

Suggestions to Make NREGA to Work and Succeed

By K.S. Gopal

Centre for Environment Concerns (CEC), Hyderabad, in association with over two hundred activists and select voluntary organizations is assisting officials in select districts in implementing the NREGA in Andhra Pradesh. This is based on a memorandum of understanding between CEC and the Department of Rural Development and agreed upon as voluntary service and thus without remuneration. The purpose of such an agreement is that tasks are divided mutually and each is accountable to the other to deliver on the commitments. Such an arrangement is unique and equal where the focus is on working together to succeed with the task. CEC felt the need for such an Agreement as running around government offices is not only wasteful use of scarce money but is also frustrating. It also results in draining out human energy and motivation for the activists while being unable to make commitments to the community. Being a "Rights" based scheme it was vital to retain autonomy from the government while being able to articulate and force delivering on the provisions of the enactment.

The motivation for over two hundred activists engaged with NREGA in voluntary capacity is because of our firm collective belief in its value and potential to address the immense and chronic problems faced by the poor in drought prone and agriculturally backward areas. We have a vibrant civil society initiative - Upadhi Hami Hakku Amalu Committee involving a wide range of academics, activists and campaigners in human rights and entitlements of workers, dalits and women. We place key issues and our suggestions to tackle help NREGA serve its intent and meet expectations of the people as under:

1. Low worker participation in NREGA and their discontent is arising from the following - Employment is not provided when sought and there are gaps in its provisioning with the next work opportunity offered several days after the first is completed. Wages are not ensuring statutory minimum wages and delay and

uncertainties of wage payments are widespread.

Employment provisioning is supposedly based on a sanctioned shelf of works prepared on the basis of a village labor budget. This looks fine on paper, but does not automatically mean provisioning of employment to all wage seekers. Firstly it overlooks calculating and having adequate works available on a daily basis for the entire workforce. Hence it is vital that several works must be opened up whose total employment potential totals the workforce. It must also ensure to exclude works stated as

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"in progress" but on the ground are either abandoned or stopped. Another urgently needed major step is that government must stop approved works listed in the shelf from oral instructions to not to be taken up. The other major need is for opening up for each village at least one large work with high employment potential. Thus current planning based on shelf of works is not reflective of ground reality. It is leading to rationing of employment provisioning and emer-

gence of a class of labor touts. The task in planning employment provisioning must be to provide work opportunity for every person and on any day as sought by the worker with no grips in employment provisioning with several works being in progress simultaneously. While planning, the type of works for Sep-Dec period and Jan-May must be identified and must form the basis to plan the starting of specific works.

An aspect unique to note is that in NREGA the workforce has a right to employment. While in all other works under various schemes provide employment, the choice of selecting the worker wrests elsewhere. Hence the work taken up must be such that it is possible for any ordinary person capable of doing manual work to undertake it with an entitlement to earn the minimum wage. Correcting current wage payments calls for revisiting the emphasis on the works available under the shelf of works and a thorough scientific revision of the Standard Schedule of Rates (SSR) specifically applicable for NREGA. Doing so calls for undertaking two sets of studies. The first is "Time, Work and Motion" and the other is "Lead and Lift". In both instances, workers of average capability are employed to calculate the outturn in a day and revise the SSR accordingly. Even then minimum wages may not accrue in some cases. Therefore, along with revising SSR it is vital to look at patterns of works where minimum wages are not accruing. A major lacuna in ensuring minimum wages is that certain tasks are not included and provided for in the SSR. For example, for digging on hard soils it is vital to first wet the soil. This is done a day earlier by the workers but this is not included in the SSR. Such activities must also be in the SSR construct of NREGA works.

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is placed such workers with varying skills wouldn't turn up and without them the task cannot be taken up. So we suggest that in cases where such workers are needed, they be classified as skilled with their payment made from the 40 percent material and skilled labor component available in the NREGA. Also, it must be the responsibility of the field staff while giving the mark out in beginning of a work to tell workers what outturn is expected on each day and ensure the same is being undertaken collectively.

For timely and transparent wage payments we appreciate the steps such as smart cards or payments through banks and post offices. But this will only partly address the issue. Timely wage payments can only be addressed by placing in advance a part of the annual village labor budget or work sanctions in an account at the concerned bank/post office where the wage seeker obtain his/her payments. Then every week releases must be made to individual worker accounts based on recorded measurement and on individual payment as generated by computer software. This step will enhance confidence of workers, ensure timely wage payment and most importantly, address the fears in opening works by field officials who hesitate doing so fearing agitation by workers or bad press for delays in wage payment.



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2. It is true that NREGA has led to an avoidable yet rising tension between agriculturists and workers. As a knee jerk reaction to this NREGA is either being watered down or informal instructions are given to stop works. The contentious issue for agriculturists is not the minimum wages paid in NREGA as generally believed but that women who are the backbone for agricultural work and were paid very low wages are now getting equal and minimum wages in NREGA. The servitude of "quality" labor force is a threat. So this aspect must be seen from gender point of view in our society. It is vital that the workers and agriculturists are not edging out aspirations of each other. One way to address this aspect is that the number of works taken up can be reduced during peak agricultural season. Current blanket closure of all works in the guise of agriculture must not be allowed as even during peak agricultural season a section of the labor will need employment. Alongside steps to reduce friction and providing space for both interests through healthy bargaining and recognition of the mutuality of interests must be the strategic way out. Another major

factor is that the agriculturists do not see any benefit to them especially from the works being taken up. As asset building is the key task in NREGA, it is vital that the works taken up must lead to improved livelihood conditions and real benefits to the farmers.

3. In the name and belief of growth and poverty reduction, officials are dumping government schemes as community works chosen under NREGA. NREGA emerged to address the growing employment deficit and we strongly recommend that sustainable additional employment generation activities must form the basis in selecting works in NREGA. Investing on soil nutrition enhancement, land development, water harvesting and environment services must receive priority in NREGA works rather than roads and housing.

To give a fillip to this and bring in new ideas of asset creation we strongly recommend that the 60:40 labor materials ratio be limited only to land related development activities and pegged at 90:10 for all other works. This will keep away vested interests driving NREGA works and trigger valuable employment centric approaches to development investments, vital for NREGA to serve

its basic task. Direct cash transfer to households and dumping of government works such as rural housing in Andhra Pradesh must not be allowed.

4. Ad hoc or single step/intervention to increase incomes has largely been ineffective in poor resource drought prone dry land areas. Being public investment, NREGA money must be used to create and strengthen the underlying conditions to tackle resource endowment inadequacies. The selection of the specific activity for income generation and investments for it must come from private investors' and farmers' initiative. Such third party verification is a vital reality check to good choice making among income generating activities. This will also open up new ideas on what works should be taken up to improve the underlying conditions using NREGA investments and thereby leading to tangible outcomes. Understanding and tackling the underlying conditions call for planned steps to improve endowments and reverse degradation. We find that a three-year approach to bring back fallow lands into productive use with drought resistant characteristics is worth promoting. It involves working on soil in the first year, water in the next and microbes and environmental services in

the third. Such an approach to underlying conditions should then be followed with investments for its productive use to succeed with crops, horticulture or plantations. Such lands belong to the very poor and this approach offers income, additional employment with capabilities to withstand moisture stress.

5. People work in harsh climatic conditions doing arduous tasks, leading to occupational health hazards in some cases and drudgery in all. Our proposal is to provide simple improved tools for activities such as carrying of water, head loading of materials, digging in hard soils and clearing of bushes. This step will bring in other employment needy people into NREGA, improve productivity and also help workers meet performance standards in labor markets. Our Centre has introduced select tools to reduce drudgery and enhance productivity, especially for women.
6. NREGA earnings offer a unique opportunity to address food needs and tackle malnutrition. This can be done by providing on credit 50 kg of rice and 6 kg of legumes every month and deducting the same from NREGA wage payments. For this, financial intermediaries must be mobilized for the initial investment while Government undertakes to procure, store and transport the commodities and make it available at a fixed price at the village. Intermediary organizations or workers' collectives serve as links with the lending banks and ensure effective repayments. Under the NFFW, CEC successfully undertook such a monthly grain credit scheme and I am happy to inform you that the AP Chief Minister has sought its piloting in the NREGA. To make this work the central government must come up with a scheme that is not subsidy based but to provide select commodities at assured prices. The storage and transport facilities of such commodities should also be ensured while absorbing the risk of market price fluctuations. Once we are able to assure the poor of adequate food it would be possible to unfold other measures such as health care and children's education by redirecting the earning from NREGA to tackle the issues of poverty and social backwardness.
7. Our group is working with an aim to reach the hundred days of employment for all wage seekers. Last year our performance was 65-75 days, three times higher than the district and state average. Our analysis shows that the differentiating reason for this success is a village based activist working with active

local labour committees supported by institutional back up for grievance resolution. The precondition is that adequate works be made available. During initial years we promote government-civil society collaboration with financial support of both parties and performance of activists is measured strictly against the additional number of days of works generated vis-a-vis the block and district average. Activists can serve as financial intermediaries in providing grain credit and their service gets compensated by borrowers as they get value. Overtime the activist could emerge as a social entrepreneur, with clarity on the activists' task along with measurable outcomes making the process transparent.

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8. NREGA as is being implemented as a scheme lacking direction. This is its biggest weakness - unable to see the opportunity in visionary terms. We are convinced of the scope and potential of NREGA in new areas such as food security, workers' welfare, resource development, community institutions, etc. So NREGA must be embellished with a vision for clarity on the direction to take, along with the milestones for planning and measuring outcomes. This will help NREGA to pursue its goals and to guide action through synergy of a common purpose that inspire stakeholders to see a shared common future and

thereby work to its realization

9. Five aspects would help to improve NREGA governance. First is the use of Information Technology based software to prepare work estimates and determine payments, along with public information access scope through ITC tracking systems. The next relates to the works being determined and calls for new ideas and participants. The third is to tackle the systemic implementation bottlenecks as emerging in Social Audit findings by linking it with Management Audit. The next is proactive transparency in terms of details on wage payments and work sanctions being made available to the community and must be a non-negotiable task entrusted to Programme Officers. Finally, work place facilities should be so designed that women workers feel confident of their wards being taken care off. Transport to worksite along with food is also important so that workers gain a sense of dignity while undertaking hard manual labor in testing field conditions.
10. CEC will be pleased to provide further information detailing our above proposals and place our field experience for its learning value in order to make NREGA serve its intent. I have also authored a book titled "Capturing Stakeholder Imagination - NREGA" which was originally published in English but now also available in Telugu and Hindi. You can obtain copies of the same by writing to us.
11. At the national level a group of activists came together under the aegis of the 'Wada Na Todo Abhiyan' to hold a two-day national level meeting to share and learn from experiences. In collaboration with the Ministry of Rural Development and Planning Commission, Government of India, it would be organized on 5th and 6th of May 2008 at India International Centre, New Delhi. It would be worthwhile for activists to participate and present their experience and suggest ways forward as the success of NREGA is vital to addressing access to food and nutrition, tackling poverty and promoting sustainable livelihoods. The meeting is aimed at constructive engagement in furthering shared societal concerns and to meet common objectives.

(This paper was presented by Mr. K.S. Gopal, Centre for Science and Environment, Hyderabad, during National Workshop on Accountability and Participatory Governance organized by CYSD on 23rd and 24th March 2008)