

MANY HANDS MAKE LIGHT WORK

Reflections on the MGNREGA-NRLM Convergence CFT Project

INAYAT SABHIKHI

Seeking to transfer, in a sustained and well-designed manner, the knowledge of best practices and theoretical understanding of concepts from CSOs to frontline functionaries, the CFT project promises rich and multi-fold dividends from this investment in human resources, impacting all programmes at the block level

The Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD) is currently implementing an ambitious project, in collaboration with Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), to deliver on the employment guarantee put forward in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA).

The Cluster Facilitation Team Project is intended to address a specific gap—the lack of adequate human resources to administer MGNREGA in backward regions, where it is required the most. MGNREGA is a difficult programme to implement. It has various processes—planning, registering workers' demands, initiating work, measuring the quantum of work, wage payments and community monitoring. It requires a wide range of expertise in administration such as engineering skills, information technology, planning methods and community mobilization. Often, the most backward regions with the weakest state capacity to deliver the employment guarantee programme require the programme the most. MGNREGA has been consistently under-utilized in these regions—much below its potential. Along with the primary concern of a weak state capacity, two other related concerns were also recognized as major gaps—that of the questionable quality of MGNREGA assets and the low awareness of workers' rights in the community.

On the other hand, there is encouraging evidence to show that whenever implemented correctly, MGNREGA has arrested distress migration. The programme has had a great impact on the consumption and the poverty of Scheduled Caste (SC) and the Scheduled Tribe (ST) households in lean agricultural seasons. Direct benefits exceed programme-related transfers and are most pronounced for households that supply casual labour.

To bring these benefits to all regions and to address the three identified gaps of poor state capacity, the questionable quality of assets and the low awareness of workers' rights, a single alternative was thought of—that of channelling the expertise of grass-roots organizations. CSOs that are willing and able to work in backward regions will be nominated by the state governments and will place teams of three people at the Cluster level—hence the term Cluster Facilitation Team (CFT). A Cluster is roughly congruent with one-third of a block. The three main areas in which expertise is expected from this team are social mobilization, agriculture and livelihood planning, and basic civil engineering technical skills. Given the task entrusted to the team, its main activities were to be participatory planning (to involve communities and plan for better assets), building capacities of the state (to strengthen its ability to implement the programme) and working with MGNREGA workers and women's collectives (to improve awareness of workers' rights).

Facilitation, in itself, is not a straightforward concept. It means 'to make easier or less difficult'. And given the multiple stakeholders involved in the implementation of MGNREGA, something that makes things easier for one

CFTs are expected to keep the interests of workers at the heart of their work and engage with the administration and the gram panchayat in doing so.

stakeholder could potentially make things more difficult for another stakeholder. For example, processes that are intended to strengthen workers' participation such as dated receipts for work demand applications are unpopular with

the implementing functionaries because this leads to pressure for time-bound performance. It is within this context that CFTs are expected to operate.

Envisioned as a Technical Secretariat to the *gram panchayat*, their role has been specified to help facilitate MGNREGA-related activities of the *gram panchayat* such as registration of demands, planning for works, worksite management and on-time payments. The focus within this cycle is participatory planning. Thus, CFTs are expected to keep the interests of workers at the heart of their work and engage with the administration and the *gram panchayat* in doing so. Their other major role is to build the capacities of all stakeholders involved—block-level functionaries, *gram panchayat* members, MGNREGA workers and women's collectives. By building capacities of MGNREGA workers and women's collectives, the intention is to increase awareness of their rights and entitlements, leading to the strengthening of the community involvement in the programme.

This article will first detail certain features of the collaborative aspect of this project and MoRD's consequent monitoring framework. It will then seek to place the capacity building role of CFTs in the context of developing a human resource base for development programmes as a whole. It will briefly focus on the role of planning for development programmes and, finally, it will deliberate upon a targeted strategy within a universal programme.

TAKES TWO TO TANGO: LESSONS FROM COLLABORATION

This is the first-ever initiative undertaken by MoRD with respect to MGNREGA, and there are many lessons to be learned from this collaboration. The genesis of this concept lies in the Operational Guidelines 2013, wherein CFTs were thought of as part of the institutional architecture and human resources for the programme. The guidelines for the programme were issued in November 2013, introducing a convergence with the National Rural Livelihood Mission so that women's collectives could also be actively involved in the facilitation role. State governments took varying amounts of time to operationalize the project although, for practical purposes, the project duration was considered April 2014 to March 2017, which makes it, currently, about mid-term of the project.

The CFT project has 77 CSO partners in 207 blocks across 9 states. It is funded entirely by MoRD and is implemented through CSOs working with block-level officials and is overseen by state governments. By design, there are many layers to this collaboration. This article will highlight five such aspects—the role clarity of each stakeholder, distinction between implementation and facilitation, processes developed to achieve outcomes, various capacities within CSOs, and the establishment of a communication channel between CSOs and the Ministry.

First of all, there are multiple stakeholders, all with different and equally important roles. It took time for each actor to understand his or her own role and that of the other stakeholders. For example, whereas a CFT has to facilitate the registration of demands of workers, the task of accepting the demand

The CFT project has 77 CSO partners in 207 blocks across 9 states. It is funded entirely by MoRD and is implemented through CSOs working with block-level officials and is overseen by state governments

applications and issuing dated receipts still remains primarily that of the Gram Rozgar Sewak. In fact, what has emerged as a by-product of over a year-and-a-half of active CFTs is a clear standard operating procedure for not just CFTs but also for women's collectives and block-level functionaries for each

of the activities involved in implementing MGNREGA.

The second challenge has been the joint responsibility of the administration and the CFTs for the project deliverables. The project has three clear deliverables at the end of a three-year period; 75 days of work for all Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) households in the block, all wage payments to be made within 15 days, and preparation of an integrated watershed plan with a focus on natural resource management, prepared through participatory methods in all *gram panchayats* of the block. Given that CFTs are not directly implementing the project but only facilitating the administration and the *panchayat* in the implementation, it is unfair to hold them solely responsible for the outcome. Thus, the monitoring of the project has now emerged as the responsibility of both, the Programme Officer at the block level as well as the CFTs.

This leads to the third aspect—of understanding the nuances of the process-oriented and the outcome-oriented roles of a CFT. To be able to achieve the outcomes, CFTs have to focus on putting in place complex processes to evaluate and monitor, as compared to straightforward quantitative outcomes. The encouraging anecdotal evidence that is emerging indicates that inroads have been made by CFTs into the process flow of the programme at their level. Informally, one CSO representative

from Maharashtra noted the reason for the low average days of employment per SC/ST household: "We are now watching every muster roll," thus reducing avenues for inflated figures. In several *gram panchayats* in Gumla and Raidih blocks of Jharkhand, the successful participation of women's collectives in the planning process ensures that water conservation works are taken up despite the pressure they face from contractors in the village to include material-heavy infrastructure works. The outcomes may not be immediately apparent but these processes are setting in place a system of external and community participation and monitoring.

The fourth aspect of this collaboration has been the diversity in the capacity of CSO partners. All CSO partners have been nominated on merit by the state governments. Some are established CSOs working in multiple states, thus giving them the advantage of working at scale. Some CSOs work in one district but undertake several government projects simultaneously, thus giving them strong local advantages. There have been cases of CSOs not being entertained by the Programme Officer at all as well as the other extreme of CSOs being handed over entire *gram panchayats* for implementation without any supervision by the Programme Officer. Neither of these scenarios is desirable for the efficient implementation of the programme, the responsibility for which ultimately rests with the *gram panchayat* and the administrative structure. Understanding the varying capacities of CSOs, arriving upon standards expected from them and enumerating certain non-negotiable activities has taken time.

Building upon this, state governments have begun to facilitate the capacity building of

The outcomes may not be immediately apparent but these processes are setting in place a system of external and community participation and monitoring

CSOs by arranging exposure visits and cross-learning among CSOs. This was first done in Maharashtra, where Junior Engineers of the block and the CFT technical personnel were sent on a joint exposure visit to the Samaj Pragati Sahyog in

Madhya Pradesh. Jharkhand too organized exposure visits for Block Development Officers of all the CFT blocks, to better-performing CFT blocks.

The fifth aspect of this has been the establishment of an information and communication channel between CSOs and the Ministry. The multiplicity of such platforms can only help the programme. In a recently concluded national review of the project, the Ministry communicated about the latest resources and programmes at the central level to the CSOs. This was very helpful for them. Congruently, CSOs bring ground-level issues related to the implementation of policies to the attention of the Ministry, providing a very useful input for the latter.

These aspects are to be kept in mind when the Ministry undertakes its primary role in this project, that of monitoring it effectively. The Ministry has a monitoring framework that aims to capture the role of multiple stakeholders, gives due weightage to processes as well as outcomes, and enforces non-negotiable expectations of CFTs. This involves a combination of a quantitative review (using the information available on NREGASoft), a qualitative review (through field visits), responsiveness to block-level issues and the periodic standardization of the learning applicable to all CFTs. Each one of the 207 blocks has an Annual Action Plan, to assess the existing lacunae in the implementation, and a detailed plan of CFTs to address these lacunae.

Progress on achievement against the deliverables for each block is monitored along with comparative analyses with state and national averages on the same parameters. MoRD reviews are held with CSOs as well as the concerned state MGNREGA Commissioners, making it clear that the task of implementing MGNREGA to its full potential is not outsourced to CSOs but is still very much the responsibility of the administrative structure.

Capacity Building: Creating a National Resource

By examining a CFT's role as a builder of capabilities of stakeholders of MGNREGA, one can make a wider comment on the engagement of CSOs with the government for development programmes as a whole. There are two parts to building capabilities: that of the administration and that of the communities. CFTs have an important role to play in both.

The administration at the block level will typically consist of a Programme Officer, in charge of the overall running of MGNREGA, a Junior Engineer assisted by Technical Assistants and a Gram Rozgar Sahayak for every *gram panchayat*. There are wide inter-state variations in staff structure and strength. These officials may be permanent employees of the government or contractual personnel, both of which create their own dynamics. They may be dedicated staff for MGNREGA or may double up for other programmes as well. For the purpose of analysis, they are colloquially referred to as 'frontline functionaries'.

Several independent evaluations on MGNREGA have noted the deficiency in the capacities

Often overlooked is the need for investment in human resources, to administer and implement development programmes commensurate to the financial resources vested in them

of frontline functionaries as a major gap. This operates at two levels: either the functionaries are unaware or uninterested, or are unable and untrained to carry out their responsibilities. Often overlooked is the need for investment in human resources, to administer and implement development programmes commensurate to the financial resources vested in them.

This is where a CFT has a crucial role to play—by setting a precedent in the successful building of capabilities of functionaries. Whereas training material is regularly prepared and disseminated to the blocks by the Ministry, this is the first time that an initiative has been taken to provide a block with a resource for building capacities of functionaries, with sustained support over a three-year period. It is not just a one-off, book-based training, but a consistent learning-by-doing that CFTs are expected to provide.

This is, in a sense, playing to each other's strengths and tapping into the natural symbiosis in the capacity building role of CFTs for the functionaries. Where the government has an advantage of scale, that is, mandated staff strength with fixed responsibilities, it has the disadvantage of, at times, untrained and uninterested personnel. On the other hand, CSOs have the advantage of a direct connection with the communities and expertise in concepts related to natural resource management, livelihoods, watershed, etc., essential for the development of a region. Their understanding of these concepts has emerged from decades of testing these through trial and error in their geographical areas and contexts. The flip side is the disadvantage of being localized; that is, being able to create islands of excellence but not being able to scale up due to a lack of

human and financial resources or geographic and cultural affinity. Herein lies the value of the CFT project: whereby the technical expertise of CSOs is sought to be imbibed by government functionaries, to enable them to deliver high quality work on a larger scale than can be achieved by CSOs working independently.

Thus, this arrangement works to the advantage of both.

This model of engagement is relevant not just to the functionaries of MGNREGA but for all development programmes. The CFT project is an arrangement that seeks to transfer the knowledge of best practices and theoretical understanding of concepts from CSOs to frontline functionaries, in a sustained and well-designed manner. The dividend from this investment in human resources will be multi-fold and will impact all the programmes at the block level.

Apart from strengthening the capacity of frontline functionaries, CFTs are intended to strengthen the capacities of *gram panchayats*, MGNREGA workers and women's collectives. This is, in essence, the sunset clause of the project. If communities and community representatives are suitably aware of the benefits and processes within the programme, they will themselves be able to claim their entitlements and act as watchdogs in the implementation of the programme.

Over the past decade, two factors have emerged with respect to MNREGA workers: one, awareness about wage rates and basic entitlements has actually decreased in many cases and two, back-end processes change frequently and become steadily more complicated, thus, hampering people's ability to peg accountability on local functionaries.

The technical expertise of CSOs is sought to be imbibed by government functionaries, to enable them to deliver high quality work on a larger scale than can be achieved by CSOs working independently

The decrease in awareness about entitlements can be attributed to their non-enforcement. If workers are consistently paid less than the stipulated MGNREGA wage rate, knowing the actual wage rate may not be that important to workers. If worksite facilities are largely absent, the expectations of

entitlements such as crèches, drinking water and shade will also naturally decrease. In this respect, CFTs have their work cut out for them. Awareness generation is not merely printing of a flex or engagement in a single meeting; it is the constant reiteration of the lack of these requisites with the workers until they are not only aware of the entitlements but suitably empowered to claim these.

With respect to the frequently changing processes of MGNREGA, it becomes important to identify and groom people from the community, who can understand these processes for themselves, without dependence on a third party. Asymmetry of information and deliberate complication of procedures by the administration have to be countered by an empowered and informed community cadre. The task of a CFT is not to just simply communicate current processes to workers but to communicate to them how they can find out about these processes and use them. The knowledge of the sources of information on where a worker's wage is stuck is more important than providing the information itself. Thus, a CFT is expected to constantly communicate what workers can expect from a programme and the mechanisms of redressal if it falls short.

The Ministry guidelines for expanding the project are along these lines. In the latest conceptualization of the project, CFT- 2, there will be only one person placed by a CSO per

gram panchayat, who will then identify at least two people from the community. These people will be mentored on how to access MGNREGA entitlements and, thus, move towards building a community cadre.

Through these dual roles of a CFT in MGNREGA, one can comment on the institutional role of the CSO engagement with the government as a whole. Given the sheer scale of MGNREGA and its relevance to every aspect of the development discourse in the country, whether it is rights-based framework, participatory planning, natural resource management, financial inclusion, strengthening women's collectives, supporting agriculture and allied activities, transparency and accountability or social audits, a successful collaboration here will show the way for other development programmes. Thus, a continuous and effective communication channel with CSOs will only stand to benefit the government in receiving feedback from the ground and help it to act on relevant suggestions. The CFT project is a step towards doing this.

PLANNING AS AN ENTRY POINT

One of the key roles of a CFT is to facilitate participatory planning. The concept of participatory planning is now part of the dominant strategies for both the MoRD and the Ministry of Panchayati Raj (MoPR). Last year, MoRD launched the Intensive Participatory Planning Exercise (IPPE) in 2,500 backward blocks of the country. Much along the lines of the CFT project, here also participatory methods were required to be used, to arrive at a plan for MGNREGA works for 2015–16. This year, MoRD has taken this a step forward as a convergent planning exercise not just for MGNREGA but all rural development

a continuous and effective communication channel with CSOs will only stand to benefit the government in receiving feedback from the ground and help it to act on relevant suggestions. The CFT project is a step towards doing this.

programmes, including pensions, housing, and the skills and livelihoods planning of self-help groups. Concurrently, MoPR has initiated a process of preparation of a Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP) on the basis of which it will spend the additional resources received as part of the 14th Finance Commission recommendations.

The benefits of participatory planning have been well documented. Although this is a mandated activity as per MGNREGA, that is, the *gram sabha* is to collectively plan for works and determine priorities, in actuality the decision-making is done behind closed doors. In this context, the role of the CFTs attains greater importance, given that participatory planning is often used as the entry point by them. Tasking the CFTs with preparing plans is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it gives them some locus standi in the *gram panchayat* to interact directly with the community and initiate a supposedly non-controversial activity; on the other hand, this makes them the face of the plan. Expectations rise and the CFT, justifiably or unjustifiably, is held responsible for the programme, in the eyes of the community.

So, planning by the CFTs was, in many cases, used as an entry point into the entire cycle of MGNREGA and, indeed, to rural development. Presumably if people were to participate in planning for the works, they would be more interested in the outcomes and would be more likely to participate in the works. They would also, then, become aware of the other works and their projected expenditure in the *panchayat*, and thus, begin to act as watchdogs for all development works. To deliver on the plans, it is paramount that these are honoured and works initiated. This would then trigger

the CFT's follow-up on the entire process from tracking the works being initiated, their eventual measurement and payment to workers.

When the CFTs prepared the first round of plans, they received the feedback that their plans were not accepted by the block administration and if the plans were accepted, these were not being sanctioned as per the priority decided upon in the *gram sabha*. Thus, it revealed that plans prepared through transparent methods and community participation, had difficulty in passing through the administrative structure. Consequently, this brought to light the implicit targets for the types of works set by the administration or the MLAs that were forced to become explicit within the participatory planning framework.

In this discourse, CFTs have emerged as an important resource to both guide the planning process in their own blocks and be available to state governments as trainers for the functionaries in other blocks as well. As the Ministry goes into the second year of IPPE, the expertise of CFTs is being sought as state and block resource persons, to bring in additional quality to this exercise.

PARTICULAR STRATEGY WITHIN A UNIVERSAL PROGRAMME

A legitimate concern of the CFT project has been the targeted strategy approach. MGNREGA, at the end of the day, is a universal programme, backed by legislation and is applicable all over the country. It has

CFTs have emerged as an important resource to both guide the planning process in their own blocks and be available to state governments as trainers for the functionaries in other blocks as well

brought with it a paradigm shift to a rights-based framework in the implementation of other legislations as well such as the Right to Education and the National Food Security Act.

It is the universal nature of these programmes that ensures their scale and importance.

They lay the ground for a wide and robust development framework, within which certain aspects and regions can be given more focus. There is emerging evidence that even in states and districts thought of as conventionally developed, there are large inter-block inequalities and regional variations. It is in this context of additional support to backward regions that CFTs operate.

State governments selected 207 blocks for this project, based on the criteria suggested by MoRD: poor human development indicators, tribal areas, high percentage of population belonging to the Scheduled Castes, poor connectivity, and an active presence of civil society or community based organizations. A year-and-a-half into the project, the figures indicate that CFTs have worked to at least bring these backward blocks at par with the district and state averages of the region. Looking at the baseline of 2013–14, the average on key parameters in these 207 blocks was considerably lower than the national average; 4 days less for average days to a Scheduled Caste household, 5 days less for a Scheduled Tribe household and 9 percentage points lower for wages paid on time. However, as of October 2015, these blocks are more or less in sync with the national average (Table 1).

Table 1: Key Parameters at a Glance (Figures for 2015, as of October 2015)

	2015-16		2013-14	
	CFT 207 Blocks	National 6,849 Blocks	CFT 207 Blocks	National 6,849 Blocks
Average days SC HH	30	31	41	45
Average days ST HH	31	31	44	49
% wages paid on time	52%	48%	41%	50%

Source: www.nrega.nic.in

However, this extra support is of value only if the basics are in place and enforced all over the country. Unless MGNREGA operates as an employment guarantee in all blocks, this fine-tuning and additional support will be of little use. This needs to be kept in mind when undertaking targeted strategies. Strategies such as the CFT Project need to be time-bound and evaluated for their merit and consequently either discarded, or their learnings and strategies adopted universally.

CONCLUSION

This article has attempted to convey the challenges of a collaborative approach between the CSOs and the government. This is to some extent captured in the monitoring framework of the CFT Project. Given the multiple stakeholders involved, the focus of the project is on processes rather than outcomes and the varying capacities of the CSO partners. It then argues for the development of capabilities of frontline functionaries, *gram*

panchayats, MGNREGA workers and women's collectives to be seen in the larger context of developing a human resource base for the nation as a whole. This includes investment in functionaries as a human resource commensurate with the financial investment in development programmes. It also focuses on institutionalizing the engagement with CSOs and the advantages of the government collaborating with CSOs. The development of a community cadre can be seen as the ultimate metric upon which to assess the achievement of the CFTs. Planning as an entry point into development was looked at, as well as the value of a particular strategy within a universal programme.

There is no doubt that the CFT project has the potential to be transformative for MGNREGA. It has already revealed what a successful collaboration of CSOs and the government can achieve and has shown the contribution this can make in delivering an employment guarantee for those who need it the most.