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MGNREGS IS DEMAND DRIVEN BUT HAS BECOME TARGET DRIVEN



A GROUND REALITIES OBSERVED IN DARINGBADI BLOCK, ODISHA

Banamali Montry

Abstract: “The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), enacted by the Government of India in 2005, is perhaps the most ambitious anti-poverty scheme launched anywhere in the world. However, as reported by the various studies, the scheme has shown several anomalies when it comes to its implementation in the right manner. Some anomalies relating to the implementation of this scheme was observed during the conduction of the research study on “Tribal Development Through Institutional Arrangements” in Daringbadi block, Kandhamal District, Odisha. Though 48.61 % of job card holding households found to have been worked under MGNREGS in the block during 2012-13 but their awareness level on the various provisions of the schemes and on the process of implementation was completely poor. 150 respondents of 36 villages of the 12 GPs of the block were interviewed with a set of questionnaires to know the reality of MGNREGS implementation in the block, the findings of which in gist has been presented in this article with suggestive measures. The study shows that MGNREGA which is demand driven has become target driven in the block. The findings needs further probing in other blocks of the district and elsewhere in the state. The effort of the study is not to blame any individual or show fault in the system or but to generate reflection in the minds of the policy makers and implementers to bring necessary improvement in the implementation of the scheme and lead the scheme towards desired objectives.

Keywords: Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act , policy makers , National Rural Employment Guarantee Act .

INTRODUCTION

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (Mahatma Gandhi NREGA) notified on September 7, 2005, aims at enhancing livelihood security of households in rural areas of the country by providing at least one hundred days of guaranteed wage employment in a financial year to every household whose adult member's volunteers to do unskilled manual work. In addition to provide unskilled jobs, creation of durable assets and strengthening of livelihood resource base of the rural poor are the important objectives of the scheme. Certain provisions like Social Audit and Right to Information have enabled Civil Society sponsored scrutiny & monitoring of the implementation of the scheme across the states. Many such initiatives have brought to light several short comings/ discrepancies/ irregularities in the implementation of the scheme which primarily indicate that benefits are not reaching the intended beneficiaries, the guarantee component is missing, planning has been inadequate to provide succor to the poor. Overall, it has become target driven instead of becoming demand driven.

The first premise of MGNREGA is that it is demand driven. Pioneers of the formulation of this Act have made the Act demand driven compelling the administration to provide unskilled job if someone asks for it if not then pay unemployment allowances. As per direction of the act people who demand for unskilled jobs are to be provided unskilled jobs.

Reality of MGNREGS implementation in the block in brief:

In this article a gleams of the reality of implementation MGNREGS in Daringbadi block, Kandhamal district that was observed during the conduction of a research study on the topic “Institutional arrangements for tribal development” has been presented. A sample survey was conducted in 36 villages of Daringbadi block taking 150 respondents to know the process and product of MGNREGS implementation in the block and the benefit accrued to the people under the scheme. Answers of some of the questions relating to MGNREGS implementation were sought in the ground like whether people are aware of the scheme, do they know the provision of the schemes and process of its implementation, their reaction on the total process of implementation, about their demand for the work, payment etc

The secondary data revealed that till date 160089 households have been issued with MGNREGA Job cards in Kandhamal district out of which 77663 households (48.51%) have availed jobs under MGNREGS in the year 2012-13. In case of Daringbadi block, a total of 27020 households have been issued with MGNREGS job cards in the block out of which 13136 households (48.61 %) have availed jobs under MGNREGS in the same year as per official record. More than 50 % of them belong to STs. The respondents revealed that employment that they have been provided till today was

never demanded by them. Instead some of their villagers called them to work in road, pond and land levelling work in their villages about which they neither knew before nor planned. They have no idea of planning for project, demand for work, acknowledgement receipt, PIM, information board, worksite facilities, muster roll, measurement, amount of payment, time line for each process, social audit, grievance redressal mechanism, staff structure etc. Whenever they are called for work they just work and get payment. In some cases payment gets delayed even more than three/four months. As a whole it is said that MGNREGS instead of becoming demand driven has become Target Driven in the block. When the concerned officials are asked of the nature of becoming target driven the simple answer comes from them is that they are asked to spend certain amounts of money anyhow in a particular year. Hence, they try their best to spend the money as per the instruction given to them.

Key issues and concerns:

Some of the key issues and concerns of the implementation of this scheme has been presented in this article so that step may be taken to create a conducive environment for the villagers and officials to make the Act demand driven instead of making it target driven.

Low awareness is still a crucial problem to make it demand driven:

The current trend of holding one or two awareness meetings or training at GP or block or district level with two or three percentage of participation of job card holders of the area is not going to solve the problem of low awareness. Even involving NGO for the purpose is not going to make lasting solution. NGOs do the same as long as fund is provided to them if not expecting anything better from them will be like a day dreamer. The question is how long the villagers remember what we say in the meeting or training? Hence, which I have been emphasising is that minimum information of the provision of the schemes as mentioned below and contact no of all the concerned officials of block, district, banks, postal dept.etc should be kept in the villages in hard form, may be written on the walls, maintained as a form of village register/document, may be kept as a audio/ visual cassettes etc. In the village level. If anybody goes to a village just have to remind them to see them and know those information. The minimum information what should be told to the villagers under MGNREGS are the following.

1.List of permissible work (both individual & community):

People do not know what are the works/projects can be taken up under MGNREGS. Tell them the list and leave on them to choose.

2.Demand for work, dated receipt and unemployment allowances:

People do not know how to demand for a work. Many of them do not know about dated receipt and unemployment allowances. It should be informed.

3.Wage vs Measurement:

People do not know for how much work how much of payment is given. They start their work at 7 or 8 AM and stop at 5 or 6 PM. In case of thika (agreement), they are told to be given Rs.120 or 130 for digging 10 by 10 by 1 pit which supposed to be Rs. 286. Completely exploited. Every time we visit to the field find such cases. How many places we shall visit and sensitise? Unless special drive is taken by the state administration such cases are not going to be minimised.

4.Payment process:

People still have the concept of contractor bringing the work for them and will pay every day and accordingly asking for payment to him and getting minimum wage as 100 or 120 rupees. They should be informed where to get payment and how payment is processed.

5.Plan for creation of assets in their village out of permissible work: participation in Palli Sabha and raising demand for individual and community projects for their village is not happening. It should happen.

6.Enquiry or Complain: Many of them do not know about Panchayat helpline. Nobody knows where to enquire or lodge complain. Contact no of Collector, PD, MC, APO, BDO, GRS, JE/GPTA, PEO, Panchayat helpline, bank and post officials etc are to be maintained in the villages either in hard or soft form or to be written in any public place of the villages. At present people are completely ignorant of all these officials.

Delay payment still a problem to make it demand driven:

The delay payment or issues relating to delay payment is another crucial problem known to each one of us including the state and district administration. Because this problem the pace of achievement under MGNREGS has drastically slowed down in the state. We all know that without solving this problem no intervention is going to yield any good results under MGNREGS in the state. Labourers in the village want daily payment because they live hand to mouth every day. Wherever they get instant payment they go to that work. Most of the expenditure and person days shown in the websites are manufactured figures. If there is 10 percent of work 20 percent is shown with the knowledge of the wage seekers in certain cases and even without the knowledge of wage seekers in many cases. If one goes to the ground and trace then will find how much of those figures are true or false and how much of those are manufactured figures. Wage seekers also are involved in this process. Attendance is shown in the muster roll, money comes to the account of wage seekers with their knowledge, withdrawn and shared among the wage seekers, GS, GRS and other officials. We all had the first idea of this situation when we conducted the village level social audit where more than seventy percentages of data mismatched. The same practice is still going on.

The hard truth is that due to delay payment people do not like to work under MGNREGS. They go for the other work where they get instant payment or more payment.

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Wherever contractor in the form of GS makes daily payment or conditional payment in the form thika in the village some villagers work but are exploited as I mentioned above. The GRS are forced to get involved in such practices because they are given target. The GRS are scolded by the BDOs in the meeting if target is not fulfilled. BDOs get scolding by Collectors and Collectors get scolding by Commissioner. We are witness to such scolding and hard talks in the block and district level nodal meetings. Why such scolding takes place you and me know well. It is because that salary of the staff could not be met from six percent contingency if total expenditure does not become up to that much. So MGNREGA which is demand driven has become supply driven and target driven. So in order to fulfil the target lower level officials adopt any means suitable for them. Some cases it is fair but many cases it is fouts. But the task payers' money goes to the hand of those people without yielding results for the villagers as it has become target driven.

After more than six years of implementation of the act e-FMS has been devised to reduce the payment problem, to bring more transparency in the process. It is a welcome step. In many ways it will solve the problem, major of them would be removing the problem of shortage or surplus of fund at GP, block and district level and giving payment within 10 days to the villagers those are closer to sub post offices and banks. But for the villagers living in remote areas problems still continue.

Problem relating payment of MGNREGS through e-FMS in Odisha:

Banks cannot provide payment solutions to major MGNREGS wage seekers as more than 80 percent of the accounts of the wage seekers have been opened in the post offices because of its proximate locations to the villagers. But the unfortunate fact is that all branch offices located at the village level and many sub post offices in the district haven't online connectivity so they cannot be accessed through EMO clients. Hence, until the internet connectivity is provided to the sub post offices and branch post offices, the payment could not be made to the wage seekers of remote villages before 12 days. It can reduce the time of preparation of cheques and submission to either to post office or banks but taking money from main post office to branch post office will be still a problem

There is no linkage between the server of the postal department & MGNREGA Soft. So the official of either department cannot get the information on each transaction. What I mean to say is whether the wage is paid to the wage seekers or not MGNREGA officials cannot know and the other way the postal officials cannot not know when the FTO is generated against whom of how much amount.

Besides, there are other technical problems like name and account no shown in MGNREGS website but branch post officers takes only account no and not names, he has to match those accounts no and make entry in his ledger then only can make payment which is time taking.

As everything is done online, 24 internet connectivity is a must. Constant failure of electricity hampers the MGNREGS work as many blocks are located in the remote areas where failure of electricity and internet is the order of the day.

Hence, installation of VSAT is recommended to provide 24 hrs internet connectivity and to provide electricity arrangement of generator could be thought of.

Simple suggestions to make the Act demand driven:

1. Let us build up ownership of villagers through information sharing and orientation with the help of GRS. Let us train the GRS to carry out the following tasks:

a. Write the minimum information of MGNREGS on the walls of the villages that we want the villagers to know as mentioned above including the phone numbers of all the concerned officials of block, district, postal and banks. A template of minimum information to be written in the village wall may be developed.

b. In addition to that maintain a register to write the essential MGNREGS information as well as MGNREGS profile of the village like no of HHs, job card holders, accounts opened, project approved, ongoing, payment received etc. And keep at the village level.

c. Open accounts of the wage seekers, engage them in work, process their payment etc.

d. Make the list of the villagers against whom work order may be done for the community project.

e. Form MGNREGS committee 5 to 11 members taking majority consent of the villagers to approve the projects for the village, finalise the GS list, start the project, conduct meeting, supervise the project and complete the project, participate in a social audit etc. This person will be facilitating all these tasks to be looked after by them.

f. His/her payment will be made on performance basis with due approval by the villagers. Amount of payment for each of his/her tasks may be devised.

g. As the payment will be on performance basis one GRS may be selected to look after 300 to 500 active job card holders to make the work more easy, effective and efficient. Because present GRS are not giving justice to their assignment due to more tasks with low payment.

2. Measurement will not be a problem if the GRS is active and wage seekers are aware of minimum information and have contact number of higher officials. They can Phone to the higher officials for any problem. JE/GPTA will automatically go for measurement.

3. Branch post masters will be alert as people might phone to their higher officials for delay in payment.

4. There should be a monitoring cell to address the complain received by the villagers at block and district level.

5. Punishment and compensation: Section 25 under chapter VI under miscellaneous part of the NREGA that is penalty for non compliance does not make the officials accountable as the punishment is not heavy and stringent. The state should make a special order relating to penalty for non compliance of the Act in order to make all the officials accountable. But simultaneously the working environment also need to be created by meeting the essential requirement like recruitment of enough number of staff with reasonable salary, meeting all infrastructure requirement etc to carry

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forward the mandate effectively and efficiently.

6. At present there are vacancies of BDOs, JEs/GPTAs, PEOs, and GRS in most of the places. Most of the GPs do not have electricity and internet connection, no space to keep computers and run office at GP level. Hence, computers are kept at block office. These problems are to be sorted out.

CONCLUSION

There is a purity and novelty in the Act as long as the act remains as demand driven but failing to create a conducive environment for its proper execution leading it to be target driven and thereby making it worse day by day. This is not a good sign for the Act as it has failed to become people friendly. A brain storming for this is necessary and a small step in the right direction might boost the MGNREGS performance in the state in the coming days.

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