go to the right person on time. For this also we could use biometric thumb impression readers to ensure payment going to the right persons. By having a user identity with computer data on payment for each person pre-fed into the hand held biometric reader a print out

on the payment is also provided to the receiver. As the biometric record the date and time of payment the same can be verified with when the money was drawn from the bank and paid to the wage seeker. When several people are paid on the same date and about the same time, we can assume the entire action took place publicly and is thus transparent. By using this way of payments we reduce the costs incurred in opening bank accounts for the wage seeker and having him/her go to distant banks for collecting their wages, reducing the cost to the wage seeker. CEC is currently using this system and will share its experience after some rounds of payments are done. The factor under test is that the thumb of people involved in manual work has bruises and cuts making authentication not work sometimes.

Management Information System for NREGA using IT applications will be done. But the data provided is aggregate and useful to programme managers at district, state and central govt. levels. It hides more than it reveals as far as the activist is concerned. Have you sent a parcel? You know that the status of the parcel can be verified at every stage in the process. And this is possible because of IT. So in NREGA all works once agreed for implementation can be tracked. This would help officials know where the delays are and correct them while NGOs or the village community can track every detail of any specific work. All that is required is that the entire system should be web enabled and the data base provided as a "read only" facility to the commoner. This system also helps vigilance groups to monitor deviations or even build them into the software and see that corrective action is taken so that NREGA activities run smooth and efficient.

Capacity building is widely recognized as fundamental for NREGA. But given the

number of people involved training will be expensive and even what is learnt may not be authentic as it is provided based on levels at which the stakeholder is placed. So we need a uniform solution oriented training kit. The answer is to have CDs with all details and who ever wants to know more on any aspect can get it by a clique. NREGA can have query facility through help lines that are recorded and the answers provided by senior officials used as a precedent to address similar dilemma faced in another place. This makes learning practice based, constantly improving and user friendly. After six months an updated CD can be got or be automatically updated as we do with Norton anti-virus.

So IT offers immense potential to correct all major flaws in NREGA and enormously improve its performance while making the task of the officials easy. But its adoption involves sharing information and demystification - the source of power. The issue is not of the availability of the technology or its capacities but of our ability to crack the powerful cartels. They are most unwilling to share their authority or action. Our task is to take democracy forward by asserting citizens rights. So let us adopt IT wherever feasible and acceptable. Once the nut is cracked and enhanced performance and its value is demonstrated the laggards would be compelled to join in. PACS plans to give an impetus to such an empowerment of civil society and influence the success of NREGA. We want NREGA to succeed and ensure the right of employment and dignity of the worker.

K.S. Gopal
Centre for Environment Concerns
3-4-142/6, Barkatpura, Hyderabad
040-27564959/27563017,
E-Mail: hyd2_cenvicon@sancharnet.in

Inclusion of disabled people in National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme

Disabled people are integral part of any society and forms a significant proportion (more than 4% in India) of population in any developing country. Disability and Poverty are both the cause and consequence of each other. Poverty compounds the extent of disability in any individual and restricts access to all mainstream resources strongly biased with negative attitudes. Any rough estimates suggest that there are more than 40 million disabled people in India itself, which probably more than the population of few countries put together. Less than 10% of disabled people in India have access to any sort of meaningful livelihood.

The Government of India passed the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2005 in September 2005. The Act gives legal guarantee of a hundred days of wage employment in a financial year to adult members of a rural household who demand employment and are willing to do unskilled manual work. The Act will be applicable to areas (initially identified 200 districts) notified by the Central Government. The Objective of the Act is to enhance the livelihood security of the people in rural areas by generating wage employment through works that develop the infrastructure base of that area. The choice of works suggested addresses causes of chronic poverty like drought, deforestation, soil

erosion. Effectively implemented, the employment generated under the Act has the potential to transform the geography of poverty.

With the enactment of NREG Act, the Government of India has initiated a process that, if properly administered, could go a long way in mitigating rural poverty, deprivation and starvation. The launch of this programme at massive scale shows the government's commitment to poverty reduction and to check migration from rural areas by providing livelihood security to people in rural areas.

But this goal cannot be met effectively without considering the needs of all people including the disabled, who are among the poorest of poor. *Unfortunately there isn't an explicit expression of disability in this Act.* If the interests of disabled people are not recognized do the key goal of poverty reduction will ever be achieved at all?

Recognising that people with disabilities are among the poorest and most vulnerable of the poor and that they are discriminated against and excluded even by poor persons, government should give special attention to their rights, inclusion and opportunities in such schemes. If government is serious to achieve sustainable poverty reduction then, first, disability needs have to be addressed by ensuring their inclusion in

such a massive poverty reduction programmes.

Thus the focus now should be on to ensure the inclusion of disabled people in this scheme. As per the provisions of PWD Act 1995, Chapter VI, sec.(40) "The appropriate Governments and local authorities shall reserve not less than three per cent in all poverty alleviation schemes for the benefit of persons with disabilities".

It also says that appropriate government and local authorities shall formulate schemes for ensuring employment of persons with disability in employment programmes.

To ensure inclusion of disabled people in the scheme, first we ensure that all employable disabled people are enrolled in the scheme and apply for the work. NGOs, DPOs and Village level societies should do intense campaigning to ensure registration of such people in the scheme. They should help Panchayats, the implementing agencies, in identifying jobs and works which can be done easily by workable disabled people. Being a demand driven project the focus should be to allow PwDs to identify projects (components) for themselves and create mechanism and indicators to measure outcomes. This means that disability concerns should

be duly recognized in identifying projects which can accelerate their entry and expand their involvement in social and economic activities in a much fair way.

For educated but unemployed disabled people the jobs can be identified with in the scheme at Panchayat and Block level where they can be engaged as Account cum MIS assistant, Community Organiser, Supervisor (for every 50 people 1 will be appointed), Crèche worker, etc. The important is to have increased disabled people's participation in selection of projects. Create a menu of model projects indicating work that can be given to Disabled people. There is a need to mainstream disability issues across such programmes and to have specific projects for them.

All the key officials such as District Programme Co-ordinator, Programme Officer, Panchayat Secretary, should be given intensive training and be sensitized to issues related to women and PwDs. Capacity building of these institutions is very essential to operate them in a much inclusive manner in addressing the needs of the PwDs and in particular of the women with disabilities.

The Administrative Reforms Commission (ARC) organized a two day national level consultation process to strengthen accountability, transparency and monitoring of NREGS. This meet was represented by Leonard Cheshire International South Asia Regional Office and we took the opportunity to sensitize

the participants to include disabled people in the entire scheme. The ARC came up with the following recommendations to Scheme;

- 3% of the resources at block level should be earmarked for disabled people's employment opportunities and skill development. This should be backed up with separate action plan in place. i.e., 3% of money for disabled people's employment, without separation from inclusive standard.
- To ensure inclusion of disabled persons, particularly of the widows, disabled siblings, each adult disabled should be counted as "Single family Household". (Separate Household) so that they get an additional 100 days of employment guarantee
- Choose projects for group of Disabled where they can work together pre training, skill up gradation training programme be designed at block levels.
- EGS should create useful employment to beneficiaries (Particularly disabled people) and standard assets to the villages (Ensuring barrier free access to community assets).
- Disabled people to be preferably included in admin and supervisory roles at District, Block and Panchayat level.

- Social audit to measure and evaluate inclusion of different class on periodic basis.

In nutshell the scheme should help rural disabled persons and their care givers to improve their quality of life and livelihood. It should give special attention to their inclusion and opportunities and create assets which are accessible to all, making barrier free environment.

One of the studies shows that nearly 80% of the employed disabled people in rural India are engaged in manual labour work. And nearly 70% of disabled people live in rural areas. So NREGS if implemented in right spirit would engage itself in alleviating poverty of disabled people.

Article by:

Neeraj Sharma,

Manager Livelihoods,

and

K.R.Rajendra

Regional Representative- South Asia,

Leonard Cheshire International,

South Asia Regional Office

542, 9th Cross, JP Nagar,
Bangalore 560 078, INDIA.

Tel & Fax: 0091-80-26581902

Mobilie: 09341230904,
09945145252

Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme for BREAKING THE WEB OF POVERTY

PACS Programme rests on the presumption that in India there is no shortage of schemes aiming at providing development inputs to the marginalized sections of the society. The fact that poverty continues on a large scale is attributed to weakness in the delivery system and absence of demand by the poor.

NREGP stands out in the whole set of poverty alleviation programme because of two new components:

- a. The Center pays for work generated by the State and the States pay if they cannot generate work.
- b. The work is as per the need of the poor and not at the convenience of the government.

I expect that every State will try to nullify these two fundamentals when the State document is made so that the State will be shielded from being responsible for non-performance, and continue to retain its hold over the poor. and PACS, therefore, must examine the State documents and initiate high-level interaction to reduce distortion. A team consisting of VANIPRIA, Human Rights Group, and others located in Delhi can do the needful.

However, the main thrust of PACS in tune with its structure and objective must be at the ground level. I had been pointing out repeatedly that the approach to solving the problems of poverty must start at district and reach the village through Block and Panchayat. Advocacy is needed at the district level, interaction at the block level and sharing at the villages. The performance of PACS partners on the issue of district level advocacy must improve to match the need.

NREGP provides excellent opportunity at

the village level. The General Body, that is, all adults in the village, is expected to

- a. Identify members in families opting for the scheme.
- b. Identify works to be undertaken (within 5 km)
- c. Help proper execution of the work (up to certain percentage, 1/3rd women etc.)

This will be the acid test of the PACS programme. PACS has invested to improve the capacity of NGOs, in the hope that they will empower the CBOs for accessing schemes meant for them.

During the last few years, pressure had been mounting on PACS management to provide fund for service delivery. It has been argued that for the poor, empowerment without opportunity is of little use. Luckily, we could withstand the pressure and insisted that all effort should be to improve the "demand power" of the people. NREGP is now available and hence our partners must ensure that the scheme is used rightly.

Many villages under PACS are covered under NREGP, and hence poverty must be fully overcome within the first year in these villages.

But this is only winning a battle. PACS has to win the war, that is, ensure permanent eradication of poverty.

We can look at NREGP from four angles:

- a. Social Engineering: Organise the village, identify and register the families, help them to apply and ensure that they follow the rules laid out to get 100 days work or full compensation.
- b. Technology Management : Identify the work, make design & estimate, fix the work schedule, interact at district,

converge other programmes, help to do the work rightly.

- c. Combination of SE and TM
- d. Integrate SE and TM for Sustainable Solution

I am referring to (d) which starts with the question: "How do we use NREGP to ensure that the people are permanently out of the web of poverty"? And Poverty must include both economic and social aspects.

Mostly we look at poverty from the view of earning. Overcoming the bonds of poverty is through appropriate spending. Hence, as the income is assured through the scheme, the PACS partners have to work to open right channels for spending education, health, asset, security. A completely new set of issues, problems, opportunities, push and pull forces will be emerging.

The critical component of planning will be optimum deployment of family work force for various tasks, covering income generation, societal obligation and household chores. For the smaller families, a new gender sensitivity will be needed, based on equality and sharing.

Some of the tasks like carcass management, burning of bodies, sweeping and cleaning will have major impact due to NREGP. We expect, that our partners will encourage these activities by "untouchables" remain undermanned. Therefore new technological back-up has to be brought in, and that alone can lead to the emergence of "not-so-untouchable" Doms and Chamars.

The impact on marginal and small farmers will be interesting. After the first few years of land and water development, they will

have to invest in agriculture to get adequate return. Biotechnology, crop management, new agriculture will be needed to make the investment fruitful. PACS partners may think of introducing some of these concepts and naturally learn them first. Information service by CSO will become an important factor.

The most difficult challenge is for the landless labour, which means landless unskilled labour. The "Unskilled" term emerges because they use rudimentary tools and implements like spade and shovel, or use no tool, as in loading & unloading. When these people opt for land work near home, cities will suffer and the labour rate will go up. To match the increased manpower cost, mechanization will certainly enter the arena, demanding a whole new set of services and skills.

The question is how we approach to manage the situation and make the best out of this bold and brave venture!

I am advocating for a national level programme, "Promotion of Rural Agricultural, Industrial and Service Enterprises", shortly named as PRAISE.

The Core themes are three

- a. Agriculture, Industrial activity and Services are to be reckoned on one platform as enterprises.
- b. Ultimately Service Enterprise will absorb maximum workforce in village area, just as in urban areas, and these enterprises need urban facilities.
- c. Only in urban centers, quality improvement in health, education, social securities are possible. Development infrastructure like water, housing, household water, sanitation, communication, entertainment will come only with urbanization.

In PRAISE, one visualizes one growth point for 15 to 20 villages or for about 20,000 people or for 4000 families. All

development inputs are concentrated at these points. Thus national development aiming to cover 600,000 villages (29 lakh habitats) starts at distributed 30,000 points only. At each point a township is designed and built for 4000 families. This is PURA, our President is talking about.

PRAISE is actually a promoter of PURA. No township emerges without economic activity. Hence PRAISE focuses on economic activities only.

PRAISE is an NGO initiative. The aim is that at each Block there will be one NGO well trained in Business promotion. Its task is to help to set up 5 clusters in the Block in 5 years.

Each clusters may contain about 20 enterprises some on farming producing industrial raw material, some on processing adding value to the raw material producing either consumer goods or intermediary for higher level processing, some will provide the services : Energy, Water, Marketing, Transport etc.

I believe that if the total turnover in a cluster is about 20 lakh, it will attract other investments and thus act as a growth promoter.

PRAISE visualizes a 3-tier structure, all manned by NGOs for optimum effect. Each zone should have a Resource Centre with core competencies in the fields of

- a) Business promotion
- b) Entrepreneurship development
- c) Alternative Agriculture
- d) Processing Systems
- e) Engineering technology

At the districts within the zone there should be District development Platform to negotiate with government, market, and knowledge sources, financial institutions. The Block level NGOs have to establish this platform.

At each Block one NGO will be the promotional group, will be holding hands of the new enterprises, Electronic connectivity to the Resource Centre will ensure least delay problem solving.

I propose that each enterprise pay 1% of its turnover as Promotional charge to the NGO. 5 clusters will make the NGO self-supporting and therefore, the process will continue.

PRAISE offers enormous benefits to the corporate sector. For those who need intermediate products for their industries, PRAISE will ensure quality and quantity, will reduce transport cost and lessen the manpower at finishing points., This will promote automation, international protocol maintenance, high productivity, zero waste, least pollution. These industries and all others will have a high Corporate Social Responsibility credit for supporting equity, justice and creating social development opportunities.

The greatest contribution of PRAISE will be for reducing migration, increasing respect for agriculture and bringing hope and opportunity for all youths, rural or urban. PRAISE will thus empower Justice leading to social Inclusion & Equity.

In future, I dream families are living in townships provided with better education health and social security, villages are converted to agricultural farms where one goes to work every day on foot or on bicycle.

Five points in each block is achievable People in the villages are tired of bluffs. 29 lakh habitats will not get electricity in several generations. Roti, Kapra, Makan will not satisfy the need of the youth of Developed India. History will not forgive if we fail to bring Justice to seventy percent people in our county side.

Prof. A.K. Basu
Society for Rural Industrialisation
Bariatu Road, Behind Doctors Colony
Ranchi - Jharkhand - 834009

Poorest Areas Civil Society (PACS) Programme A Partnership Initiative against Poverty

The Poorest Areas Civil Society (PACS) Programme is probably the single largest anti-poverty programme being implemented in India by a network of Civil Society Organisation (CSOs).

Supported by the UK Government's Department for International Development (DFID) and managed by Development Alternative and PricewaterhouseCoopers (P) Ltd., the PACS Programme focuses on the 108 poorest districts of India. Over 80% of India's poorest districts are located in the states of Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh. These are the states covered by the Programme.

A seven-year programme, PACS is now in its fifth year of implementation. The programme already has a network of 529 CSOs in 87 districts, covering over 14,030 villages in these six states.

Objective: Empowering the Poor

PACS aims to empower the poor so that they can exercise their rights and demand their entitlements. The Programme aims to achieve this by strengthening the capacity of CSOs working for the poor in the target districts.

For more information visit us at: www.empowerpoor.org



Management Consultants:
Development Alternatives – Pricewaterhouse Coopers (P) Ltd.



Supported by:

DFID Department for
International
Development

PACS Programme Coordinator
Development Alternative
111/9-Z, Kishangarh, Vasant Kunj, New Delhi - 110 070, India
Tel.: 91+011+26890380, 26134103, Fax: 91+011+26130817
email: pacsindia@devalt.org, website: www.empowerpoor.org