

WORKING WITH LOCAL GOVERNMENT FOR INFLUENCING IMPLEMENTATION OF NATIONAL PROGRAMMES: COMMENTS ON NREGA GUIDELINES USING RELEVANT EXPERIENCES FROM THE BONTHI PRI PILOT PROJECT IN INDIA¹

1.0 Background

NREGA² is in its initial stages of implementation and all stakeholders are currently on a steep learning curve from the experiences. The programme needs to go through a few years of implementation for it to have a significant impact on the rural livelihoods on a national scale.

The NREGA guidelines are elaborate and stress on implementation and funding modalities from national level to the Gram Panchayat³ level. They stop short of operational detailing beyond the Gram Panchayat. However, in reality, the implementation 'operations' actually start from the Gram Panchayat and are more intense at lower levels of the village and habitation - the "field where the action really lies". Understandably, the NREGA guidelines are at the National level and the respective state governments are expected to compliment this by contextual fine-tuning for Gram Panchayat and below. Also, overlapping elements detailed in the Panchayati Raj Act⁴ like Gram Sabha, social audits, etc. also come into play. Hence, successful NREGA implementation is also dependent on the successful implementation of processes mentioned in the Panchayati Raj Act. The converse is also true- the successful implementation of NREGA can contribute to strengthening the Panchayati Raj Act.

2.0 Experiences from the Bonthi PRI⁵ Pilot Project

We share a few experiences and challenges on the operational aspects of working with a Gram Panchayat from a pilot project working directly with a Gram Panchayat in a remote area in North Karnataka. Intercooperation in partnership with the **Bonthi**

¹ This note was written in response to a query inviting field experiences as inputs to National level NREGA Guidelines. The query was posted to the Decentralization Community of Solution Exchange, a web based CoP (Community of Practice) initiated by the United Nations Agencies in India.

² NREGA stands for National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005. The act strives to fulfil the "Right to Work". The Act guarantees to provide employment to an adult turning up for work in rural India for a maximum of 100 days in a year. If work cannot be provided to the individual putting in a requisition, a minimum wage has to be paid to the individual.

³ Gram Panchayat is the lowest unit of elected local Government in rural India that is mandated to implement the NREGS. In the State of Karnataka, a Gram Panchayat usually covers a population of 5000 to 7000.

⁴ The Government of India enacted Panchayati Raj Act through the 73rd Amendment to the Indian Constitution in 1992. It is a landmark act that strengthened decentralization by providing a constitutional status to the Panchayat Raj Institutions in India. The Act contains provision for devolution of powers and responsibilities to the panchayats to both for preparation of plans for economic development and social justice and for implementation in relation to twenty-nine subjects listed in the eleventh schedule of the constitution.

⁵ PRI- Panchayat Raj institutions. Panchayati Raj is a three- tier system of local governance at the village, block and district levels. At the village level, it is called a Gram Panchayat. The block-level institution is called the taluka panchayat/panchayat samiti. The district-level institution is called the zilla panchayat/zilla parishad.

Gram Panchayat in Bidar, Karnataka is implementing an Integrated Natural Resource Management Project.

The project approach **is similar to that of NREGS⁶ as it focuses on soil and water conservation activities by creation of local employment opportunities.** A policy of no use of machinery is being followed.

Some of the challenges we have faced while implementing the pilot project, which are also relevant for the NREGA are:-

a. Gram Panchayat is not really the lowest unit for implementation.

A majority of the primary stakeholder for the NREGA and the Bonthi PRI Project are unskilled labour in the villages. For these communities, especially those staying in villages other than the Gram Panchayat headquarters, the Gram Panchayat is still an institution at some distance. The opportunity costs for transacting with the Gram Panchayat is often the loss in daily wages. Hence, any programme designed for the unskilled labour should actually detail operational modalities that recognise their livelihood imperatives and enable their engagement. It is in this perspective that the operational modalities from Gram Panchayat to the village/hamlet level and vice versa are considered important.

b. Lack of capacities at the Gram Panchayat for planning, estimation of works.

For realizing “demystification” of technical estimates, as envisaged in the guidelines, a lot of capacity building initiative needs to focus on the Gram Panchayat and the villages. The role of the civil society is currently very limited in the guidelines. It needs to be strengthened, at least, for aspects of community capacity building, supporting implementation and for strengthening the monitoring and social audit processes. Lack of local capacities for planning and implementation is the biggest impediment for processes that seek to strengthen decentralised institutions. These constraints cannot be wished away – they have to be addressed through systematic and sustained capacity building support – there are no short-cuts.

c. Lack of availability of local line department functionaries/lack of local technical skills.

Bonthi Gram Panchayat does not have a full time secretary. An agriculture assistant from the agriculture department is deputed as a secretary with “additional charge”. He also has “additional charge” of another nearby Gram Panchayat. Although cooperative in timely disbursement of funds for sub committees, the secretary finds little time to get intimately involved in the project activities. The Junior Engineer also shares responsibility with other panchayats. The panchayat relies on these two functionaries for all its activities.

d. Lack of information

The current guideline has little stress on an organized information campaign at the village level for the NREGA. In Bonthi, we find that many misconceptions exist about the programme among the community that are rarely clarified through objective sources.

e. Delays in fund transfer to the Gram Panchayat- low accountability of the higher institutions.

Fund releases from the Zila Panchayat to the Gram Panchayat take a long time to get processed. This despite promises by officials to look into the matter, each time

⁶ NREGS – National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, a scheme functioning as per the NREGA guidelines.

the matter is discussed in the Steering Committee Meetings at the Zila Panchayat. Also, no communication from the Zila Panchayat to the Gram Panchayat is made on the reasons for the delay. For, the Zila Panchayat handling multiple programmes in 175 gram panchayats, this is just another project file. Changes in officials further complicate matters, as new officials require time to understand the project. Donor intervention was required for all fund releases till date.

Although the NREGA guidelines provide for punitive action on part of erring Gram Panchayats that delay job creation after a demand has been made, levels above are not equally accountable. This will prove to be a big hindrance for ensuring work as a "right" as the Act envisages. There are delays of over a year in labour payments reported from at least two villages in Bonthi Gram Panchayat.

3.0 Relevant Experiences from Bonthi for NREGA

Some of the approaches we adopted in Bonthi could be of relevance for NREGA to consider:

3.1 Role of Gram Panchayat as a local governance body, not an implementation agency. The Gram Panchayat scrutinizes and consolidates village level plans, monitors progress, undertakes project policy- making, undertakes fund allocation and fund disbursement functions. Village level sub committees, functioning under the Gram Panchayat and accountable to the Gram Panchayat & Gram Sabha implement the project. Thus, the Gram Panchayat members do not function as "de facto contractors" for the project activities.

3.2 Deepening Decentralization beyond the Gram Panchayat to the village level

By creating village level structures below Gram Panchayat, the project is actually closer to the community. The project messages spread quickly to all sections in the village. There is greater awareness among the community that discourages any wilful wrongdoing and manipulative disinformation. Planning and project implementation is done at the village or the habitation level. Gram Sabha resolution for the plans is mandatory.

3.3 Devolving financial, planning and project implementation function to village sub committees.

The village sub committees submit detailed microplans with technical estimated (technical support is provided by resource NGO) to the Gram Panchayat. Gram Panchayat release funds to the sub committees based on the fund requests and subsequent 60% utilization. The funds are transferred to the village sub committees by the Gram panchayat. Sub committees draw money after a resolution is passed in the meeting. Community appreciates the labour payments in open forums at the village level as it encourages greater transparency.

3.4 Creation of a cadre of village level resource persons for community organization, technical supervision and financial administration

Each sub committee is assisted by two community resource persons who function as book writers, community extension, technical supervisors and administrative functionaries for the sub committees. They assist the sub committees in documentation of the meeting, in the participatory planning process (organizing gram sabhas, assisting in the net planning with the technical team, agreement with the farmers, etc.), in implementation (providing markouts to labours, labour management, measurements, etc.) and in progress monitoring (compiling progress reports, accounts, organizing gram sabhas for progress sharing).

3.5 Involvement of resource NGO for Capacity building

The Gram Panchayat was encouraged to hire the services of a resource NGO for undertaking the capacity building for the different stakeholders, like community resource persons, sub committee members, Gram Panchayat members and SHG members. The resource NGO also provided the technical support to the sub committees in preparing the net plans.

3.6 Strengthening local monitoring mechanisms

3.6.1 Gram Sabhas every six months

The sub committees report the project progress to the respective Gram/ward Sabha on a six monthly basis. Apart from the area treated and financial progress, the performance of the community resource persons and the sub committee members is also reviewed.

3.6.2 Alternative for Review at Gram Panchayat level- the Project learning forum

In the absence of a full time secretary, the Gram Panchayat finds it difficult to meet on a monthly basis. It reviews the progress once in every two to three months. The Project learning forum, undertakes the monthly monitoring of the project. Two members from each sub committee, share the progress, their learning as well as their difficulties with other sub committees. The discussions and decisions taken at the project learning forum are shared back in their respective sub committees.

4.0 In conclusion

The NREGA is an ambitious programme with vast transformative potentials. It is important that implementation mechanisms are strengthened to use its full potential. While there is abundant experience with India's bureaucratic set-up, the Panchayati Raj system is of relative recent vintage and project designers/ policy makers have limited hands-on experience of its functioning. Often positions are taken from an ideological perspective than from field experience.

The debate on merits of decentralisation needs to be set at rest and all efforts now need to be made to strengthen the capacities of the decentralised institutions and to improve their role clarity following principles of subsidiarity. Planning and implementation of NRM based activities, community participation and accountability are best addressed at the habitation level and Panchayats in most states are still too remote an institution for these functions. The governance role of Panchayats needs to be strengthened including accountability of officials at the Zila Panchayat and the line departments to the Gram Panchayat. The civil society has an important stake in the success of NREGA and in contributing to its success which should be harnessed.

Devanshu Chakravarti (devanshu@intercooperation.org.in)

with inputs from

Ms. Rupa Mukerji (rmukerji@intercooperation.org.in)

& Dr. B. Ram Kumar (ramkumar@intercooperation.org.in)

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