

## *Claiming NREGA from below*

January 28, 2014

-Sowmya Kidambi

*Social audits should not be judged by state response alone. They create awareness about rights and create engaged citizens.*

This article is in response to Farzana Afridi's 'Social audit isn't enough' (IE, January 22). Social audits have been enshrined as one of the transparency and accountability tools in the MGNREGA. Such accountability mechanisms aim to strengthen the otherwise weak institutions of delivery as they engage the beneficiaries in the process of implementation, who participate, measure and raise concerns related to the implementation. The mere provision of a scheme does not necessarily guarantee its access, and certainly not where the awareness on rights and entitlements is lacking. It cannot be truer than in the case of India, which has a set of well-designed social policies suffering from major implementation failure. Among other things, it is a stark manifestation of the existing top-down approach that has failed to deliver at the grassroots level and needs to be addressed on priority. The lack of involvement of beneficiaries, who are systematically disempowered and discouraged from questioning service delivery and holding implementing agencies accountable, is one of the key reasons for implementation failure.

It is important to differentiate between the structural- and the process-related barriers to implementation that lead to financial and non-financial irregularities and the scope of social audits to impact them. Structural barriers arise from within the social, economic and political contexts within which the scheme operates, which shape and define the constraints of implementation. On the other hand, process-related barriers refer to issues of awareness, access to information and overall participation that impact implementation. As a community monitoring tool, while social audit reveals largescale corruption in the implementation of MGNREGS, it also redefines and strengthens people's engagement and participation. Thus, in assessing the credibility of social audits, it is imperative to look at these through a qualitative lens throwing light on people's engagement with the state at the grassroots level, beyond measuring corruption.

The public hearing forum in the social audit process is one of the few platforms at the grassroots level where beneficiaries can voice their concerns and negotiate their entitlements directly with senior state officials. In Andhra Pradesh, where the process of social audits has been institutionalised, so far more than 6,000 public hearings have been held, related not just to MGNREGS but also other schemes, such as Social Security Pensions, Aam Aadmi Bima Yojana, Mid-Day Meal Scheme and the Integrated Watershed Management Programme. Through this, the state has reached out to more than one crore beneficiaries and trained more than 1.5 lakh village youth — of which approximately 20 per cent are women and the majority belongs to SC/ ST/ backward communities — in conducting social audits. In FY 2012-13 alone, public funds to the tune of Rs 50 billion have been audited in Andhra and 35,000 members from the families of beneficiaries have been trained.

Furthermore, prior to the public hearing, the scheme beneficiaries are trained to form a collective

capacitated to voice and negotiate entitlements at the forum. This includes training in filing RTIs, accessing scheme-related records, verifying the records and conducting door-to-door beneficiary verification, alongside worksite verification. Here, the role of citizens in monitoring the enforcement of entitlements and in demanding public scrutiny and transparency, comes into sharp focus. It brings the local government and implementing agencies directly under the radar for provisions, such as the number of works completed, quality of work undertaken, expenses incurred on projects, appropriate facilities offered at worksites, etc, by bringing in credible and well-scrutinised evidence.

This is one of the few instances where the beneficiaries reflexively engage with issues of governance and power that play out at the field level and sharpen the political edges of participatory democracy. Alongside unearthing corruption related to labour and material, social audits offer the finer details of corruption, such as specific tasks where delays have been observed, tasks not recorded, or reasons for payment delays. Thus, social audits present firsthand ground-level challenges and policy-level issues that need to be addressed by the state.

It is true that social audit is an excellent community monitoring tool, but judging its effectiveness by looking only at corruption data is to overlook the process of gradual empowerment it brings about at the grassroots level. It provides a mechanism to those currently not getting served, or are underserved, and negotiate services meant for them. Field observations also suggest a phenomenal lack of awareness about scheme-related entitlements that social audits address. Particularly, in door-to-door verification, social audit gram sabha and public hearings, the auditors bring to light various MGNREGA guidelines not being adhered to. This creates awareness regarding rights and entitlements. It also serves as an empowering tool that encourages rural citizenry to participate in local governance and creates a sense of civic responsibility.

Across the six rounds of social audits conducted in Andhra, financial corruption of up to 72 per cent and non-financial of up to 22 per cent (maximum 35 per cent) of total issues have been brought to the state's attention. The break-up of these financial and non-financial deviations has also been specified. This includes benami names (down from 52 per cent to 11 per cent in six rounds), extra measurements (up from 3 per cent to 47 per cent) and ghost work (more or less constant at 15 per cent across the six rounds). Moreover, implementation-related issues have been classified under 150 categories and presented in detail at various public hearings. Reports have been submitted to the vigilance wing for follow-up action. Judging the credibility of the social audit process led by beneficiaries by analysing it against the post-audit follow-up led by the state and its larger impact on the scheme's workability is a short-sighted proposition.

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