

Report on a Civil Society Dialogue with Members of Parliament on the Issue of National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS)

Date: 5th March 2008

Venue: Constitutional Club, New Delhi

Introduction to the Act:

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2005 is a law whereby: any adult who is willing to do unskilled manual work at the minimum wage is entitled to being employed on local public works within 15 days of applying. It aims to enhance the livelihood security of people in rural areas by guaranteeing 100 days of wage employment in a financial year to a rural household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work.

Following the enactment of the Act, National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) was launched in 2006 in 150 poorest districts of the country. The programme has had a mixed outcome, with success and failure almost in equal proportion; nevertheless it was perceived to be critical instrument and flagship project of the central Government to alleviate poverty in rural areas. Now that a political choice has been made to extend the scheme to the entire country starting April 2008, it is also the obligation of the State that a proper utilization of the resources is made, and the scheme should also be implemented effectively without corruption. But how does that happen? NGOs, such as Centre for Environmental Concern Hyderabad, who have been involved in the implementation of the scheme have had very positive and successful experiences, however such experiences (including not so successful) need to be shared at the highest level and a discussion with the Members of Parliament was thought necessary.

Against this background, the purpose of organizing the Civil Society Dialogue with the Parliamentarians was to share with them the experiences of NREGS implementation of the past two years and bring back the issue to the agenda of good governance at the local level. For good governance there is the need of finding out the ways in which states can ensure that wage employment scheme is delivered effectively in an environment with ensured accountability and continuous efforts to eradicate corruption and minimize inefficiency.

Proceedings of the Meeting:

The meeting was formally initiated by Mr. Narender Kumar, Executive Director IPAC. He highlighted the purpose of organizing the dialogue, requested the participants to introduce themselves. The introductory session was followed by several presentations based on the field experiences in different states. Mr. K.S. Gopal from Hyderabad could not come, his paper was circulated.

Mr. Rishu Garg:

Mr. Rishu Garg works in Association for Rural Advancement through Voluntary Action and Local Involvement (Aravali) Jaipur. ARAVALI works for capacity building of medium and small sized non-government organizations across the state on different issues, with a focus on Natural Resource Management, Microfinance and livelihood. Partner organizations of ARAVALI have been involved at various levels and have observed implementation of NREGA across the twelve districts where NREGA is being implemented. ARAVALI had initiated a debate on NREGA on solutions exchange regarding the issue of Afforestation activities in NREGA. Points that would be shared are based on experience of partner organizations, observations on the field and review of literature. Mr. Garg told that the focus of the implementation appears to be entirely on undertaking activities that generate more and more wage opportunities. He mentioned about query floated by ARAVALI on Decentralization Community and work and employment community of Solutions exchange, UNDP Prior to the query there was no despite it being an important aspect that needs to be looked into. Circulars from the ministry have at least thrice pointed to the states to give priority to draught proofing. Cost of maintenance such as keeping a cowkidaar would also be covered besides raising nurseries. The Act also states that "the state council shall prepare a list of preferred works for different areas based on their ability to create durable assets". But only state government of Kerela has so far come up with instructions on how drought proofing activities should be taken up under NREGA. He also shared that Keshavbadi initiative in Udaipur District for developing horticulture orchards, experience from Karauli and Barmer of water tank through NREGS has not generated much interest among the implementers. He also stressed that in the whole process of effective implementation of the NREGA, there is a need of the involvement of more and more number of people, NGOs/CSOs in awareness generation and development of perspective plans for the district. District administration and State Government should be more proactive than the Centre. Specifically, in selection of activities (as per Act) other than activities mentioned in the schedule II of the act, if required. Another issue is that people are not provided receipt for application for work. Yet another issue that should look

into is 60:40 wage and material ratio. Whenever the ratio has to be maintained activity or GP wise needs to be clarified. The local governing institutions like Gram Sabha and Gram Panchayat could prove to be instrumental in the successful implementation of NREGA.

Mr. Sarbjeet Singh (Saptrishi, Jharkhand):

Mr. Sarbjeet Singh from Saptrishi, Jharkhand, shared that the money which rural labour gets has been found to be very useful for their livelihoods. But still there are few problems such as lacunae in the registration of workers employed under the Act. At the time of application, no receipt or the letter of proof is issued to the workers so that they could be ensured of getting employment within the stipulated time. Account of minimum wages/the task based wages is also not duly maintained by the recruiting staff of the government. Lastly, he also stressed on the point that the provision of guaranteed employment just for the hundred days is not sufficient to ensure social security for the whole year, therefore, this time duration of 100 days should be increased to 250 days.

Mr. Yogesh Jain (Prayatn, Rajasthan):

Mr. Yogesh Jain represented Prayatn, Rajasthan. Prayatn has taken up the task of effective implementation of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act in two districts in Rajasthan. The main focus of this intervention is capacity building of CSOs and building local leadership to monitor implementation of NREGA. Mr. Jain mentioned that Government of India declared this Act to be a true people's Act as it envisaged active people's organizations in its designing and implementation. The achievements also appear to be somewhat satisfying, but if one considers the very spirit of the Act, we need to work a lot. He shared from his field work experiences that extremely important provision of crèche at worksite has been grossly neglected. At almost all the large worksites the requirement of the provision has to be met. But the awareness about the provision is very low and no serious efforts for the same are made at the grassroot level. He told that a lot of irregularities exist at the implementation level, like no written receipt is issued to the applicant at the time of application; corruption is prevalent in the form of charging of applications and photographs, non-display of worksite boards, Work Vigilance Committee at village level exist for the namesake, even members themselves do not know that their name is their in the Committee. He also stressed Social Audits are also just an eyewash. Individual payments (wages, material bills etc) are never announced in front of the workers who were actually employed. Management Information System does not give any details of worksite quantity and kind of facilities made available to the workers

and expenditure made thereof. Minimum guarantee period has become maximum guarantee period in actual terms.

Mr. Bharat Dogra (Journalist, Navbharat Times):

Mr. Bharat Dogra, a senior journalist from Navbharat Times, mentioned that the Act which has seemingly been given a lot of priority is under budgeted. In the first year, NREGS covered 200 districts, Rs. 11300 crores were allocated. Experts have revealed that about Rs.100 crores are needed for each district every year. Then in 2007-08, coverage of NREGS was increased from 200 to 330 districts with the spread of Rs 12,000 crores, it means each district gets Rs 36 crores instead of Rs. 100 crores that is needed. He had given the examples of regions like Bundelkhand, Chitrakoot and Banda. The failure of NREGS is particularly glaring in the Bundelkhand region of Uttar Pradesh. At the same time, over 50% of the summer and winter crops were lost due to extremely adverse weather conditions that lead to starving conditions and financial crunch among the villagers. In Chitrakoot, Kol that is one of the poorest communities of the region was assisted by a voluntary organization to apply in a systematic way for the NREGS. But for the purpose, they had to wait endlessly and that also for very few days that could not satisfy them from hunger so they started migrating from their villages. Similarly, Nahri Village of Banda District reported starvation deaths.

Mr. P.L.Mimroth (Centre for Dalit Rights, Jaipur):

Mr. P.L.Mimroth who represented Centre for Dalit Rights Jaipur said that as far as NREGA is concerned a large number of rural people are still unaware of the provisions of the Act and its utility. In the process of Social Audit, he mentioned that a leading activist from MKSS (Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan) Ms Aruna Roy also reached to the same conclusion that lack of awareness is one of the causes for improper utilization of the scheme. The people's movement to strengthen this demand-driven scheme should become stronger and larger numbers should come forward to demand work as part of a wide mobilization.

Mr. Jayesh Joshi (Vaagdhara, Baanswara, Rajasthan):

Mr. Jayesh Joshi belongs to Vaagdhara, a community based civil society organization in the Baanswara district of Rajasthan. Vaagdhara is running lots of programmes for the local tribal people of the region who are extremely poor and are struggling with lots of problems of livelihood. Mr. Joshi from his experiences shared about the actual condition of the implementation of NREGS and

talked much about the Social Audit System. He stressed that Social Audit System could prove to be an important instrument to ensure the better implementation of NREGS.

Mr. Subhash Dubey (Lok Vikas Sansthan, Bihar):

Mr. Subhash Dubey was the participant from Lok Vikas Sansthan, Bihar. Mr. Dubey again told more or less similar story on NREGS and its implementation in the region. He pointed out in figures that out of total budget fixed in his region only fifty two percent expenditures have been made. Much is needed to be done to keep a watch eye to maintain a desired expenditure and to provide the minimum wages to all the workers employed under the Act.

Mr. Bharat Bhushan (Pani, Uttar Pradesh):

Mr. Bharat Bhushan who represented Pani, Uttar Pradesh shared that in UP they are getting similar experiences. He stressed that there is a strong need of keeping an eye on the implementation of this scheme by the Central Government so as to monitor and evaluate the work of the state government and also the district administration. This will also help in meeting out the money constraints and tracing out the corruption at any level of Government. Mr. Bhushan told, several times he experienced that the people who are in need of employment assistance under NREGS are not able to get it even for the minimum prescribed hundred days, therefore, there is the need to keep a complete record of such information and workers should be employed for complete hundred days. The payment of wages and duration of work days should be done according to the proper planning.

Mr. Rajender Sen (Saarthi, Jhunjhunu, Rajasthan):

Mr. Rajender Sen from Saarthi Sansthan Junjhunu shared his experiences of his operational region that the worksite is quiet far from the residence of workers. This creates problem especially for the women to walk daily for five kilometers to reach to their worksites. Sometimes it also happens that they have to stay there till 5.00 pm in the evening even after finishing their work early. He also showed concern that extreme poverty, that is the base for NREGA, also exists in the urban areas so why this kind of scheme is launched just for the rural areas. Lastly, he also stressed on the strong need of the social audit forum to track the improvements and evolution of better strategies for effective implementation of the provisions of the Act.

Ms. Alka Lamba (Secretary, All India Congress Committee):

Ms. Alka Lamba, Secretary of all India Congress Committee, also joined the dialogue. She asserted that Non Government Organizations are bridging the gap between the government and the common people by putting the demand of people forward to the decision makers. Especially in the context of NREGS, she said that there was indeed a strong need to work as watch guard of the existing government schemes so that the required benefits could reach to the maximum number of people rather than to ask for more improvements. She stressed that, existing schemes and programmes of government like NREGA are enough to meet out much of the sufferings of people but the only condition is its proper implementation. She attacked the NGO sector also by saying that nearly one lakh NGOs were involved in corrupt practices and were blacklisted last year. This shows that there is equal responsibility of civil society as government's to sustain and nurture a just and sustainable society.

Shri Ramdas Athawale (Member of Parliament, Maharashtra):

Shri Ramdas Athawale, the only parliamentarian who made it to the dialogue occasion, put forward the government's point of view on the NREGA issue. He told that government is trying to increase the number of working days so as to meet the employment needs of the rural masses for both men and women. At the same time, it also wants to make an increase in the criteria for minimum wage requirement. But due to budgetary constraints, it's taking time to reach at the objectives. He also praised the efforts of organizing agencies of this Dialogue Session and acknowledged them for giving the opportunity to members of Civil Society Organizations to discuss the public issue like NREGA with Parliamentarians.

In his concluding remarks, Mr. Awadhesh Kumar who had presided over the dialogue stressed on the need of use of machinery for effective implementation of the Act to benefit the maximum no. of the target group. He viewed that if bringing improvements in the scheme will be a tough task than at least, what we can do is that we can work jointly to get NREGA's sustained benefits.

Some of the Recommendations of participants to bring out the Improvements in NREGS:

- The participating elected representative should lead discussion in the Parliament and within the respective political party and create pressure for better implementation of the provisions of the Act.

- They should monitor the implementation of the Act to check the above irregularities and make efforts for increased awareness, improved implementation and removing irregularities.
- There is the need of opening Keshavbadi Centres for horticulture orchards, water tanks for water storage for helping rural poor by involving these individuals in such employment activities for their own betterment.
- To involve more number of people and CSOs to develop a strong social audit system.
- The receipt of the application at the time of registration should be issued to all the workers to use it as a proof in case of any doubt.
- The provision of minimum 100 days employment should be increased to almost 250 days.
- Crèche facility with adequate amenities should be considered as right of the children and must be provided at the worksite to minimize the accidents.
- There is the need of individual measurement of work instead of group work measurement to avoid injustice and exploitation.
- The scheme should be regularly monitored to avoid under-budgeting, corruption and neglect on the part of the state and district administration.
- The people's movement to strengthen this demand-driven scheme should become stronger and larger numbers should come forward to demand work as part of a wide mobilization.

Conclusion and Follow Up:

Mr. Narender Kumar concluded the session by remarking that NREGS had been surely launched with high expectations and strong vision of minimizing the financial crisis especially of the rural poor classes by providing minimum 100 days of employment and self sustainability. But as everyone agreed that this Act could not fully live up to the expectations and could not bring desired results, thus the issue became much debatable. Mr. Kumar hoped to discuss and to find out some recommendations the dialogue of CSOs with the Parliamentarians would prove to be very fruitful in the near future.

For follow up it was agreed that all the participant organizations would work in a network to compile the document of some suggestions and recommendations to bring the desired changes and improvements in the application of the Act for which this dialogue session was organized.

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

	Names of Participants	Organization
1.	Shri Ramdas Athawale	MP, Indian National Congress, Maharashtra
2.	Ms. Alka Lamba	Secretary, All India Congress Committee
3.	Mr. Bharat Dogra	Navbharat Times
4.	Mr. Jayesh Joshi	Vaagdhara, Rajasthan
5.	Mr. Yogesh Jain	Prayatn, Rajasthan
6.	Mr. Rajender Sen	Saarathi Sansthan, Rajasthan
7.	Mr. Mr. Sarbjeet Singh	Saptrishi, Jharkhand
8.	Mr. Awadhesh Kumar	Srajan Lok Hit Samiti, Madhya Pradesh
9.	Mr. P.L.Mimroth	Centre for Dalit Rights, Rajasthan
10.	Mr. Subhash Dubey	Lok Vikas Sansthan, Bihar
11.	Mr. Brijesh Kumar	Gram Chetna Kendra, Rajasthan
12.	Mr. Bharat Bhushan	Pani, Uttar Pradesh
13.	Mr. Shabab Ahmad	Manasi Trust, Delhi
14.	Mr. Pritam Kothadia	Sampark, Maharashtra
15.	Mr. Naval Kishore Roy	Vikas Prabha, Jharkhand
16.	Mr. Prem Narayan Sharma	Student Relief Society, Rajasthan
17.	Mr. Mohd. Syed Ahmad	President, Jamiat-ul-ulema e-Hind, Manipur
18.	Mr. M Kandwal	Delhi
19.	Mr. Asha Ram Gautam	PBI
20.	Mr. Roshan Lal	GRAVIS, Rajasthan
21.	Mr. Rishu Garg	Aravali, Rajasthan
22.	Mr. Narender Kumar	IPAC, Delhi
23.	Mr. Hanuman Sahay Sharma	IPAC, Delhi
24.	Ms. Deepti Dutt	IPAC, Delhi
25.	Ms. Sanvia Danish	IPAC, Delhi