

## **Reinforcing the implementation and monitoring of the schemes under NREGA through Panchayati Raj**

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NREGA , is perhaps , an opportunity for rural India as it guarantees one of the crucial rights, right to work envisaged in the Article 41 of the Indian Constitution. The national rural employment guarantee act has the potential to provide a “big push” in India’s regions of distress. Panchayats are having central (Principal authority) role in the implementation and monitoring of the Schemes under NREGA. . Under the provisions of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), eligible households apply to the Gram Panchayat which, after due verification, issues the job card. Each district has to prepare a shelf of projects, which is done on the basis of priority assigned by the Gram Sabha. At least 50% of the works have to be allotted to Gram Panchayats for execution. Social audit has to be done by the Gram Sabha. However, for the potential of NREGA to be realized , major interventions are required to enable Panchayats to fulfill their constitutional obligations to lead economic development and social justice in their areas and major reforms need to be initiated in its implementation.

It is important that Panchayati Raj Institutions are effectively enabled to govern the Scheme. In several states of India, the District Rural Development Authorities have been entrusted with a key role relating to administration of the Scheme, while the critical role of Panchayati Raj institutions remains to be adequately appreciated and actualized. In a state like Jharkhand, where elections to local panchayats haven’t taken place for over two decades, the government needs to pro-actively engage traditional gram sabhas of local

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<sup>1</sup> *(The views expressed in the write up are personal and do not reflect the official policy or position of the organization .)*

communities in operationalization and governance of the Scheme. The role of institutions like DRDA becomes particularly questionable, when they unilaterally initiate critical processes, e.g. preparation of shelf of projects, without any local level consultations and involvement of panchayat functionaries – a common reality in many states where NREGS has been initiated.

As per section 16 (1) of the NREGA for the works/projects to be implemented in the Gram Panchayat area would be undertaken by the Gram Panchayat ensuring active participation of the gram sabha members. The plan proposals will then move upwards for approval and consolidation at the above Panchayat levels and DPC will coordinate the preparation of detailed technical estimates and sanctions. Most of the Gram Panchayats across the districts have not identified the works to be implemented instead the works to be carried out are allotted to them. Gram Panchayats play a very limited role in identification and planning of the works. It seems Panchayats have become mere implementers of the scheme. The first step in the planning process has to be initiated at the gram sabha level. Even the identification of the beneficiaries is to be done by the gram sabhas. The gram sabhas have to carry out a social audit of all the projects, within their jurisdiction.

The Act says that at least 50 per cent of the works in terms of costs will be allotted to the Gram Panchayat for execution. Intermediate Panchayats and District Panchayats are among other implementing agencies. The selection of implementing agencies will have to be indicated in the Annual Plan. Although Panchayats are associated with the implementation of the works but they play a very limited role in its effective implementation. Panchayat representatives lack capacities and skills to efficiently perform their duties as a result of which they get dependent on the government officials for each and everything resulting in to passive participation in the processes. Lack of capacity and skills of the Panchayat officials is one of the major critical issues which is restricting Panchayats from effective participation in the NREGA. Lack of technical skills, low awareness of the provisions of the scheme, lack of clarity on their roles and

responsibilities are some of the problems putting off the Panchayats from active functioning.

Lack of professionals is the key issue in NREGS. The CAG Report has found that 19 states have not appointed the full time programme office (PO) in 70 per cent of the blocks surveyed by CAG. The existing block Development Officers (BDOs) have been given the additional charge of NREGS. An Employee Guarantee Assistant (EGA) was meant to be appointed in each gram Panchayat. However, 52 per cent of the 513 gram Panchayats surveyed by CAG has appointed EGAs. The Act defines Panchayats as the prime authorities in management of the NREGA. The limited role of Panchayats in management of the scheme is a critical issue in effective implementation of NREGA. Due to lack of functionaries, they have become paralysed and are not able to perform their roles and responsibilities. Deployment of full time professionals dedicated to NREGA at all levels, but most importantly at block level is vital.

Grievance redressal mechanism has not yet become functional. People approach mainly to the Gram Pradhan and the Secretaries for their problems, though complaints are not made in writing nor are satisfactory responses received against the filed complaints. Due to lack of information and awareness on the part of the Gram Panchayat the grievances and the problems of the workers are not provided any solutions. The redressal mechanism is yet not institutionalized and complaints of the workers remain unaddressed.

The system of continuous monitoring and evaluation at every stage of the program has to be built in order to ensure quality. Central Operational Guidelines delineates that Gram Sabha will monitor all the works implemented at the village level as well as the employment provided to each person who has applied for work. It will also monitor the registration and issue of job cards and the timely payment of wages. For every work sanctioned under the scheme, there should be a local Vigilance and Monitoring Committee, composed of members of the locality or village where the work is undertaken, to monitor the progress and quality of work while it is in progress. The Gram Sabha will elect members of this committee.

Institutionalization of social audit needs to be done by creating a separate independent and integrated structure at Gram Panchayats, Intermediate Panchayats and District Panchayats level. Elected Representatives, Members of Vigilance and Monitoring Committees, Civil Society Organisations, Community Groups, Worker's Organisations, Women and Youth Collectives need to be part of such a structure. A centralised manual should also be developed with instruction to apply them uniformly. This entire process should be made autonomous of implementing agencies and Action Taken Report from district level authorities. NREGA endows responsibility of monitoring the execution of works within the Gram Panchayat to Gram Sabha. Indication of low participation in Gram Sabha meeting shows that a lot more has to be done to strengthen Gram Sabha. Defining the role of the Ward Sabhas can encourage meaningful participation in Gram Sabhas.

Vigilance and monitoring committees have not been constituted in all the Gram Panchayats and places where it is, it exists in a dysfunctional form. Social audit of works under NREGA has not been done in several places. Participation of the Gram Sabha is not ensured in the implementation of the scheme. In most of the states it has been observed that external agencies who are either inefficient or are not interested in doing so, have been given the responsibility of the social audit. In Orissa, academic institutes are made responsible for social audit and in Jharkhand CSOs are given this responsibility, most of whom are funded by the government and thus the social audit to be carried out by them itself becomes questionable.

Each Gram Panchayat should have a job card ledger in the Panchayat, which should be a shadow of the job cards. This would have the dual advantage of preventing any tampering in the job cards and also having the entire information available in the Panchayat. In Gram Panchayats, which have computers, this would not be an extra effort. In, Panchayats, which do not have computers, this could be a simple register, which would have the same entries as in the job card. This register should be updated every week whenever payment of wages is made

Greater use of IT should be mandated for all states, in order to bring more transparency, accountability and speed at all stages. To augment the technical resources of Panchayats

at the village and intermediate levels, a block resource center may be set up which would include a panel of experts and professionals available at the block level. This center would perform functions at the block level, similar to those of the block technical group at the district level. Early creation of Panchayat Resource Centres at Intermediate Panchayat level as envisaged by national capability building framework under BRGF will go a long way in providing regular handholding of elected representatives in planning and implementation of NREGS works in BRGF districts covered under NREGS.

Strict monitoring of their performance by PRIs against specific outcomes should be ensured. Greater convergence is required across departments and Programmes with NREGA so that sustainable livelihoods can be created. Some of these principles, such as answerability to PRIs, stakeholder participation and social audit, are inherent in the NREGA architecture. But they are yet to be effectively put into place.