



POLICY VISION OF POVERTY ALLEVIATION PROGRAMMES (MGNREGA) – A PERSPECTIVE

Dr. Purushotham Gotte

Assistant Professor of Economics
Government Arts & Science College
Karimnagar, Telangana, India

Abstract

MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Guarantee Act, 2005) essentially guarantees employment for the unemployed in rural areas for 100 days in a year, through work such as building roads, improving water supply and works that are necessary to improve the village infrastructure. The uniqueness of this act is in the fact that it carries emphasis on issues like equality of wages for men and women, elimination of work contracting/middlemen, payment of wages only through bank and post office accounts to prevent corruption, creating transparency in workers muster rolls etc. Any individual, irrespective of his socio- economic status can ask for employment with the Gram Panchayat. The act guarantees that if work is not provided within a 15-day time frame then the applicant is eligible for unemployment allowance. Work to be done is decided by the Gram Panchayat. Emphasis is given to unskilled manual labor focusing on building roads and other public village infrastructural facilities, water conservation, afforestation, land development & drought proofing. All adults in a house hold are eligible to work. If the work site is not within 5 kilometers from the applicant's residence then the applicant is eligible for an additional 10% of the wage. This law can be a big boost for nomadic tribal communities since locally domiciled but migrant population is also eligible for employment.

Keywords:MGNREGA,Economic Empowerment, Poverty Alleviation, Social Audit,RuralDevelopmentFormal Information, NERD, Policy Makers

Introduction

Statement of the Problem

“The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Act aims at enhancing the livelihood security of people in rural areas by guaranteeing hundred days of wage-Employment in a Financial Year to a rural Household whose adult members volunteers to do unskilled Manual work.”

The aim of the MGNREGA

Decision makers do not prefer to utilise formal information systems like libraries and documentation centres, either because the systems fail to provide the information needed or the system managers are not aware of what must be provided. Decision makers appear to use informal channels of communication more than conventional sources. In order to make them and those who influence decision making as effective users of information services, the barriers like non-availability of information when needed, unreliability, inconvenient forms of presentation, language barriers media problems etc. should be removed. This task very difficult unless special attention is paid to the development of networking capability among bibliographically oriented information centres. It is essential to promote concerted efforts in collecting the materials that are generated at various levels that is sub-district, district, divisional and national level, so that combined picture can emerge to facilitate decision making at various points. It may also be necessary to develop the networking capability among numerical data centres and their functional relationships with bibliographically oriented network to provide a total picture of development information system.

Two or more organisations engaged in a common pattern of information exchange to achieve common objectives either through conventional means or through modern method like Telecommunication links is called networking. The networking may have inter-connected or inter-related group of modules so that activities of such a network could be to support the identification of items, the location of items, the transfer of items shared by the network participants and acquisition of such items. In the context of rural development, the organisations and institutions which can form an Indian network could be from among the following: 1. National Academic Associations 2. Universities 3. Research institutions 4. Agencies and institutions of centre/state government and 5. non-governmental organisations. Network partners should identify their clientele and their interest and accordingly focus their activities. They should act more like motivators to use information for development rather than passive suppliers of documents. Naturally it presupposes more user participation in collection of information and constant interaction between the network participants. Special efforts are required to index constantly the emerging literature in rural development by the constituent partners. Directory type of information on the profiles of the institutions and organisations and experts engaged in rural development activities,



and the researches in progress should be compiled and updated periodically. Common format and procedures should be followed in computerising the databases of the participating libraries.

Poverty Alleviation Programmes in India

Much before poverty alleviation was put on the development agenda of developing countries and multilateral and international aid agencies, leaders of the independence movement in India had accorded it the status of one of the primary national objectives. There are various reasons for India's commitment to poverty eradication. The most important among these is the nature of the national struggle, which led to independence. The mainstream political movement in India was profoundly influenced by the Gandhian approach, which emphasised the need to uplift the social and economic status of the poorest of the poor or 'antodaya'. Emphasis on an egalitarian social order was reflected in the policy documents produced by the Indian National Congress. Most notable among these was the report of the National Planning (Kumarappa) Committee. Drawing from the experience of a large number of experiments in rural development involving local communities, the Government of India soon after independence launched the Community Development Programme (CD) to rejuvenate economic and social life in rural areas. The emphasis was on infrastructure building at the local level and investment in human resource development through the provision of education and health services.

The frontal attack on poverty was pursued in three successive phases. In the first phase, lasting from the beginning of the 1950s till the end of the 1960s, the major emphasis was on redistribution of land and improving the plight of poor tenants, on abolition of functionless intermediaries, on tenancy reforms culminating in the principle of 'land to the tiller', on imposing ceilings on large holdings, sequestering surplus land and redistributing it among the landless agricultural labourers and marginal farmers.

By the late 1960s the second phase of Poverty Alleviation Programme (PAP) started with measures that promised to address directly and exclusively the poor in the rural areas. This target-group oriented approach started with the programme for backward regions, graduated to the programme for the development of small and marginal farmers, landless labourers, etc. and finally culminated in the Integrated Rural Development Programme and National Rural Employment Programme. The distinguishing feature of the poverty alleviation programme during this phase was the emphasis on creating employment opportunities and distributing renewable assets among the poor. Heavy emphasis was also placed during this phase of PAP on transfer of income to the poor in indirect ways, e.g., through food subsidies and 'dual pricing' of essential commodities. In the third – the latest – phase starting from the beginning of the 1990s, emphasis has shifted to measures aimed at accelerating economic growth and on creating an environment for ensuring a 'spread effect'. In keeping with Indian traditions, lip-service is continued to be paid to structural change, as much as to the target-group oriented programmes, but the dominant thought is to create more wealth to enable the poor to benefit from the secondary effects of growth which, it is presumed, will percolate down and reach the poor.

Measuring Poverty

Poverty Line A number of terms have been used to identify those who experience poverty most intensively – ultra poor, extreme poor, hardcore poor, destitute, poorest of the poor, and declining poor. There is a broad agreement that poverty occurs when someone experiences a fundamental deprivation – a lack of some basic thing or things essential for human well-being. Until the 1990s, poverty was considered mainly in "material" terms – as low income or low levels of material wealth. More recently, vulnerability and multi-dimensional deprivation, especially of basic capabilities such as health and education, have been emphasized as key aspects of poverty. Poverty may be measured either in relative or in absolute terms depending upon whether it is related to the relative or the absolute concept of deprivation. This involves some element of arbitrariness for making it operational. In the absolute concept, some absolute norm of income or consumption that determines the cut-off point or the line of demarcation between the poor and the non-poor is laid down and all persons below that line are considered as poor. The concept of relative poverty is related to inequality. Thus, whereas an absolute poverty viewpoint defines poverty as the inability of an individual's income to meet subsistence needs, a relativist viewpoint defines poverty as a situation in which an individual's income is low relative to some social standard.

Poverty reflects the deficiencies in the essential requirements of individuals. It refers to a situation in which the overall needs of an individual are not satisfied due to lack of adequate purchasing power. Poverty is not directly associated with regular cash income flow. On the other hand, it is associated with the actual consumption of the household or the individual or household. Thus, consumption expenditure is considered to be more appropriate and relevant than income for the purpose of a directional idea on the level of poverty. The procedure followed is to define or fix a poverty line in terms of overall monthly per capita consumption expenditure, to update the same over time for price change employing price deflator and finally measuring the dimension of poverty in absolute terms utilizing the size distribution of Consumer Expenditure.

The concept of Poverty Line in India was introduced on the recommendation of the Task Force on 'Minimum Needs and Effective Consumption Demands' in 1979. The contribution of the Task Force was to estimate daily per capita calorie requirement



separately for rural and urban areas on the basis of age, sex and activity-specific calorie allowance recommended by the Nutrition Expert Group (1968). Accordingly, norms of nutritional requirement for the rural and urban sectors were obtained as 2435 K-cal and 2095 K-cal respectively.

The official approach to measurement of poverty, therefore, started by fixing a standard of calorie intake and observing the level of per capita consumption expenditure with which on the average, this calorie intake level is associated. An allowance for non-food consumption also exists in the delineation of the poverty line though not on normative basis but on a behavioural basis. The poverty line at 1973-74 (base year) prices for the rural and urban sectors was worked out as Rs. 49.09 and Rs. 56.64 respectively utilizing National Sample Survey (NSS) data on consumer expenditure and using inverse interpolation method. The poverty line so defined was updated over time by taking care of change in the price levels.

The Planning Commission constituted an Expert Group in 1989 to look into the methodology of poverty estimation at national and state levels and also to go in to the question of redefining the poverty line. The group in their report submitted in 1993 recommended:

- i. Abandonment of NSS-NAS (National Accounts Statistics) adjustment procedure.
- ii. Derivation and application of state specific poverty lines as against an all-India poverty line for rural and urban areas for working out state-specific poverty estimates and its aggregation to derive national level poverty estimate.
- iii. Use of state-specific cost of living indices for updating the poverty line separately for rural and urban areas.

The Planning Commission (1997) has accepted the recommendations made by the Expert Group in working out the poverty estimates for rural and urban areas at the state level and its aggregation at the national level. However, the constitution of the poverty line shows that the Government is primarily concerned with income poverty

Much of the theoretical debate on the measurement of poverty has been on poverty measures rather than on the poverty line. While there has been considerable discussion on whether the poverty line should reflect an 'absolute' or 'relative' view of poverty, the literature is relatively thin on how to update the poverty line to account for inflation and changing consumption patterns and ensuring its accuracy in terms of the original definition. With inflation and changing consumer preferences, the 'official poverty line' in India that was anchored on the minimum energy requirements three decades ago, has ceased to be an accurate, or even a reasonable, indicator of the cost of acquiring the minimum energy requirement.

Anti-Poverty Programmes under the Five-Year Plans

Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP), introduced in selected blocks in 1978-79 and universalized from October 2, 1980 has provided assistance to the rural poor in the form of subsidy and bank credit for productive employment opportunities through successive plan periods. Subsequently, Training of Rural Youth for Self-Employment (TRYSEM), Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA), Supply of Improved Tool Kits to Rural Artisans (SITRA) and Ganga Kalyan Yojana (GKY) were introduced as sub-programmes of IRDP to take care of the specific needs of the rural population. These schemes were, however, implemented as 'standalone programmes', an approach which substantially detracted from their effectiveness.

On April 1, 1999, the IRDP and allied programmes, including the Million Wells Scheme (MWS), were merged into a single programme known as Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY). The SGSY is conceived as a holistic programme of micro enterprise development in rural areas with emphasis on organizing the rural poor into self-help groups, capacity-building, planning of activity clusters, infrastructure support, technology, credit and marketing linkages. It seeks to promote a network of agencies, namely, the District Rural Development Agencies (DRDAs), line departments of state governments, banks, NGOs and Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) for implementation of the programme. The SGSY recognizes the need to focus on key activities and the importance of activity clusters. The programme has in-built safeguards for the weaker sections. It insists that women must exclusively form 50 per cent of the self-help groups and that 50 per cent of the benefits should flow to SCs and STs. There is also a provision for disabled beneficiaries.

Wage Employment Programmes

Wage Employment Programmes, an important component of the anti-poverty strategy, have sought to achieve multiple objectives. They not only provide employment opportunities during lean agricultural seasons but also in times of floods, droughts and other natural calamities. They create rural infrastructure which supports further economic activity. These programmes also put upward pressure on market wage rates by attracting people to public works programmes, thereby reducing labour supply and pushing up demand for labour. While public works programmes to provide employment in times of distress have a long history, a major thrust to wage employment programmes in the country was provided only after the attainment of self-sufficiency in food grains



in the 1970s. The National Rural Landless Employment Programme (NREP) and Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programmes (RLEGP) were started in the Sixth and Seventh Plans.

Jawahar Rozgar Yojana/ Jawahar Gram Samriddhi Yojana

The NREP and RLEGP were merged in April 1989 under the Jawahar Rozgar Yojana (JRY). The JRY was meant to generate meaningful employment opportunities for the unemployed and underemployed in rural areas through the creation of economic infrastructure and community and social assets. A major proportion of JRY funds were spent on roads and buildings. Over 47 per cent of the employment generated benefited SC/STs. The JRY was revamped from 1 April 1999 as the Jawahar Gram Samriddhi Yojana (JGSY). It became a programme for the creation of rural economic infrastructure with employment generation as a secondary objective. The 60:40 wage labour/material ratio in the JRY was relaxed. The programme is implemented by village panchayats and provides for specific benefits to SC/STs, the disabled and provides for the maintenance of community assets created in the past.

Employment Assurance Scheme

The Employment Assurance Scheme (EAS) was launched on October 2, 1993 covering 1,778 drought-prone, desert, tribal, and hill area blocks. It was later extended to all the blocks in 1997-98. The EAS was designed to provide employment in the form of manual work in the lean agricultural season. The works taken up under the programme were expected to lead to the creation of durable economic and social infrastructure and address the felt-needs of the people. The EAS is a centrally sponsored scheme, with the Centre providing 75 per cent of the funds and the states 25 per cent. The zilla parishads and panchayat samitis were the implementing agencies.

Food for Work Programme

The Food for Work programme was started in 2000-01 as a component of the EAS in eight notified drought-affected states of Chattisgarh, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Rajasthan, Maharashtra and Uttaranchal. The programme aims at augmenting food security through wage employment. Food grains are supplied to states free of cost. However, lifting of food grains for the scheme from Food Corporation of India (FCI) godowns has been slow.

Center on Rural Documentation

National Institute of Rural Development (NIRD), Hyderabad is the premier institute for training and research in the field of rural development. Centre on Rural Documentation (CORD) functions under the aegis of NIRD primarily with the objective to cater to the information needs of the institute. It also functions as a clearing house of information for rural development at the national level. Over the years CORD has been striving to develop its library resources and database on various aspects of rural development. Several periodical publications are brought out to disseminate information to various levels. CORD is now sounding several state level institutions for rural development along with some of major research and training institutions to form into a regional network.

The CORD started automation of its activities way back in 1992 by using LIBSYS software package. In addition to this CORD has developed a virtual library using Internet technologies to facilitate the users to access the latest information in their area of specialization. CORD also conducts training programmes on themes of current interest like Information Technology applications in the field of Library and Information Science; Internet Resources; Web Technologies etc. and skill development of Information Technology professionals in effective handling of information related activities. As a part of its publication activities, CORD regularly brings out the following information products available on line: Presently, CORD is undertaking a project on Gateway of Information for Rural Development (GIRD) by transforming the Computerised Library and Information Clearinghouse (CUE) developed by the centre. GIRD envisages to act as a one stop location for rural Development in India to bring information together on different aspects of rural development like rural development programmes of the central and state governments, data bank of themes of drinking water, watershed development, panchayati raj, rural roads rural housing and success stories and best practices in rural development.

A healthy economy requires a strong rural base. The primary objective of National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, which has been under implementation since August 25, 2005, is to augment wage employment besides strengthening the natural resource management through works that address causes of chronic poverty including drought, deforestation and soil erosion and to encourage sustainable development. NREGA is the first ever law internationally, that guarantees wage employment at an unprecedented scale. National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), with its rights-based framework, is a paradigm shift from all other development programs that were traditionally supply led. NREGA is one of the largest single rights-based social protection initiatives in the world. NREGA is the first ever law internationally, that guarantees wage employment at an unprecedented scale. The potential of NREGA spans a range of possibilities. The primary objective of the Act is augmenting wage employment. The choice of works



suggested in the Act addresses causes of chronic poverty like drought, deforestation and soil erosion, so that the process of employment generation is maintained on a sustainable basis.

NREGA essentially guarantees employment for the unemployed in rural areas for 100 days in a year, through work such as building roads, improving water supply and works that are necessary to improve the village infrastructure. The uniqueness of this act is in the fact that it carries emphasis on issues like equality of wages for men and women, elimination of work contracting/middlemen, payment of wages only through bank and post office accounts to prevent corruption, creating transparency in workers muster rolls etc. Any individual, irrespective of his socio- economic status can ask for employment (either in writing or verbally) with the Gram Panchayat. The act guarantees that if work is not provided within a 15-day time frame (including the eligibility verification and issuing of the job cards) then the applicant is eligible for unemployment allowance. Work to be done is decided by the Gram Panchayat. Emphasis is given to unskilled manual labor focusing on building roads and other public village infrastructural facilities, water conservation, afforestation, land development & drought proofing. All adults in a house hold are eligible to work. If the work site is not within 5 kilometers from the applicant's residence then the applicant is eligible for an additional 10% of the wage. This law can be a big boost for nomadic tribal communities since locally domiciled but migrant population is also eligible for employment.

Summing Up

Make the completion and maintenance of works under the NREGA mandatory. Give importance to forestation under the NREGA by linking it to other forestry programmes. Do more to strengthen village-level planning and decision-making by revamping current operational structures. Equip Panchayats with the necessary personnel and funds for effective implementation of the scheme. The problem of society's cleavage into rich and poor, strong and weak, upper and lower classes have been existing since time immemorial. When the problems of weaker sections become severe, reformers were born and measures undertaken for temporary relief. The weaker sections were never given wholesome assistance in spite of the sociological and political concern of the social philosophers and reformers. In conclusion, it may be said that rural poverty poses a great challenge to the planners as well as communication professionals. The Nehruvian and Post-Nehruvian planning models pursued during the past decades have failed village communities in terms of improving their living conditions. Information plays an important role in the development of nation or a community. The policy makers should recognise the library as an agency of vital importance in providing information, which is an essential ingredient to welfare and development of the tribal community. Information can be collected from published and unpublished sources and organised as files, directories, leaflets, pamphlets, displays and exhibits, audio-visual aids. This information serves as advice, counselling support, practical aid, referral services, etc.

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