

Mgnregs – From Dream to Reality

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Through exposure to and taking part in the awareness campaign, the people of Kuira realize that they have 'the power, the unity and the right', to decide the type of work that should be undertaken in their village under the MGNREGS.

There are two major components of the MGNREGS—wage generation and asset creation. These, along with strengthening of democracy at the grass-roots, have great importance and significance in the lives of the people. The opportunity offered by the MGNREGS for creating land and water assets in a village is vast, especially because there is no financial or physical restriction in the Act on the asset creation plans of villages and *panchayats*.

The present state of the MGNREGS, however, is not very encouraging in Jharkhand, specifically in the district of West Singhbhum. Even after five years of its inception, the schemes under MGNREGA are still entangled in a web of corruption and lack of awareness, technical capabilities and accountability at all levels. Contractors and middlemen still rule the roost. Even though the scope for land and water asset development is immense, the potential remains untapped because the complete process is still District Rural Development Agency-driven. The poor quality of the assets created due to lack of technical capabilities of all actors, that is, the mates, *rozgar sewaks*, *panchayat sewaks* and Junior Engineers, working at the grass-roots level is another major worry.

One of the biggest challenges to the success of MGNREGS is making the process of the schemes participatory and demand-driven. All the stakeholders such as the local bureaucracy and the *panchayati raj* institutions (PRIs) require an orientation in the concept of a demand-driven participatory plan. The PRI, the bureaucracy and the villagers need to develop a better understanding of the process for an effective implementation of schemes. The system suffers from a serious lack of accountability at all levels. One of the ways to rectify this is to involve the relevant institutions at the grass-roots level in the monitoring process. It is also important to strengthen the institution of the *gram sabha*. A bottom-up pressure is required, to increase accountability.

The PRIs in the districts are still in their nascent phase. It is the right time to involve them in the process and provide the necessary training and orientation to set up a sustainable system around the MGNREGS-INRM convergence.

MAJOR PROCESS ENGAGEMENT AND INTERVENTIONS

Kuira, a revenue village of Jaipur *panchayat* comprises 428 households spread over five hamlets. The village is predominantly tribal. Migration levels are at about 40 per cent per household. As of today, there are 14 Self Help Groups (SHGs) in the village. The process of strengthening PRIs was started with hamlet-level meetings and formation of SHGs.

It was followed by the formation of a Project Execution Committee (PEC). The body comprises representatives from all the hamlets. Concept seeding and selection of representatives in the tola sabhas were followed by a *gram sabha* meeting. The PEC was finalized in the *gram sabha*. The awareness level of the people about MGNREGA was found to be abysmal. The villagers were not even aware of their basic entitlements under the Act. The lack of awareness helped middlemen exploit labourers. The job cards of the labourers were misused by middle-men.

A mass awareness programme was started in the village. A group of villagers was trained about the MGNREGA, and they acted as resource persons for bringing awareness in the village about this government Act. This was followed by a natural resource management (NRM) exposure visit of PEC members to the Tonto watershed. The members were then given technical training on NRM technologies and the participatory planning process.

Once the shortcomings and gaps were identified by PRADAN, an initiative was taken

to launch a pilot project. The focus of the project in the village of Kuira was to work on the identified gaps/issues. The emphasis was to set up a sustainable process of the MGNREGS-INRM convergence through the panchayat and the *gram sabha* in the tribal-dominated village at Hatgamaria block, keeping in mind many issues, amongst which were:

- ♦ Participatory planning missing
- ♦ Not demand-driven
- ♦ Durable and productive assets not being created
- ♦ Gap between the available resources and the assets created
- ♦ Major gap in awareness level of people
- ♦ Lack of accountability at the grass-roots level
- ♦ Poor technical capability of Block Extension Workers (BEWs)
- ♦ Lack of motivation and vision amongst the PRI representatives

The PEC of Kuira prepared a comprehensive NRM-based plan of the village. The planning process took two months because it involved transecting all the plots with the names of the landowners. An extensive transect of the village was done by the PEC members, along with the landowners. Planning was done for long-term patch treatment. The assets to be created under the MGNREGS, along with wage labour generation, would lead to the creation of a model for the entire district and the state.

The comprehensive plan comprises 42 Water Harvesting Tanks, 181 'five per cent models', 61 seepage tanks, 11 homestead wells, and 10 acres of 30 X 40 model and plantation. The total estimate presented was of Rs 8,330,770. The plan was approved by the *gram sabha*.

The total number of beneficiaries, on the basis of the land document, was 92; at the village level, the numbers were around 150. The complete implementation would result in the creation of approximately 55,000 person-days of work.

The plan was submitted to the block office by the villagers. The estimates were verified by the Junior Engineer, the Assistant Engineer and the Executive Engineer for technical sanction of the plan. It was followed by an administrative sanction by the DRDA and the District Collector. To help the block and the PRI representatives gain a better understanding about the INRM-based and the MNREGA-funded activities, an exposure visit to Mednipur, West Bengal, was organized. The team included the Block *pramukh*, the *up-pramukh*, the *panchayat mukhiya*, the *panchayat samiti sadasya*, the Block rozgar sewak, the village PEC and the SHG representatives. The focus of the exposure was on the implementation and supervision process set up under the MGNREGS in some *panchayats* of Mednipur.

THE MAIN FOCUS WAS TO ESTABLISH THE FOLLOWING PROCESS OF IMPLEMENTATION

- ♦ SHGs were to be involved in the monitoring and implementation process. A representative of the SHG would be made the mate, and some of the other members of the SHG would distribute the work among themselves. The mate would receive the supervision cost, and the SHG members would divide it among themselves, according to individual responsibility. The experience of implementation and monitoring through mates in the *gram sabha* has, however, not been very encouraging. Corrupt practices, it was

found, start at this level because there is least accountability here.

- ♦ The work would be done on piece-rate basis, as defined in the Schedule Of Rate.
- ♦ The village PEC would be involved in planning, work selection and general monitoring of the schemes.
- ♦ A block monitoring committee would be formed, comprising SHG and PRI representatives, and Block officials, who would monitor the implementation of the schemes. It would also ensure that the local bureaucracy and the PRIs are aware of the realities at the grass roots.

A series of meetings and visits with the *panchayat mukhiya* and the *pramukh* took place. The most important link in the process is the *panchayat*. The PRI representatives need intensive capacity building in the field of NRM, participatory planning and MGNREGA. The *panchayat* has to be built up, to ensure the replication and sustainability of the model. PRADAN can help in this direction. Work started on 4 June 2011 in the presence of the Development Commissioner, the Deputy Development Commissioner and the Block District Officer along with PRI representatives. Till date, 36 structures have been completed at an expenditure of over Rs 3.5 lakhs. The created structures are being used.

KUIRA NOW: THE CHANGES

Effective planning and monitoring by the villagers at the *panchayat* level have ensured the completion of several useful public works in Kuira, a quick payment of wages and a substantial fall in distress migration from the village. Nirasho Gope, a landless labourer, and her daughter have worked for 70 days under MGNREGS this year. At one time, Nirasho

used to detest working under the MGNREGS because payments were always delayed. Now, her top priority is to finish her 100 days, which is her right under the Act. The Rs 8,400 she has earned thus far have helped her family steer clear of the abject poverty cycle. Like Nirasho, there are many people in Kuira, who see the scheme as a way to earn money and improve the conditions in their village. Although the present state of the MGNREGS, a massive social welfare scheme from the government, is not very encouraging in Jharkhand, a slow and steady revolution has been taking place in the tribal village at Kuira.

Corruption in the MGNREGA implementation is a stark reality in Jharkhand. The lack of accountability at all levels of governance and implementation has resulted in so much cynicism that people have stopped questioning the system. Years of exploitation of tribals have taken away their voice. Middlemen (*bichaulias*) are an integral part of the system and everyone, including the people of Kuira, have become used to the nexus of middlemen and corrupt bureaucrats. They believed that the work would never be completed and that they would not get their wages on time. They also knew that to get any work they had to hand over their job cards to the middlemen. No one questioned the latter and the mates about the discrepancies in wages or the lack of worksite facilities. "*Narega toh marega*," was how they dismissed the scheme. To them, it was just another government scheme for the creation of large ponds, wells and *kuccha* roads.

However, now the people see the picture differently. An understanding of the Act, the development schemes and the processes involved has helped them access and use MGNREGS in a better way. They are now aware that the MGNREGA aims at making the creation of assets demand-driven and

at strengthening decentralization. The *gram panchayat* is the pivotal body for implementation at the village level. But things are not happening as per the Act. Through exposure to and taking part in the designed awareness campaign (rallies, posters, tola sabhas, village level meetings, etc.), the people of Kuira realized that they have 'the power, the unity and the right', to decide the type of work that should be undertaken in their village under the MGNREGS. Participatory planning by the people around the available land and water resources has led to the formation of a comprehensive village-level plan and to the realization of benefits of group work.

RESULTS AND IMPACT

The villagers of Kuira have come a long way since then. Indeed, now the equations have completely changed in the village. People have the confidence, to seek accountability from the system. If the workers do not get entitlements such as a first-aid kit at the worksite, they confront the mate or the *rozgar sewak*. Similarly, if there is a delay in issuing cheques by the *panchayat*, the mates immediately ask the *mukhiya* for reasons. All the mates are questioned about expenditure and the progress of work at the monthly *gram sabha* meetings. "*Na lok sabha, na rajya sabha, sabse upar hai gram sabha!*" says the village *Dakua*, Arjun Pan, at the start of every *gram sabha* meeting.

It has become obvious that one of the major reasons for the poor state of the MGNREGS in Jharkhand was the absence of strong *gram sabhas*. Now, a *gram sabha* at Kuira is attended by a large audience of labourers, mates, landowners and other villagers. The extension workers and the PRI representatives also attend meetings. The mates maintain ledgers, to track the weekly expenditure of the MGNREGS works, and present work and

financial reports to everyone present at the meeting. Strong monitoring and supervision by the *gram sabha* has ensured optimum utilization of funds at the grass-roots level.

Kuira is showing the way to *panchayats* and villages that complain of the small number of labourers at the MGNREGS works. A hundred or so people have been working on various schemes, on a regular basis, in the village. The local bureaucracy and the PRI representatives have worked hard to mobilize people and create awareness about the scheme. It is not uncommon to see the BDO, the *mukhiya* and the *rozgar sewak* conducting regular *tola sabhas* here about the MGNREGS.

Kuira is the only village in West Singhbhum that boasts a series of completed MGNREGS works. Whereas the expenditure vs completion ratio is pretty skewed for the district as a whole, (in the last five years, only 40 per cent of all the works have been completed, using 70 per cent of the sanctioned funds). The completion of most of the water-harvesting structures exists only on paper. In Kuira, on the other hand, 90 per cent of the water-harvesting structures started after the monsoons last year have been completed. The key has been a healthy collaboration between the local bureaucracy, the PRI and the villagers. A strong platform for the three has been built, which meets weekly to ensure smooth implementation.

Steady work and regular payments have helped reduce distress migration. There has, in fact, been an almost 40 per cent drop in the number of people migrating to cities in search of work. "If we keep getting regular work and payment in the village, why would we go outside for work? I used to migrate to Chhattisgarh for work in the tower line. But now I can earn Rs 12,000 in the village itself," says Chunnu Pan, who works at one of the many MGNREGS worksites in Kuira.

Earlier, middlemen used to withdraw money from the bank and distribute it to the workers as wages after taking their share. Many labourers did not even know about the existence of these bank accounts. Embezzlement has been a critical issue in the MGNREGS implementation. Although recently, the district has allowed cash payments for all *panchayats* that are at a distance of 3 km or more from the nearest bank or post office to avoid delays, the people of Kuira prefer payment through banks. Withdrawing wages from the bank has been a new experience for many men and women here, giving them a sense of empowerment and confidence that no one can take their entitlement away from them.

Surja Perti, a physically-challenged man, had lost all hope of getting unskilled work in the village. After becoming aware of his rights under the MGNREGA, he wrote out a job application and asked the panchayat for work. He was given the task of providing drinking water to workers, and monitoring the on-site crèche. He became the first disabled man in the entire block to have asked for work under the MGNREGA, and to get it. The villagers have now started viewing the MGNREGS as a rights-based government scheme, not just another asset-creation scheme. Workers get in touch with mates or the *rozgar sewak* and demand work. A comprehensive shelf of work ensures that everyone gets something when they need it.

The MGNREGS has traditionally been male-dominated, with local contractors and *bichaulias* ruling the system. For the first time in this district, the SHGs have been involved in the implementation and the supervision of schemes in Kuira (they are implemented by the SHG representatives who have been selected as mates by the *gram sabha*). This was a totally new concept in West Singhbhum district, causing immediate unrest among

the male mates and the *bichaulias*. Despite repeated attempts to intimidate the women mates, however, the SHGs and villagers remained united. Now, thanks to tremendous improvements in the quality and timeliness of implementation, the middlemen have been driven out of the system.

The MGNREGS implementation depends greatly on extension workers like the *rozgar sewaks*. An area of concern in West Singhbhum was the irresponsible attitude of many extension workers to their duties. Today, the people of Kuira are aware of each person's role and responsibilities. This has brought about an upward pressure on the system to deliver. It is not uncommon to see the *rozgar sewak* of this *panchayat* busy at the worksite, issuing job cards to new labourers. In the words of the *rozgar sewak*: "*Agar sarkari tantra zameeni star par kaam kare, toh koi bhi kaam ho sakta hai.*"

Kuira has also streamlined the muster-roll wage workflow. The women mates measure the work at the end of each day, filling in the daily measuring book and the muster roll. At the end of the sixth day, they complete the muster roll and get it signed by the workers at the worksite itself or in a public place such as

a school. This is then submitted to the *rozgar sewak*, who checks it and forwards it to the *panchayat mukhiya/secretary*, the next day. A cheque is issued the very same day and deposited at the local bank. The labourers get their wages at the bank within 10–12 days. The impact of the MGNREGA in Kuira can be seen at multiple levels, the most important being the safety net it provides to wage labourers. The scheme has helped many families tide over the lean agricultural season. And distress migration, which is at its peak at this time, has visibly reduced. A major focus of the Act is the creation of land-based assets for families and the village. As village plans are made taking an INRM approach, the structures created will help harvest rainwater and check soil erosion. Families will be able to shift from mono-cropping to double-cropping, along with crop diversification. Other major visible benefits have been the empowerment of villagers and the strengthening of the *gram sabha*.

Kuira has demonstrated that a healthy collaboration between the bureaucracy, the PRI and aware citizens around the MGNREGA can turn the fortunes of a village around. If Kuira can do it, other villages in Jharkhand and the rest of the country surely can.