

EMPOWERING THE MARGINALIZED: MAHATMA GANDHI NATIONAL RURAL EMPLOYMENT GUARANTEE ACT IN INDIA

NIDHI VIJ

Abstract: Social protection programs have been an important part of development process and planning in India since its Independence. However, after sixty-five years, around one-fourth of its population lives in poverty. Despite a plethora of social protection programs, vulnerable groups among the poor have not been well targeted. However, the recent paradigm shift towards rights-based legislations may have hit the right chord with its self-targeting mechanism. The Right to Work, or the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) provided employment to almost 55 million households and spending nearly 8 billion US dollars in April 2010-March 2011. Participation of women and socially backward groups has been exceptionally high. This paper analyzes the policy provisions, implementation and monitoring mechanism of MGNREGA to argue that policy designs with legal enforceable mechanisms and collaborative governance systems can lead to empowerment of the marginalized sections.

Keywords: social protection, marginalized groups; empowerment; MGNREGA.

Introduction: social protection to the marginalized

It is unfortunate to be born poor, but worse to be poor, vulnerable and unprotected in a developing country. The poorest of the poor are most affected even by a slight temporary disruption or loss of income and assets. They are most vulnerable to external shocks-economic, environmental or political, and have poor resilience and limited capacity to overcome them.

India has a population of 1.2 billion, and even with an average economic growth rate of 6-7 percent per annum, almost one fourth of its population still lives in poverty. Seven out of every 10 Indians still live in rural areas. The social environment is complex. The economic condition of a poor is inextricably intertwined with the social dimensions of his well-being, equity and social rights (Sabates-Wheeler, Devereux 2007). The vulnerable and marginalized groups in India are not distinct and easily identifiable. The social fabric is ethnically diverse, socially stratified and heterogeneous in composition. With low literacy, abject poverty, complex social-ethnic environment, the poor and the vulnerable are mired with historical suppressions and subordinations over the generations.

Often, poor and certain vulnerable sections within the poor such as women, elderly, children, disabled, and socially-excluded groups are marginalized and discriminated against

both overtly and in more subtle ways on basis of gender, class, caste, religion or region. Gender inequalities and discrimination are still pervasive in rural workforce, with rural women occupying lower positions compared to their counterparts (Srivastava, Srivastava 2010). Srivastava and Srivastava (2010) observed multiple forms of discrimination faced by rural women. Women, particularly belonging to lower caste groups, were at a greater disadvantage due to limited access to assets, lower levels of education and skill. On basis of religion, Muslim women had the lowest employment rate in rural India. In India, rural women are often constrained by institutional, cultural, religious, social and demographic factors. Workforce participation rates reveal that while multiple factors such as compulsion for men to earn, cultural and social norms, lower wages for women, poor conditions of work lead to lower employment opportunities for women (*ibid.*). In addition, women in general are also marginalized from participation and excluded from social protection programs (Sabates-Wheeler, Kabeer 2003). Empirical evidence indicates that regional and rural-urban disparities are also widening during the last two decades (Kurian 2007).

Moreover, multiple identities of an individual tend reinforce and accentuate inequalities and injustices. The traditional caste system, still prevalent in India determines the social position of an individual based on birth and heredity in the Hindu society, not allowing social mobility across the classes, denying and differentiating lower castes and classes from all forms of social life. Lower caste and tribal groups remained consequently at the bottom of social-economic hierarchy in acute poverty. These lower castes and classes, often referred as the “Backward Castes and Classes”, are the generally the poorest among the rural population and are still victims of discrimination despite prevailing laws in India. For instance, the *Dalits*, or the untouchables are the outcastes and the worst victims of this caste discrimination followed by the *Adivasis* who are outside the caste hierarchy (*ibid.*). The *Adivasis* are the tribal communities, mostly inhabiting in forest areas. These are categorized as the Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) as defined in the Constitution of India *vide* the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order 1950, the Constitution Order (Scheduled Tribes) Order 1950 and Other Backward Classes (OBC), a dynamic list of other socially and educationally backward classes as per Article 340 of the Indian Constitution. According to Census of India 2001, Scheduled Castes constitute 16.2 percent of the total population in India and an additional 8.2 percent comprise of Scheduled Tribes. The Constitution provides protective and preferential treatment to these groups, including the right to be treated equally and affirmative action in form of reservations in educational institutions and public sector. It also prohibits any practice of *Untouchability* i.e. discriminating or excluding individuals from social interaction, public place or even physical contact against these groups. Still discrimination and marginalization persists. Even with the affirmative action in reservation, elite captures and control by the “well-do-to” from those classes is not uncommon (Corbridge 2000). Taboos perpetuated by tradition and beliefs impose social obligations and economic deprivation on these groups (Thorat 2002). Worst, discrimination is not always so subtle. Massacres like the *Bathani Tola* massacre in Bihar¹ in 1996 or Kherlanji massacre² of 2006 in

¹ Editorial: “A Travesty of Justice”. *The Hindu*. 2012, April 25. Retrieved from www.thehindu.com.

² Buckwalter, S. (2006, December 02). “Just Another Rape Story”. *The Times of India*. Retrieved from www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com.

Maharashtra and frequent media reports of lynching and killing Dalits and other lower castes across the country are gruesome reminders of discrimination and atrocities still committed still. In 2009, nearly 33,500 cases of crime against Scheduled Castes and another 5,000 cases of crime against Scheduled Tribe were officially reported across the country (Government of India 2011).

The oppression is such that even when the marginalized groups have an opportunity to assert themselves, they feel incapacitated. Their voices remain unheard and their needs, unaddressed. In cases of violence, the perpetrators are not always convicted². But even in the less violent spheres of economic and social lives, participation of the marginalized groups in *Panchayati Raj System*³ is dismal. Their access to political participation depends on their economic and political relations with the dominant social class (Pattenden 2011). Women are either not informed or restricted to attend village meetings due to cultural prejudice or disinterested due to lack of time and because as social issues like crime against women or unemployment are taken up in villages (Nambiar 2001). Pressures and restrictions on voting and political participation also persist (Thorat 2002). Even in leadership positions, lower caste and tribal people, particularly Dalit women representatives, face harassment and obstructions to work (Mathew 2003; Mangubhai, Irudayam, Sydenhan 2009; Chatterjee 2010).

The analysis in this paper focuses on these three identities—Backward Castes and Classes and women among the rural poor as the marginalized group. However, to qualify at the outset, this is neither an exhaustive grouping nor does it imply that no other group or an identity is not marginalized, both in the program and in the society, and this categorization is emphasized only with the context of the social protection program in this discussion.

For social programs to target marginalized groups, the programs should first have targeting strategies to focus and proactively select marginalized groups or strategies that allow them to self-select into the program for social protection programs in order to build their capacities and empower them. The objective of this analytical paper is to synthesize the literature and emerging theories on community empowerment to develop a theoretical framework relevant for social protection policy design and analysis. This empowerment framework is then applied to MGNREGA highlighting the potential for empowering the marginalized groups through the policy's right-based features and collaborative monitoring. Evidence is drawn from secondary analysis of existing evaluative research and independent studies conducted on MGNREGA and policy position papers over the last seven years. This paper makes a case for implementing the policy and the social audits, the collaborative governance in MGNREGA in letter and spirit to empower the marginalized sections.

The following section provides a contextual background about MGNREGA, the policy provisions for the marginalized groups and its performance outcomes over the last four years. This is followed by a brief outline of the theoretical proposition on how collaborative governance can lead to empowerment and evaluates social audits in this framework.

Most governments and international agencies view social protection as an instrument for only economic and risk protection. However, social protection should be interpreted

³ Panchayat Raj is a system of governance in which gram panchayat (or the local self-governments at the village level) are the basic units of administration. This constitutes the third level of government, apart from Federal and State Government.

more broadly to aim at helping poor escape poverty but also enhance their social and political participation (Kabeer, Cook 2010). It should be able to improve the livelihoods of poor through asset-building, infrastructure and human capital development, and citizenship and social justice. These potential developmental and transformative outcomes of social protection interventions, and the conditions under which these can be achieved, have been gaining wider recognition. Social protection programs can become transformative if they address the structural complexities and inequalities by enabling the vulnerable groups to claim their rights and seek social justice (Sabates-Wheeler, Devereux 2007). Although there is no magic bullet to address social exclusion and structural inequalities that are not only stark but also overlapping and complex in India, but policies can be designed to effectively target and reach out to the vulnerable sections in limited ways. Specifically, Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in India is one such social protection program. MGNREGA has been much appreciated as a social protection program as it has the potential to reach out to the most “needy” economic and social groups of the country (Reddy, Tankha, Upendranadh, Sharma 2010). As a policy design for social protection, it is a significant departure from the earlier wage employment programs in India in design and implementation. Specifically on one hand, the policy design and its implementation strategy has led to increased participation of the marginalized groups in the program, as shown in Table 1. The participation rates of women, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in MGNREGA have been higher than earlier employment programs like Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana (SGRY) (Sharma 2009). On the other hand, the collaborative monitoring mechanism of MGNREGA, *the social audits* has shown the potential to empower these groups.

Social protection programs and MGNREGA in India

India has a rich history and experience in diverse social protection programs- food subsidies (Public Distribution System), wage and food employment programs (Flood Relief, Rural Manpower (RMP), the Cash Scheme for Rural Employment (CRSE), National Food for Work), skill building (Swarnjayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana, National Skill Building Mission, National Rural Livelihood Mission) and rural infrastructural development (Indira Awas Yojna (IAY), Integrated Rural Development Program) apart from a gamut of education, health and pension policies. These programs are aimed at providing economic assistance and relief from vulnerabilities from loss or fluctuations in income or assets. However, most of these initiatives often suffer from design and implementation issues. The targeting and enforcement mechanism are weak and income support and subsistence relief is transitory mired with distributional inefficiencies. In addition to administrative problems, there are delays and inefficiencies, non-transparent procedures, pilferages and widespread corruption (Narayana, Parikh, Srinivasan 1988; Dreze 1990; Dev 2006; Khera 2011). The net effect is a mixed bag without any clear indication of what policy worked best in reducing poverty (Yesudian 2007). Between 1983 and 2005, even though the economy grew at an average of 5 percent per annum, rate of poverty reduction was only one percentage point per year from 46.9 percent to 28.4 percent (Lanjouw, Murgai 2009). In effect, the marginalized groups are further socially alienated from participating in these programs due to active and passive social exclusion,

problem of elite capture and control; social and economic inequalities and reinforces unequal power relations. Consequently, these programs failed to evolve as democratic mechanisms to ensure democratic practice, as envisioned by Dreze and Sen (2002).

Consequently a stronger program design was needed. In 2005, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) was enacted to address these shortcomings and the structural inequalities. MGNREGA is a law that guarantees at least one hundred days of wage employment in a financial year to every household whose adult

Table 1. Performance of the MGNREGA (National Overview)^{4,5}

	(FY 2008-09)	(FY 2009-10)	(FY 2010-11)	(FY 2011-12) up to Jan. 2012
Households Employed:	45.1 Million	52.5 Million	54.9 Million	41.0 Million
PERSONDAYS [in Million]				
Total:	2163.2	2835.9	2571.5	1401.9
SCs ⁶ :	633.6 [29%]	864.5 [30%]	787.6 [31%]	316.1 [22%]
STs ³ :	550.2 [25%]	587.4 [21%]	536.2 [21%]	249.4 [18%]
Others:	979.5 [45%]	1384.0 [49%]	1247.8 [61%]	836.4 [60%]
Women:	1035.7 [48%]	1364.0 [48%]	1227.4 [48%]	689.8 [49%]
Average personday per household	48 Days	54 Days	47 Days	34 Days
FINANCING				
Budget Outlay (In Billion \$):	6	7.82	8.02	8
Average wage per day	\$1.68	\$1.80	\$2.00	\$2.34
WORKS				
Total works taken up (In Million):	2.78	4.62	5.09	6.61
Water conservation:	46%	51%	48%	54%
Provision of Irrigation facility to land owned by SC/ST/ BPL/ S&MF and IAY beneficiaries ³	20%	17%	18%	12%
Rural Connectivity:	18%	17%	18%	21%
Land Development:	15%	14%	14%	9%
Any other activity:	1%	2%	2%	4%
Bharat Nirman Rajiv Gandhi Seva Kendra	NA	NA	0.33%	0.38%

⁴ Source: MGNREGA, Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India website www.nrega.nic.in accessed on February 21, 2011.

⁵ Conversion Rate: 1USD= Rs.50.

⁶ SC: Scheduled Castes, ST: Scheduled Tribes, BPL: Below (National) Poverty Line, IAY: Indira Awaas Yojna, S&MF: Small and Marginal Farmers.

members volunteer to do unskilled manual work. MGNREGA embraces rights-based approach for demand-driven employment at national minimum wage. The Act covered 200 districts in 2006-2007 and was extended to 330 additional districts in 2007-2008. All the remaining rural areas were included in April 1, 2008. From April 2010-March 2011, 55 million households were provided employment and 2.5 billion days of work were generated. The total expenditure from April 2010-March 2011 was more than \$8 billion. Table 1 displays the performance of MGNREGA at the national level for four years since 2008.

The Ministry of Rural Development in India sponsors the Scheme. The scheme offers rural households to obtain employment for up to 100 days within 15 days of their application for work else receive unemployment allowance. Wages paid through bank or local post office accounts allow for transparency and minimize leakages.

Employment in a form of legal statute with strong provisions for an inclusive approach serves as a powerful tool for the poor and the vulnerable groups. MGNREGA through its policy design not only covers for the economic risks but also addresses the socio-cultural dynamics faced by the disadvantaged sections of poor. The legal provision and the implementation strategy encourage participation of the marginalized groups-Backwards Castes and Classes and women in numerous ways.

First and foremost, it is a law not just another program. Second, its rights based approach with universal participation to all rural households also ensures that women, Backward Castes and Classes are guaranteed a fair share of participation. For women, the Act mandates that at least one-third participation be reserved for them. Second, since MGNREGA work is available within the village itself, women do not have to travel far to seek paid employment. Third, women are ensured equal wages for equal work compared to men, which was not a norm earlier in rural India. Third, basic facilities like water, shade and crèche for children of workers are available at work sites to help women workers. To mitigate leakages and enable women to have complete access to their hard-earned income, wage payments are directly transferred to their individual accounts in post offices or local banks. This has also led to financial inclusion of women and their accessibility for formal credit options. Representation of women is also made mandatory in all monitoring and planning groups for MGNREGA. Consequently, women participation has been almost equal to men. The national average of women's participation is 49 percent with several states such as Rajasthan, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu with majority of women workers. This is a huge economic support to women. For instance, the total work done by women in the year 2010-2011 is 1.2 billion days, and for every day they have been paid on an average Rs. 100 or \$2 per day (in some states even more), which amounts to \$ 2.6 billion dollars being disbursed among poor women belonging to these 55 million households in one year alone. Further, real wages for women in rural areas have gone up by 8 percent since MGNREGA implementation (Azam 2011). Women feel empowered and independent to take household decision like spending on children education and health (Khera, Nayak 2009; Jose 2007; Pankaj, Tankha 2010; Jandu 2008; Sudarshan, Bhattacharya, Fernandez 2010). A survey across six northern States by Lal Bahadur Shastri Institute of Management validates that almost 80 percent of the women workers collected their own wages and 70 percent kept the wages with themselves (Dev 2011). Field surveys in Bihar showed that 71% of the MGNREGA income is spent towards food and other consumption, 7.5% on health and 4.2% on education (Pankaj, Tankha 2009). In Rajasthan,

women from higher castes, who were not working outside their home, broke their traditional “purdah” restrictions to work at construction sites in MGNREGA (Joshi, Singh, Joshi 2008).

The participation of Backward Castes and Classes is also emphasized through numerous ways. The law encourages the States to prioritize employment for the backward groups, and also allows for irrigation works (like digging wells) on land owned by the backward groups to be taken up under MGNREGA. Participation of these two groups has been more than 50 percent throughout (Table 1). It has also been observed that in comparison to other groups, the backward castes and backwards groups are more likely to seek employment under MGNREGA (Shankar et al. 2010; Shariff 2009; Sharma 2009). Stipulations in the law mandate adequate representations of these groups in MGNREGA monitoring committee as well as in social audits. Evidence thus, confirms that the self-targeting mechanism for individuals who are unable to seek gainful employment anywhere else retort to MGREGA for unskilled manual work has been successful.

Empowerment through collaborative governance: social audits in MGNREGA

While MGNREGA with its rights-based approach within the design has “a space” for the marginalized to exercise their rights, but only design need not always translate into action (Joshi 2010). For the poor to effectively assert their rights, they should to be empowered to take the platform to raise their voice. Their opportunities for collective action need motivations, capacities to act and a sense of identity (Koopmans 1999). Further, individual participation and mobilization could be enhanced through a more open or decentralized political opportunity structure (Vrablikova 2011). This is provided under MGNREGA a decentralized and collaborative governance system called the social audits in Section 17 of the MGNREGA law. The basic objective of a social audit as a mandatory post-implementation exercise is to monitor all projects under MGNREGA at least once in 6 months. If conducted judiciously, they can evolve into a concurrent public vigilance mechanism to instill accountability in implementation of the work under MGNREGA. A simple social audit it like a “town hall” or a community meeting where details regarding all the works undertaken are disclosed. However, in some States, a more comprehensive form has evolved which includes an extensive inspection of work status and quality of asset created, verification of all records and financial transactions along with examining any discrepancies or grievances (Government of India 2008). In a way, social audit serves as a medium for the rural households and the vulnerable sections to claim their rights and entitlement if they are not being delivered by the administration. Social audits thus, serve as dual purpose- they bring administrators and the vigilant public together to work collaboratively to self-monitor the program and also empower the public seeks answers from the administration on the performance.

Social audits are a powerful instrument for spreading decentralization in a democratic manner. It is perhaps, the legal statute of the Act that serves as a catalyst for its deliverance. They have been able to reinvigorate *Panchayati Raj System*, the village level governance system with community activism and accountability towards developmental public policies not only just MGNREGA.

To understand how the empowerment of the poor and the marginalized is implicit in the social auditing process, it is important to understand what empowerment is.

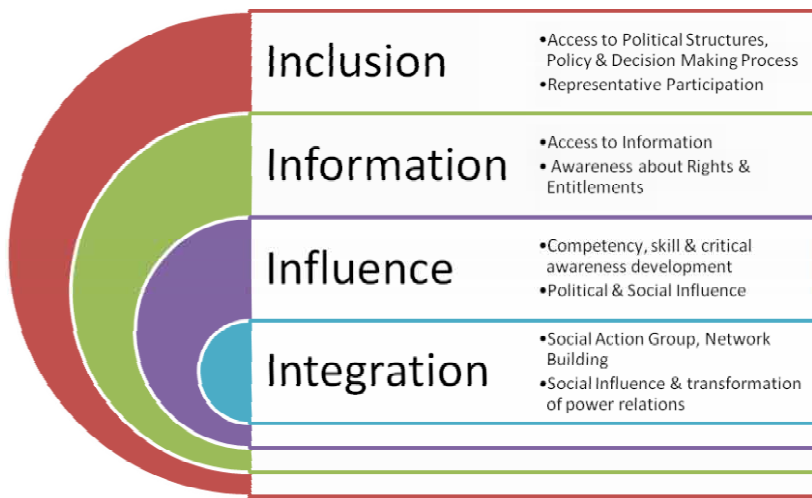


Figure 1: Enhancing capacities: empowerment

Empowerment is imperative for vulnerable groups to actively engage and participate in the decision making process, because even when there are designs, problems of exclusion and discrimination may persist. Empowerment is often inter-exchanged with “power sharing”, “participation”, “capacity building” or “development” without clarifying the distinctions. Different interpretations of power would lead to different conceptualization of empowerment. Rowlands (1995) observes power in generative terms, for instance “the power some people have of stimulating activity in others and raising their morale”. Zimmerman’s puts this empowerment simply as a process of enabling individual, through participation with others to achieve their primary personal goals (Perkins, Zimmerman 1995; Zimmerman 1995). Empowerment also occurs with change in the existing power dynamics, relations and structures that may exist in a group, community, organization or society at large in a way that everybody able to enjoy more power. This necessitates a systematic and continuous process of engagement, awareness and participation (Florin, Wandersman 1990; Rowlands 1995; Laverack, Wallerstein 2001). Empowerment can thus be seen as a process which can alter the preexisting unequal power relations in favor of the previously excluded or marginalized sections through inclusion and providing information in order to influence the governance process by integrating with mainstream discourse. With this view of empowerment, the process of empowerment will include four steps: *inclusion, information, influence and integration*. These are sequential steps are displayed in Figure 1.

Inclusion is the first step for empowerment. For those who may have been initially marginalized and not included in the decision making process, the first step towards empowerment would imply bringing them on board. This could mean access to political structures, formal decision-making or effective targeting strategy to ensure a representative participation. This should also entail a non-exclusionary provision where no one is turned away. However, even after their inclusion, they cannot fully participate unless they know what

to do. Thus, the second step in empowerment involves access to information by spreading awareness and knowledge about the provisions in the law and the entitlements that accrue to them. This is one of the foremost pillars and starting points for effective participation, the beneficiaries can be turned into true claimant only if they know their entitlements, rights and aware of the procedures to claim dues, complain and seek redressal. But, creating awareness may still not be sufficient to enable people to be in a position or have the skills to occupy a decision making space or influence the decision making process. Laverack and Wallerstein (2001) view empowerment as a process of building capacity, competence, cohesiveness and (social) capital. Capacity building should be economic, social and political. Economic improvement may provide greater access and better options but does not necessarily ensure that poor can take charge of creating for themselves the options from which they can choose (Rowlands 1995). Improving economic status of the poor should be complemented with political education and sensitization. As political education comes through, policies create a greater space for this practice, thus leading to empowerment. Empowerment must include capacity building and developing competencies, skills and critical awareness. To do that a combination of confidence, self-esteem, information and ability to identify and tap into available resources, political and social influence is needed (Moore 2001). This is analogous to Sen's argument about enhancing capacities and capabilities of individuals to bring about development (Sen 1999; Sen 1982). This enables the marginalized individual or group to *influence* the collaboration process.

The final step is *integration* of the poor and marginalized by providing them a “conducive” or enabling environment for them to represent their views collectively. Keller and Mbewe (1991) describe empowerment of weaker groups like women as a process whereby women become able to organize themselves to increase their self-reliance, to assert their independent right to make choices and to control resources will assist in challenging and elimination their own subordination. Rowlands (1995) sees that empowerment take place when people are able to connect with others in similar situations through self help, education support or social action group and network building; or on a larger scale through community organizations, campaigning, legislative lobbying, social planning and policy development. Moore (2001) takes a polity centered perspective and sees empowerment as the degree to which different social groups actively engage in politics, the ways they do and the form organizations, networks and alliances they create. However, this significantly depends on the political context within which the groups exist and work. Thus, to empower would also mean create a political environment where people are able to organize themselves to ensure a democratic participation and able to support empowerment of others in the community (McWhirter 1991; Moore 2001). This holistic conceptualization of empowerment relates to Freire's concept of “conscientization” where individuals become subject on their own lives and develop a critical consciousness, an understanding of their circumstance and the social environment that leads to action.

Social audits prescribed by the MGNREGA fit the above empowerment framework neatly. Table 2 maps social audit process over the empowerment model to illustrate how social audits can be seen as an empowering mechanism in policy evaluation.

The recent amendments and instructions issued by the Government of India mandate a Social Audit Committee (SAC) to be constituted for conducting social audits and facilitating

Table 2. Social audits as an empowerment process

Stages of empowerment process	Social Audit Process
Inclusion	• Forming a representative Social Audit Committee
Information	• Proactive disclosure of information online • Documents submitted before Social Audit Committee at least 15 days before the audit, • information can also be sought through Right to Information Act • Resource Groups to provide training to SAC to conduct social audit.
Influence	• Social Audit meeting is open to public participation • Gram Sabha members can ask question and seek redressal. • Media, civil society organizations participate as external observers • If discrepancies or grievances are legitimate, implementing agency must commit to take appropriate action within a timeline.
Integration	• An Action Taken Report to be submitted • Social Audit Committee can approach Grievance Redressal or Ombudsman Cell and higher administration

the *Gram Panchayats*⁷. This committee is independent of the Gram Panchayat to ensure that concerns can be raised freely. Information regarding the financial accounts and works undertaken is provided by the Gram Panchayat Office or through the nationwide online monitoring and information system (MIS) or Right to Information Act. The MGNREG Act puts the onus on the administration to ensure that all documents and any other related information regarding work, wage payments and funding is made available to the SAC or workers. The SAC then, verifies all payment and works undertaken under the program and presents its findings in the *Gram Sabha*⁸. In many instances, external members like civil society organizations, independent researchers or media also act as independent observers during the social audit meeting. Their presence puts additional pressure on the administration to answer queries and assure adequate action. Initial conflict and resistance from the administration is anticipated due to power dynamics, but if civil society organizations play a proactive role, worker groups and the administration can work synergistically. The Government of India in June 2011 prescribed a structure for social audits⁹ based successful models by States of Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh. In both States, the civil society organization and the State government were committed towards meeting the objective of social audits.

However, the true potential of social audits is far from being realized, as they have not been institutionalized uniformly across country. On one hand, field evidence reveals that

⁷ Gram Panchayats are local self-governments at the village or small town level in India, consisting of generally five or more elected members from the village.

⁸ Gram Sabha is a village assembly or a body consisting of persons whose names are for the time being entered as electors in the electoral roll for a Panchayat.

⁹ Social Audit Rules 2011: http://nrega.nic.in/circular/eng_nrega_audit.pdf, accessed on January 2012.

social audits can lead to increased awareness about the program and participation as well as a strong accountability mechanism (Samji, Aiyar 2009; Goetz, Jenkins 2007; Aakella, Kidambi 2007). It is a powerful tool in exposing pilferages, identifying and penalizing corrupt officials and ensuring entitlements are delivered (Shankar et al. 2010; Singh, Vutukuru 2010). Samji and Aiyar (2009) observed that relationships between the government officials and villagers also improved after social audits and beneficiaries felt that the government officials were genuinely concerned for their well being. There is also evidence individuals from poor communities in the village assume leadership positions (Priyasarshee, Hossain 2010).

On the other hand, there are concerns about social audits not being conducted in their true spirit in many other States. The channels of accountability between the SAC, local administration and village administration are unclear. Official reporting on Social Audits is poor, there are instances of access to information being controlled and on overall quality of social audits (Vij 2011). Pankaj and Tankha (2010) observed that even though women seek employment from the MGNREGA program but their participation in other planning and monitoring activities is limited. Further, there have also been disturbing instances when the whistleblowers and civil society members conducting social audits have been attacked (Dreze, Khera 2009; Gopal 2009; Vanaik 2009; Lakha 2011). It is expected that with the recent amendments including the proposed anti-corruption bill and the whistleblowers act and greater involvement of civil society organizations and dedicated resources for operationalizing social audit would be the steps in right direction.

The way ahead

Thus, while there are implementation issues, the vision in MGNREGA policy is still exploratory. Despite its scale and coverage, the program has been able to meet the diverse set of goals and expectations—from being an employment program, infrastructural development, social protection and a framework addressing structural inequalities and marginalization. The key strengths and the enforceable mechanisms of the program are its rights based approach and social guarantee. The rights based approach confers legal entitlement to the poor and the marginalized and the social guarantee provides the administrative framework for the State to fulfill its obligation. This policy design with enforceable mechanisms has led to greater civic and political engagement of the marginalized through collaborative governance systems. Lastly, social audits are at the heart of the program and institutionalizing them would not only require building capacities and empowerment the poor but also a change in the bureaucratic outlook towards collaborative governance and civil society organization. It needs a mutual trust, a constructive outlook and commitment from both ends. While policy has been adaptive and evolved with the feedback and emerging models in implementation, there is a need to empirically appraise the social audit system to assess the actual level of citizen participation and empowerment in the field. The lessons drawn from further research will be beneficial and inform the policy analysts while replicating the rights based framework and social audits being replicated and recommended for other social protection interventions in India and abroad.¹⁰

¹⁰ A working paper that focuses on Social Audits under MGNREGA was presented at the CSP conference at IDS, Sussex in April 2011, whereas this revised version focuses on the overall policy

References

- Aakella, K.V., Kidambi, S. (2007). Challenging Corruption with Social Audits. *Economic and Political Weekly* 42(5), 345-7.
- Azam, M. (2011). The Impact of Indian Job Guarantee Scheme on Labor Market Outcomes: Evidence from a Natural Experiment. *Social Science Research Network*, SSRN. Retrieved online from <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1941959>
- Chatterjee, B. (2010). Political Theory and Citizen Discourses: Cast(e) in Periphery: Understanding Representation of Dalit Women and Politics in India. *Asien* 114-115, 50-67.
- Corbridge, S. (2000). Competing Inequalities: The Scheduled Tribes and the Reservations System in India's Jharkhand. *The Journal of Asian Studies* 59(1), 62-85.
- Dev, M. (2006). Policies and Programmes for Employment. *Economic and Political Weekly* 41(16), 1511-1516.
- Dev, M. (2011). NREGS and Child Protection. *Working Paper*. Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research (IGIDR).
- Dreze, J. (1990). Poverty in India and IRDP Delusion. *Economic and Political Weekly* 25(39), A95-A104.
- Dreze, J., Khera, R. (2009, January 3-16). The Battle for Employment Guarantee. *Frontline* 16 (1). Retrieved from www.frontlineonnet.com
- Dreze, J., Sen, A. K. (2002). Democratic Practice and Social Inequality in India. *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 37(2), 6-37.
- Florin, P., Wandersman, A. (1990). An Introduction to Citizen Participation, Voluntary Organizations, and Community Development: Insights for Empowerment through Research. *American Journal of Community Psychology* 18(1), 41-54.
- Goetz, A. Jenkins, R. (2007). Citizen Activism and Public Accountability: Lessons from Case Studies in India. In A. Ebrahim and E. Weisband (Eds.). *Global Accountabilities: Participation, Pluralism and Public Ethics*, pp. 65-86. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gopal, K. S. (2009). NREGA Social Audit: Myths and Reality. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 44(3), 70-71.
- Government of India, Ministry of Rural Development. (2008). *NREGA Operational Guidelines*. Third Edition. Government of India, India. Retrieved from www.nrega.nic.in
- Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs. (2011) *Annual Report 2010-11*. Retrieved from www.mha.nic.in
- Jandu, N. (2008). *Employment Guarantee and Women's Empowerment in Rural India*. Retrieved from www.righttofoodindia.org
- Jose, S. (2007). Women, Paid Work, and Empowerment in India: A Review of Evidence and Issues. *Centre for Women's Development Studies*. Retrieved from www.cwds.ac.in
- Joshi, A. (2010). Do Rights Work? Law, Activism, and the Employment Guarantee Scheme. *World Development* 38(4), 620-630.
- Joshi, V., Singh, S., Joshi, K.N. (2008). *Evaluation of NREGA in Rajasthan*. Institute of Development Studies. Jaipur, India.
- Kabeer, N., Cook, S. (2010). Introduction: Overcoming Barriers to the Extension of Social Protection: Lessons from the Asia Region. *IDS Bulletin* 41(4), 1-11.

design of MGNREGA and its beneficiaries among marginalized groups. The author would like to thank Prof. John McPeak and Prof. Tina Nabatchi, from Syracuse University; Prof. Bruna Zani, University of Bologna for their guidance as well as participants of PIDOP conference at Bologna University, CSP conference at Sussex and the reviewer for their comments and feedback.

- Keller, B., Mbewe, D. C. (1991). Policy and Planning for the Empowerment of Zambia's Women Farmers. *Canadian Journal of Development Studies* 12(1), 75-8.
- Khera, R. (2011). Trends in Diversion of PDS Grain. *Working Paper No. 198*. Centre for Development Economics, Delhi School of Economics, University of Delhi.
- Khera, R., Nayak, N. (2009). Women Workers and Perceptions of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act in India. *Economic and Political Weekly* 44(43), 49-57.
- Koopmans, R. (1999). Political. Opportunity. Structure. Some Splitting to Balance the Lumping. *Sociological Forum* 14(1), 93-105.
- Kurian, N.J. (2007). Widening Economic and Social Disparities: Implications for India. *Indian Journal of Medical Research* 126, 374-380.
- Lanjouw, P., Murgai, R. (2009). Poverty Decline, Agricultural Wages, and Nonfarm Employment in Rural India: 1983-2004. *Agricultural Economics* 40(2), 243-263.
- Laverack, G., Wallerstein, N. (2001). Measuring Community Empowerment: A Fresh Look at Organizational Domains. *Health Promotion International* 16(2), 179-185.
- Mangubhai, J., Irudayam, A.S., Sydenhan, E. (2009). Dalit Women's Right to Political Participation in Rural Panchayati Raj: A Study of Gujarat and Tamil Nadu: Executive Summary. IDEAS, Tamil Nadu. Retrieved from http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009_2014/documents/droi/dv/201/201102/20110228_509dalitwomen_en.pdf
- Mathew, G. (2003) Panchayati Raj Institutions and Human Rights in India. *Economic and Political Weekly* 38(2), 155-162.
- McWhirter, E. H. (1991). Empowerment in Counseling. *Journal of Counseling and Development* 69(3), 222-27.
- Moore, M. (2001). Empowerment at last? *Journal of International Development* 13(3), 32-329
- Nambiar, N. (2001). Making the Gram Sabha Work. *Economic and Political Weekly* 36(33), 3114-3117.
- Narayana, N.S.S., Parikh, K.S., Srinivasan, T.N. (1988). Rural Works Programs in India: Costs and Benefits. *Journal of Development Economics* 29(2), 131-156.
- Pattenden, J. (2011). Social Protection and Class Relations: Evidence from Scheduled Caste Women's Associations in Rural South India. *Development and Change* 42(2), 469-498.
- Perkins, D. D., Zimmerman, M. A. (1995). Empowerment Theory, Research, and Application. *American Journal of Community Psychology* 23(5), 569-579.
- Pankaj, A., Tankha, R. (2009). Women's Empowerment through Guaranteed Employment: A Case Study of NREGA implementation in Bihar, Jharkhand, Rajasthan, and Himachal Pradesh. Institute for Human Development, New Delhi.
- Pankaj, A., Tankha, R. (2010). Empowerment Effects of the NREGS on Women Workers: A Study in Four States. *Economic and Political Weekly* 45(30), 45-55.
- Priyadarshie, A., Hossian, F. (2010). Decentralization, Service Delivery and People's Perspectives: Empirical Observations on Selected Social Protection Programs in India. *International Journal of Public Administration* 33(12), 752-66.
- Reddy, D. N., Tankha, R., Upendranadh, C., Sharma, A.N. (2010). National Rural Employment Guarantee as Social Protection. *IDS Bulletin* 41(4), 63-76.
- Rowlands, J. (1995). Empowerment Examined. *Development in Practice* 5(2), 101-107.
- Sabates-Wheeler, R., Devereux, S. (2007). Social Protection for Transformation. *IDS Bulletin* 38(3), 23-28.
- Sabates-Wheeler, R., Kabeer, N. (2003). Gender Equality and the Extension of Social Protection. *ESS Paper 16*, Geneva: ILO, Social Security Policy and Development Branch.
- Samji, S., Aiyar, Y. (2009). Transparency and Accountability in NREGA: A Case Study of Andhra Pradesh. *Accountability Initiative*. Working Paper No.1. Retrieved from <http://knowledge.nrega.net/193/>

- Sen, A. (1982). *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sen, A. (1999). *Development as Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Shariff, A. (2009). Assessment of Outreach and Benefits of National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme of India. *The Indian Journal of Labour Economics* 52(2), 243-268.
- Shankar, S., Gaiha, R., Jha, R. (2010). Information and Corruption: The National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme in India. *ASARC Working Papers*. Australian National University, Australia South Asia Research Centre.
- Sharma, A. (2009). NCAER-PIF Study on Evaluating Performance of National Rural Employment Guarantee Act. *National Council of Applied Economic Research*, Public Interest Foundation. New Delhi, India.
- Singh, R., Vutukuru, V. (2010). Enhancing Accountability in Public Service Delivery through Social Audits: A Case Study of Andhra Pradesh, India. *Accountability Initiative*, New Delhi.
- Srivastava, N., Srivastava, R. (2010). Women, Work, and Employment Outcomes in Rural India. *Economic and Political Weekly* 45(10), 49-63.
- Sudarshan, R. M., Bhattacharya, R., Fernandez, G. (2010). Women s Participation in the NREGA: Some Observations from Fieldwork in Himachal Pradesh, Kerala and Rajasthan. *IDS Bulletin* 41(4), 77-83.
- Thorat, S. (2002). Oppression and Denial: Dalit Discrimination in the 1990s. *Economic and Political Weekly* 37(6), 572-578.
- Vanaik, A. (2008). NREGA and Death of Tapas Soren. *Economic and Political Weekly* 43(30), 8-10.
- Vij, N. (2011). Collaborative Governance: Analyzing Social Audits in MGNREGA in India. *IDS Bulletin* 42(6), 28-34.
- Vrablikova, K. (2011). Non-Electoral Political Participation, Mobilization and Political Opportunity Structure in Western Democracies. *Social Science Research Network*, SSRN. Retrieved from www.ssrn.com.
- Yesudian, C. A. K. (2007). Poverty Alleviation Programmes in India: A Social Audit. *Indian Journal of Medical Research* 126(4), 364-73.
- Zimmerman, M. A. (1995). Psychological Empowerment: Issues and illustrations. *American Journal of Community Psychology* 23(5), 581-599.

Department of Public Administration,
 Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs,
 Syracuse University,
 Syracuse, New York 13244-1020
 USA
 E-mail: nidhivij.in@gmail.com, nvij@syr.edu