

Rural Employment Guarantee

"The hungry world cannot be fed until and unless the growth of its resources and the growth of its population come into balance. Each man and woman-and each nation -must make decisions of conscience and policy in the face of this great problem".

Lyndon B. Johnson

Prelude

More than fifty years after independence, India remains a country where 350 million people live in absolute poverty. India's poor make up roughly one third of its total population since out of the total world population of 6 billion, India alone has a population of 1 billion.

The large population has its pros and cons - it provides for a large workforce. But it also adds to the country's woe of myriad problems of food security, discrimination, lack of education, health and sanitation facilities and unemployment which has a devastating impact on the economy. Lack of rural employment has been attributed to an imbalance in the social facets in rural areas. Rural migration has increased tremendously. Migration to the urban areas in search of livelihoods and a better way of life also adversely affects the urban infrastructure, leading to overcrowding in the cities, housing problems and so on. It is clear that for India to make real gains in alleviating poverty a radical solution must be found.



Over the last decade-and-a-half India has embraced the path of reforms. Since then there have been several dramatic changes in the economic landscape. The Government of India has made rural economic development in general and rural infrastructure development in particular, a key priority. Since independence, the government has incorporated various schemes in all of its five year plans. Most of the plans have focused on agriculture, industry, (especially heavy industry), defence, unemployment, poverty removal, development of village and cottage industries, natural mobilization of resources and improving the productivity level of industries by upgradation of technology. However, the Eighth Five-Year Plan (1992-1997) has identified human development as the ultimate goal. It aimed to create jobs, contain population, eradicate literacy, universalize elementary education and provide safe drinking water and primary health care facilities to all. Despite its progress, India has a long way to go with about one half of the population still illiterate, a high gender bias, relatively low life expectancy at birth (about 61 years), high levels of under-nutrition and anemia, lack of adequate safe drinking water and other basic amenities.

The Indian government has a number of schemes meant to alleviate poverty in rural areas but their success rate is very poor. A major reason for the low rate of employment generation is the decline in the employment elasticity of agricultural growth. The late Rajeev Gandhi's statement that only about 15 percent of money meant for the poor actually reaches them speaks volumes. To address the issue of unemployment various income generation schemes such as the Jawahar Rozgar Yojana (JRY), Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY), Swarnajayanti Gram Rozgar Yojana (SGRY) and others were formulated. Creation of durable assets / infrastructure at the village level, creation of productive assets exclusively for SC / ST for sustained employment and generation of supplementary employment for the un-employed poor living below poverty line were the objectives of these schemes. But all of them failed to make a lasting impact because though the Indian Government had created labour-intensive rural work programmes and these were not based on the Right to Work. Providing employment to the growing millions of unemployed has to clearly thus be the foremost national priority.

Recognizing the loopholes, the **National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA)** was drafted and formally launched in February 2006. It promises a job to every rural Indian in each household. NREGA has great potential for income security, poverty reduction and development of the backward rural areas, which will then help in addressing issues of migration, unemployment and food security. This act has its own pros and cons. First, it aims at providing work, and not just a dole. Rural poor are guaranteed 100 days of work per household every year.

Secondly, the work is to be used to improve local infrastructure and thus expected to improve productivity. Thirdly, there is universal targeting to remove bureaucratic discretion, a major source of corruption, delay and leakage.

All those who are registered in a village and offer themselves for work are eligible. Only manual work is offered at the state minimum wage or 75 percent of the national minimum wage, whichever is higher. Fourthly, the legal right to work; transparency, with muster rolls of the eligible, of those given employment, of work done, to be posted in public places; the Right to Information Act (October 13, 2005), that makes it mandatory for officials to give information to citizens on request, are all expected to encourage citizen action to ensure delivery. Fifthly, no contractors are to be used since they have been a major source of corruption and kickbacks in public works. Instead the local *panchayats* are responsible for identifying the works and implementing the scheme. It is easier to make lower levels of government accountable to citizens.

But the main problem is that rural India's infrastructure is crumbling, and the poor continue to suffer from chronic and especially seasonal unemployment. Re-vitalization of local self-government and effective delivery go together. Ensuring this and using funds to create good quality assets will be the major challenge. The scheme, if it works, can both create infrastructure and alleviate severe poverty.

What is the NREG Act?

The NREG act aims to enhance the livelihood security of the rural households and can provide the basis of a permanent social security system and even act as an instrument for planned and equitable rural development. The provisions of the NREGA will be implemented at the state level through the State Employment Guarantee Council, which will be the nodal agency to monitor and review the implementation of the act at the state level. The panchayats at the districts, intermediaries and village levels shall be the principle authorities for planning and implementation of the schemes, under the Act.

Role of Development Alternatives

However as with every programme, NREGS has also suffered the usual implementation hurdles. Several myths and misconceptions gnaw at the grass root level. This is why the role of civil society becomes important in ensuring that the NREGS is a success.

Civil Society

"The space between the formal government institutions and the dominant economic institutions such as corporations or landed estates has been labeled civil society. This space includes kinship groups, voluntary organisations, trade unions, religious and communal groups, and similar associations". (Weaver, Rock, and Kusterer 1997:208:19)

Apart from asset creation, NREGA also provides for work under water conservation and technology oriented labour. As most of the small Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) working with the communities do not have the requisite expertise, organisations like Development Alternatives (DA) have a major role to play. In order to be able to provide successful responses and solutions, DA has built up a strong capacity to identify the priority issues confronting the nation and devise effective ways to solve them. The scheme provides a good opportunity for Development Alternatives, as it has worked on a broad array of complex development issues such as providing eco friendly, technology-based low cost measures for sustainable development. It can take on an enabling role in assisting and providing handholding support at the village / district / state level.

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Development Alternatives can help in developing some good models of best practices which can further the

advocacy initiatives as it has hands-on experience in managing a large network of Civil Society Organisations in the six states of Bihar, UP, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, Jharkhand and through the PACS (Poorest Areas Civil Society) programme. Presently with a partner network of over 562 CSOs, working directly with the community, DA can facilitate processes for effective implementation. The PACS programme has addressed certain areas such as policy advocacy, governance and social cohesion. The objective of the initiative is to provide for effective implementation of the NREGS and develop models of best practices to influence the policies for refinement of implementation guidelines of NREGA. Of the total 89 PACS districts, 70 have been brought under the NREG scheme. (www.empowerpoor.org)

The income-generation potential of the NREGS in the PACS Programme villages is enormous. Assuming an average of 50 households in the 9,000-odd programme villages is covered by the NREGS, the total number of households that could benefit from this scheme is over Rs. 4.50 lakhs. This implies a potential annual wage disbursement of over Rs. 270 crore in the PACS Programme area, or around Rs 3 lakh per annum per programme village. Additionally, each village stands to gain from land, water and forest assets that are supposed to be created under the NREGS.

Conclusion

Therefore, the role of the civil societies like Development Alternatives emerges significantly for the effective facilitation of the NREGS and also in creating an enabling environment for the sustainable development of societies. Presently involved in the awareness generation campaign organised simultaneously across all the 6 PACS states, DA has assumed an active role in disseminating the provisions of the NREGA and State guidelines through a week long awareness drive which will involve all the stakeholders. The drive is aimed at all those involved with the implementation of NREGA and successfully ensure that the common people for whom the ACT is meant is not deprived of their true rights and entitlements. q

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