
Assessing the Role of NREGA in Building Community Assets in Rural Areas: Case Studies from Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh

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Introduction

NREGA is one of the most important programmes ever launched' for rural India. Although it has been positioned and popularized as social security and livelihood scheme but it also have a very important connotations for economy as a whole. NREGS has not only emerged as ray of hope for millions of poor and marginalized families in rural India but also as a massive rural investment program, which has promise to take India's growth in top gear. This scheme is gradually building physical assets in rural India which is visible, sustainable, technically sound and being monitored by people themselves.

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) - or the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, as it is now known - was introduced in 200 of India's poorest districts in August 2005, and extended to cover all rural areas of the country in 2008. The NREGA provided for a hundred days of unskilled manual work per rural household, at the state-wise minimum wage (subject to a national minimum) and within 5 km of the worker's place of residence. Poverty reduction schemes have historically been a significant part of India's public works programs. However the NREGA stands out as being the first of its kind to provide the right to employment to the rural poor. As an Act rather than a Scheme, it is more durable, provides more security to the workers and cannot be cancelled or changed without an amendment in Parliament, all features that are desirable from the point of view of poverty reduction and improvement of the livelihoods of rural agricultural laborers (see Dey and Dr'eze [2007] for more details on the provisions of the Act).

At the time of implementation its main goals were stated as the "creation of durable assets and strengthening of the livelihood resource base of the rural poor" (Chakraborty [2007]). The social benefits, as envisioned by those who fought for its enactment, are many and far-reaching. The Act would help protect rural households from poverty and hunger by providing work in the slack season when money is hard to come by, it would help reduce rural-urban migration by providing employment to families within the village, it would aid in the empowerment of women and the increase in their agency within the household by providing them with income security,

Workfare programmes have been increasingly used in developed countries for many years with the aim of reducing work disincentives mostly caused by poverty and unemployment. In developing countries similar types of programmes have been adopted in the form of food-for-work or cash-for-work. The rationale for these types of programmes was to transfer income to poor unskilled rural households during slack agricultural seasons by providing them temporary employment on public work in rural areas, therefore enabling them to have smooth consumption spending.

In India, the Central Government had earlier implemented various programmes and policies that offered employment on public work at minimum wages. However, these programmes were found to have less than satisfactory results in mitigating the issues of unemployment and poverty in rural areas. In 2004, the National Advisory Council (NAC) to the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) Government had made an in-depth study of the job guarantee schemes launched by previous governments. The study revealed that the policies launched by the earlier governments had serious inadequacies. Some of the inadequacies at the rural level were: lack of

awareness among local communities about existence of government programmes, dearth of community participation, lack of planning, creation of sub-standard quality of assets, false muster rolls, problems of payments, contract system, diversion of funds, weak monitoring and verification systems, absence of comprehensive database, inadequate capacity of implementing agencies, multiple wage programmes running in parallel, and, most importantly, no public accountability (Shome, 2011). The study recommended that these inadequacies should be corrected in future programmes. The NAC was then entrusted with the project to transform rural lives in India through social intervention by initiating a new programme called National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA)². NREGA was enacted and notified in September 2005 to reinforce the commitment of the government towards livelihood security for rural households. The significance of NREGA is that it ² On October 2, 2009, the Government of India renamed the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA).

NREGA is undoubtedly a landmark event in the account of rural development policies in India as well as in the history of poverty diminution strategies in the world. It is an innovative programme in the Indian context. The Act advocates that by providing employment opportunities within rural areas, several social and economic issues are simultaneously addressed. Through employment in rural areas, rural poverty is reduced, and this leads to a reduction in rural-urban migration, which in turn curbs urbanization of poverty (Shome, 2011). The further purpose of NREGA, through the potential outcome of its effective implementation, is also to influence several core and non-core agenda items of ILO (Jha, 2009). These include stopping the flow of distress rural-urban migration, curbing child labour and making villages self-sustaining through productive asset creation (such as building roads, cleaning up of water tanks, soil and water conservation works, and so on). The works undertaken under NREGA are meant to regenerate the rural natural resource base, which in turn may result in sustainable livelihoods for residents.

The Act was mainly targeted to benefit landless labourers, Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST)³, and women. In other words, NREGA has great potential for increasing the volume of employment among the rural unemployed and underemployed.

It provides ample opportunities for creating rural public assets, which has been largely neglected over the years. It helps to enhance the purchasing power of rural households, thereby contributing to poverty alleviation. It also has the capacity to tap the hitherto under-utilized labour of women in developing rural India (Ghosh, 2009). By providing equal wages to both men and women, NREGA upholds the social position and integrity of ³ According to the Constitution of India, the weaker sections of the society include Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST). Thus, in brief, National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) 2005 is landmark legislation in Indian history of social security legislation after independence. Needless to mention, a legislation of this nature is bound to act for the well-being of the poorer section of the society.

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005

The most important change NREGA represents is that it gives a legally binding response by the state to right to work that is, after NREGA, enshrined in law. This is a commitment by the state that is unprecedented in the history of independent India—both as a legally enforceable right and in terms of financial resources. The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005 was passed by the Indian parliament on 23rd August 2005. The basic objective of the NREGA is to —enhance livelihood security in rural areas by providing at least 100 days of guaranteed wage employment in a financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work. This work guarantee can also serve other objectives: generating productive assets, protecting the environment, empowering rural women, reducing rural-urban migration and fostering social equity, among others.

Salient features of the NREGA

The various provisions of the NREGA following: It provides at least one hundred days of guaranteed wage employment in every fiscal year for at least one adult member of every household prepared to do unskilled manual labour at the wage rate specified by the state government.

- (a) Adult members of a rural household may apply for employment if they are willing to do unskilled manual work. Such a household will have to apply for registration to the local Gram Panchayat.
- (b) Employment will be given within 15 days of application for work by an employment seeker. If employment is not provided within 15 days, daily unemployment allowance, in cash has to be paid. Liability of payment of unemployment allowance is of the states.
- (c) At least one-third of persons to whom work is allotted work have to be women.
- (d) Disbursement of wages has to be done on weekly basis and not beyond a fortnight.
- (e) Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) have a principal role in planning and implementation.
- (f) The selected works to provide employment are to be selected from the list of permissible works.

The different categories of permissible works are as follows:

1. Water conservation and water harvesting;
2. Drought proofing (including afforestation and tree plantation);
3. Irrigation canals including micro and minor irrigation works;
4. Provision of irrigation facility to land owned by households belonging to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes or to land of beneficiaries under the Indira Awas Yojana;
5. Renovation of traditional water bodies including desilting of tanks;
6. Land development;
7. Flood control and protection works including drainage in water logged areas;
8. Rural connectivity to protection to provide all weather accesses; and
9. Any other work which may be notified by the central government in consultation with the state government.

(g) Employment shall be provided within a radius of five kilometers of the village where the applicant resides at the time of applying. In case where employment is provided outside of such radius, it must be provided with in the block, and the laborers shall be paid 10 per cent of the wage rate as extra wages to meet additional transport and living expenses.

(h) Work site facilities such as crenche, drinking water, shade have to be provided to workers.

(i) Social audit has to be done by the Gram Sabha.

(j) Grievance redressal mechanisms have to be put in place for ensuring a responsive implementation process.

(k) All accounts and records relating to the scheme are to be made available to any person desirous of obtaining a copy of such records, on demand and after paying a specified fee.

(l) Provisional for regular inspection and supervision of works taken up under the scheme shall be made to ensure proper quality of works as well as to ensure that the total wage paid for the completion of the work is commensurate with the quality and quantity of work done.

MGNREGA in Andhra Pradesh

In accordance with the guidelines of NREGA-2005, the government of Andhra Pradesh has also formulated the scheme called Andhra Pradesh Employment Guarantee Scheme and implemented in initially in 13 backward districts as Adilabad, Ananthapur, Chittoor, Kadapa, Karimnagar, Khammam, Mahbubnagar, Medak, Nalgonda, Nizamabad, Rangareddy, vizianagaram and Warangal. Later the scheme was extended to six more districts (East Godavari, Guntur, Kurnool, Prakasam, Nellore and Srikakulam) totaling to 19 districts for the period of 2007-2008. Grom April 2008 remaining three districts, Krishna, Vishakapatnam and West Godavari are covered under the MNREGA.

Review of Literature

Meera Reddy (1990) examines and highlights the effect of TRYSEM on rural employment and development. The conclusions of the study are: i. TRYSEM is able to make only a limited dent on the problems of rural unemployment and poverty. ii. The author suggests that the strategies of self-employment and wage employment programme are two components of the poverty alleviation strategy in rural areas. Krishna Kumar (1996) paper was aimed at measuring not only the incidence of poverty but also the effectiveness of poverty alleviation programmes by choosing a better measure of poverty that is suited for such a purpose. Thakur. Et.al examined the impact of the integrated tribal development programmes on the socio-economic parameters of the tribals and assessed the specific problems encountered during the implementation of the programmes. Ashok Pankaj and Rukmini Tanka (2010) examined the effects of the MGNREGA on rural women empowerment in Bihar, Jharkhand, Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh. They find that women workers have gained from the scheme primarily because of paid employment opportunity and benefits have been realized through income-consumption effects, household effects and the enhancement of choice and capability. Subhasish Dey and Arjun S. Bedi (2010) they examined selected aspects of the functioning of the MGNREGA in Birbhum district of West Bengal those are proportionately more job-days during the agricultural lean season and wages should be paid in timely manner. Kaustav Benerjee and Partha Saha (2010) their study enquires about the working of NREGA in backward areas and Maoists activities in such areas in terms of developmental woes of the Indian state.

Study No. 1: Case Study on selected villages of Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan

In a study on Impact Assessment of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme on Sustainable Asset Creation and Livelihood by Institute for Development of Youth, Women and Child, it was found that the study was conducted in four districts, spread across two states i.e. Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, critically evaluating development effectiveness, asset creation and livelihood sustainability through NREGS. Study was conducted in 16 Panchayats of these four districts among 640 households. These households have been interviewed through structured questionnaire. Random sampling was adopted for the study however; there has been a conscious effort to insure the maximum representation of the most marginalized including women in the sample design. As a result, more than a half of the sampled household are tribal and 21.5 and 17.3% sampled household belong to the scheduled caste and other backward class.

The study has revealed that the NREGS is definitely emerging as safety-net programme which has delivered some good to the rural India. There has been significant progress towards the aim of creating assets after three years of implementation, although NREGS is yet to deliver the promises it made towards sustainable livelihoods. The finding suggests that the NREGS has substantially improved the livelihood scenario of the rural India by providing multiple livelihood options. It has forced government and private employers to provide minimum wages to the poorest of the poor. The average wage, whether agriculture or nonagricultural has increased resulting in creation more flexible and fair labour market in rural areas. The study shows that average income of the households has increased considerably. There has been improvement in living conditions of the rural households and more importantly there has been significant expenditure on education and health by them. There are positive trends for nutrition and food security as well, where more than 80% households in the sample district have accepted that NREGS has helped them to purchase more nutritional food. Whether it is the creation of long term assets at the village level, the development of land belonging to Scheduled Tribes or Scheduled Castes or the increased demand for work, the NREGS has been successful. Another positive outcome of the programme is that it helped villagers to come out of their debt and decreased their dependence on local money lenders.

The structures created under NREGS have been evaluated in the study. The approach to study the civil structures, which have come up through NREGS works, was to analyze it through primary assessment of structure and interviews of beneficiary/ residents who are using it for various purposes such as cultivation, daily

requirements and general use for villagers in large. Madhya Pradesh has fared better as compared to Rajasthan in terms of physical asset creation (wells, ponds etc.) on land/farms of poor and marginalized farmers. The structures created under NREGA have been rated based on technical and qualitative assessment parameters. These structures have been further classified as sustainable asset or non-sustainable assets. The study has evaluated approx 580 structures / works executed under NREGS in selected panchayat on the given parameters. It was found that the structures, which have been built under the NREGS, are sustainable and will last for the designed period of time. Particularly wells, check dams and Anicuts have been built with right quality and technical inputs. These structures have design life of 10-15 years and through physical verification, they did appear sound enough to last for its designed life. The study has done the detailed assessment of agricultural productivity in sample villages, which shows a positive trend. The villages, which have performed better in NREGS implementation and fund utilization, demonstrate a visible growth in agricultural productivity. The important finding of the report is that the agriculture productivity in the NREGS district have been higher than the average national agriculture productivity for the same period. If the investment in rural economy continue to take place at the present rate, the agriculture growth could be as high as 7% per annum in next 10 years in NREGS districts where implementation is good. The study recommends expanding the scope of NREGS by moving from unskilled structure/earthwork based asset creation to investment in human capital by including various skill based works /programmes to establish sustainable production systems in agriculture and secondary activities.

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Sustainability of Assets Created Under NREGS

After the detailed survey and assessment based on the parameters and criteria discussed earlier it was found that the structures which have been built under the scheme are good and sustainable. Particularly Wells, Check dams and Anicuts have been built with right quality and technical inputs. These structures have design life of 10-15 years and through physical verification, they did appear sound enough to last for its designed life. Although we have not assessed the location of these structures for its appropriateness, hydrology of the area and need for it construction, but the structure itself is satisfactory for the purpose it has been built. We have assumed that the rural engineering department before finalizing a site for civil structures has undertaken these technical surveys. Most of the wells had sufficient water for irrigation during our site visit although it may not be potable.

It was also observed that the due consideration has been given to backward and marginalized farmers while selecting the sites for creating the small assets such as Wells although it is questionable in Rajasthan districts. In Madhya Pradesh many of these Wells have been constructed on the private property of poor and marginalized farmers, which has directly affected their agricultural productivity and livelihood. It has not only assured water supply for their crops but also facilitating for more than one crop. Around the wells compulsory tree plantation and sock pit construction has ensured the vegetation and fruit-bearing garden, which shall be additional source of income for poor and marginalized farmers. Similarly, the new road connectivity has been developed for greater village-to-village interaction and co-operation. These all weather roads have improved connectivity although mostly used by animal carts and pedestrians. Alwar district in particular among the survey geography did appear lagging in implementation of NREGS. Despite the hard climate, paucity of water as well as cultivable land government machinery has not been successful in making a visible impact on lives of poor and marginalized through this program. Our analysis shows there is sharp decline in agricultural productivity through non-irrigated land in Alwar district where it shows increase in other survey districts. Alwar has also spent only Rs 69 lakh in last two years, which is low as compare to other districts. This calls for attention of government to review the status of NREGS machinery for this poor performance. It may also be notices that NREGS works have made substantial difference in non-irrigated land in other districts of Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan.

It is important to note that, villagers are happy with NREGS as program and various assets which has been built through this scheme is visible and being used in villages. Over a period of last three years, number of sources of water has certainly reduced the dependence on monsoon, which is one of the key objectives of policy makers for over five decades. If NREGS is able to make difference in this fundamental, issue the contribution of this program to GDP shall be significant.

There are over 580 works/structures built through NREGS in past three years out of which only the plantation works raise some alarm. Rest of the civil works are in good shape and useful for the village economy in some or the other way. The impact of water structures on agricultural productivity is higher in those villages where watershed development work has been executed in past. The water levels are at useful levels throughout the year. This further suggests that watershed development has to precede the civil construction works in villages and it will be wise to integrated watershed spending also through NREGS to avoid the duplicity of efforts. The intangible benefits of NREGS have been discussed in previous chapters along with the supportive primary survey data. In this chapter we are presenting the impact of NREGS on agricultural productivity and investment vis-à-vis benefits over a period of ten years.

Findings and Observations with regard to Assets built under NREGS

Physical structures built under NREGS

Number of structures which have been build under NREGS in Madhya Pradesh and parts of Rajasthan is impressive. The hypothesis that NREGS is being treated as massive rural investment program has been validated , however the concern remains that the programme is not being able to deliver on providing 100 days of employment.

Civil structures which have been built under NREGS do look sound and sustainable both in quality of construction and technical design. These structures will last for the designed life.

During the physical verification of civil works, most of the structures were found useful and sustainable.

The plantation programmes although were not found sustainable since there is no mechanism for post plantation upkeep under this scheme. Mostly plantations were found in bad shape and may not survive more than 2-3 years. Besides this plantation was undertaken at random location and it appeared that there was little or lack of planning in carrying out these programme and it was taken up just to provide work for job seekers under NREGS.

Civil work of all weather roads is not up to the quality although they will also survive for 4-5 years. Since focus of NREGS is on manual labour hence in case of roads mostly road roller has not been used which is necessary for compaction of road, thereby resulting in poor quality.

Watershed development has made significant difference in usefulness of physical structure such as well and ponds, since it helps in appropriate water levels in these structures throughout the year. In most of the cases, civil works has been taken up on community land making it a community asset. Despite the provision of work to be executed on private lands of marginalised farmers, it has not yet been taken up in significant manner in the sample districts.

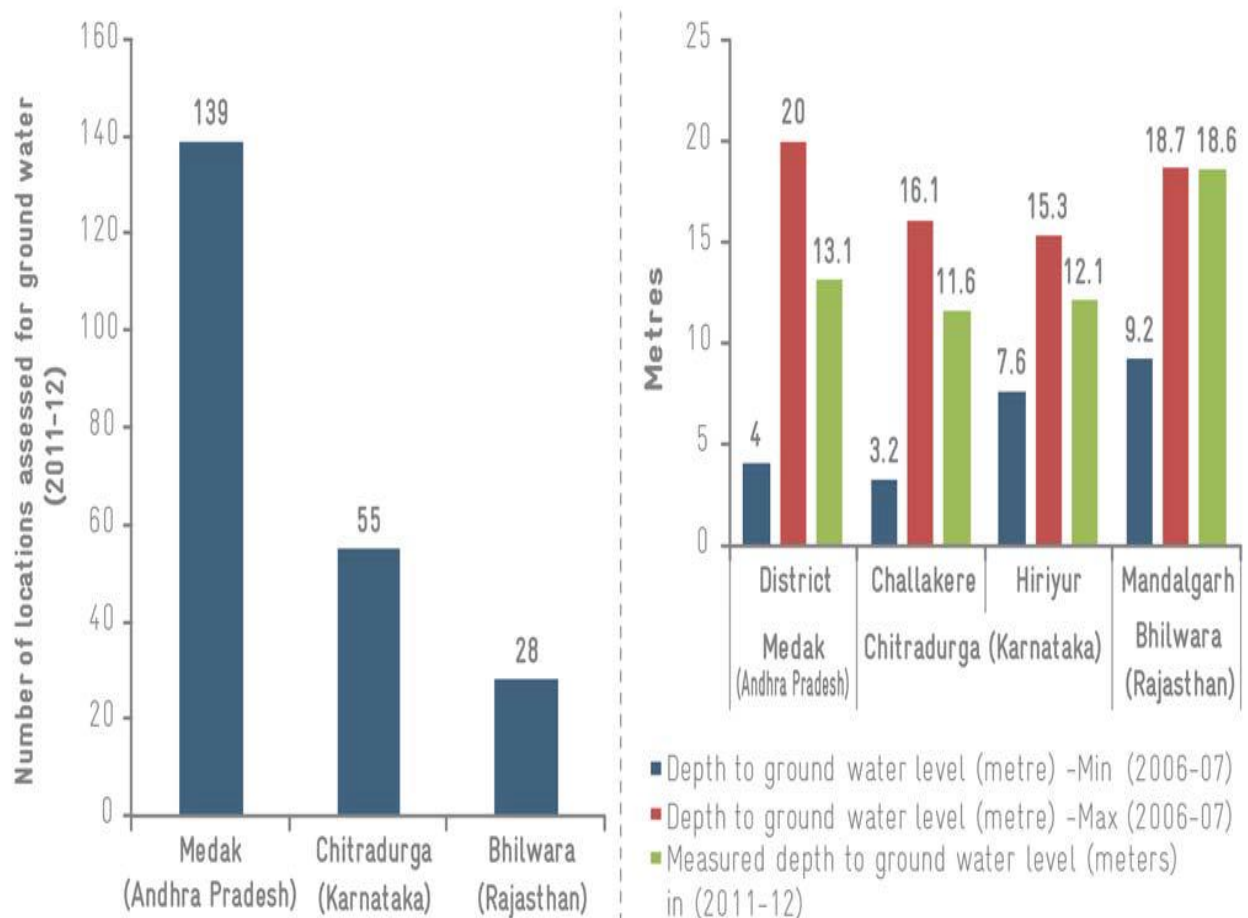
It was observed that soon villages may not have enough work opportunities pertaining to water/ earth related structure to be executed under NREGS hence a fresh thinking process is needed to leverage the benefits of previous investments provided by the scheme.

Study No. 2: Case studies of Rajasthan, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh

It can be observed that in 30 out of the 40 villages of Rajasthan studied in , there is an improvement in the extent of area irrigated by beneficiaries using ground water sources such as borewells and open wells. The percent of

beneficiaries who reported increase in ground water level in the borewells (or open wells in Dhar district) ranged from 7% in villages of Bhilwara district to 100% in Dhar district.

The increase in area irrigated is highest in the villages of Medak district in the range of 12.4 to 57 ha, followed by Chitradurga which is followed by Bhilwara as show in the following figure.



Another study revealed that 68 percent of the House Holds revealed that they purchased livestock during the year. This livestock include sheep, goat, poultry etc. Seven percent of the beneficiaries purchased household articles like utensils, pressure cookers, crockery etc. Nearly two percent of the HHs opened bank accounts and deposited some money for the first time. Most of them are from northern and southern region. There was also an interesting revelation that nearly one percent of the beneficiaries and all of them are from southern region purchased some amount of gold during the year.

The study reveals the outstanding loan status of the beneficiaries. Nearly four-fifths of the beneficiaries do not have any outstanding loan. This loan status is from all the sources i.e., banks, local money lenders etc. Only one-fifth i.e., nearly 20% of the HHs have taken loans from the local money lenders. Among them, majority are from southern and western regions. It is interesting to note from the data that out of 300 beneficiaries surveyed in each district in the western region at least 60% of them have declared that they owe money to money lenders.

An attempt was made to assess the purchasing capacity of the HHs as a result of this scheme by way of measurement of acquisition of household asset base such as bicycle, radio, sewing machine, electrical fittings, fans, steel trunk, etc. It has come to light that nearly 46 percent of the beneficiaries were already possessing bicycle even before the scheme. With the increase of income due to this scheme, only 3.3 percent of beneficiaries could buy new bicycles. 4.6 percent of people were able to buy radio/transistor. Only 31 out of 5997 HHs did buy sewing machine. 1.5% of the beneficiaries did buy either electric fan or other electrical fittings. 3.2 percent of the beneficiaries purchased steel trunks with the savings out of the income from this scheme.

It was revealed that sizable number of beneficiaries who are possessing cultivable arid/agricultural land are possessing assets even before implementation of the scheme. However, the increase in asset base with the impact of this scheme is negligible as stated in the table. Nearly 10% of the HHs were already possessing bullock carts, and the increase in this assets is only less than one percent after implementation of the scheme. Nearly five percent of the beneficiaries were already having tube wells and the net increase during this year is mere 11 tube wells from among the huge cohort of nearly 6000 beneficiaries. 1.2 % HHs were possessing harvesters and threshers and its number remained same even after implementation of the scheme. It is most significant to note that 53 beneficiaries were possessing tractors even before on-set of this scheme. It is remarkable that two beneficiaries used the income generated from this wage scheme as a supplement to buy tractor.

The asset status of livestock of the beneficiaries before and after utilizing this scheme revealed that 27% of the people were possessing milk animals and their number increased to 35% due to impact of the scheme. HHs possessing goat/sheep increased from 22% to 32% whereas the HHs possessing poultry/duck increased from 14 to 22% with the income generation from this scheme.

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