

Two Years of NREGA: The Road Ahead

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It is not possible to realise the massive potential of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act if we deploy the same ossified structure of implementation that has deeply institutionalised corruption, inefficiency and non-accountability into the very fabric of Indian democracy. On the other hand, if the reforms suggested in this paper are put into place, NREGA holds out the prospect of transforming the livelihoods of the poorest and heralding a revolution in rural governance in India.

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On February 2, 2006, amid great hype and hope, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) came into force in 200 of India's most backward districts. Last year it was extended to cover another 130 districts and with effect from April 1, 2008, the Act is to cover all of rural India.

This is the largest ever public employment programme visualised in human history. But even before it has had a chance to take off, its detractors, led by the chief minister of one of India's most populous and backward states, want it to be scrapped. While those who worked hard to get NREGA enacted into law are bound to call this a premature overreaction (which it undoubtedly is), there can be no denying that the disappointments of NREGA come as no surprise to any student of the history of rural development, especially public works programmes, in India.

It is clear that as far as implementation of public works programmes is concerned, there has been no discernible improvement since independence. If anything, progressive deterioration has occurred, especially in the most backward regions, where such interventions are needed and matter the most. How did we then expect NREGA to do any better when we entrusted its implementation to the same ossified, decaying structure that has deeply institutionalised corruption, inefficiency and non-accountability into the very fabric of Indian democracy at the grass roots?

In this article, we will try to show why NREGA has raised expectations like no other rural development programme and how it can and must be made to deliver on its massive, if yet unrealised, potential. In doing so we draw upon the experience of a National Consortium of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) that is working closely with panchayat raj institutions (PRIs) across 30 districts in seven states to help

them plan, implement and social audit NREGA works [SPS 2008]. We also incorporate the insights provided by the recent report of the Comptroller and Auditor General [CAG 2007] on NREGA.¹

1 A New Programme

The most important change NREGA represents is that it gives rise to programmes that spring not from its wilful benevolence, but as a legally binding response by the state to a right to work that is, after NREGA, enshrined in law. This also means that a constraint of resources cannot be cited by the government as an excuse for not providing work and its attendant entitlements, all of which are now also safeguarded in the Constitution. This is a commitment by the state that is unprecedented in the history of independent India – both as a legally enforceable right and in terms of financial resources.

NREGA is also supported by an extraordinary set of guidelines issued by the ministry of rural development, government of India [MORD 2005a]. These guidelines are unique in the emphasis they place on planning of works and mechanisms of social audit. In this way, the official guidelines reflect the understanding that quality of works is of central importance. Thus, it is abundantly clear that this is not a welfare programme dishing out doles. It is a development initiative, chipping in with crucial public investments for creation of durable assets, without which the growth process will not get the requisite momentum in the most backward regions of rural India. The emphasis on water conservation, drought- and flood-proofing is also critical as it underscores water security as the pre-requisite and foundation for rural transformation.

Perhaps the most novel and remarkable feature of NREGA through which it makes a decisive break with the past is the complete ban on the use of contractors. It is not very widely known but most government programmes in rural areas over the last 60 years have been implemented through the agency of local contractors, who have emerged as major sources of exploitation of the rural poor, especially women. They have run roughshod over

basic human rights, paying labour a pittance and doing most work through labour-displacing machinery. NREGA bans the use of such machines, places central emphasis on payment of statutory minimum wages and provides legal entitlements to labour on working hours, rest, drinking water, medical aid and crèche facilities. There is also provision for unemployment allowance being paid to workers in case the state is unable to provide the guaranteed days of work. All of this is obviously incompatible with programmes where the main goal becomes maximisation of profits of the contractor. NREGA visualises a programme where the local people are centrally involved at all stages – planning, implementation and social audit.

The official guidelines outline in meticulous detail completely new mechanisms for social audit, which reflect the influence of civil society in the formulation of NREGA. It is recognised that corruption is a major contributor to lack of quality in rural works (roads that get washed away every monsoon and earthen dams that are unable to stand peak run-off, being the most frequently encountered examples), apart from its negative impact on the rights of labour. Great emphasis has been placed on transparency and accountability at every stage of the programme. There is also an unprecedented emphasis on the use of information technology (IT). This is meant to facilitate the right to information, more intensive monitoring of the programme, as also greater speed of execution.

All these features put together signal the possible inauguration of a wholly new chapter in rural governance in India. One of the key factors endangering the very roots of democracy is the falling apart at the seams of systems of service delivery and programme implementation. The failure of the public sector in rural development is one of the least understood but most threatening features of life for the poor in post-independence India [Shah 2007]. And this is not a mere consequence of the advent of the so-called “reforms” era in the 1990s. It has been an enduring feature of rural life over the last 60 years, which has only got worse over time. NREGA can change this for all time to come, if

that is, its provisions are implemented in right earnest.

2 Lack of Professionals

The central proposition of this commentary is that there is no way NREGA can realise its full potential if implemented within the same moribund structure of governance that has characterised rural India since independence. A bureaucracy that is both unmotivated and corrupt and which, in any case, has its hands full with a whole host of pre-existing responsibilities, can hardly be expected to muster the imagination and energy required by NREGA. A radically new programme also makes dramatically new demands from the system, requirements that the public sector in rural development, as it exists today, is completely unprepared for.

Every state government was required to appoint, in each block, a full-time programme officer (PO), exclusively dedicated to the implementation of NREGA, with necessary support staff. However, the CAG report finds that 19 states had not appointed these officers in 70 per cent of the blocks it surveyed. The existing block development officers (BDOs) had been appointed POs and given “additional charge” of NREGA. Unfortunately, NREGA is not a programme that can work on an “additional charge” basis. An employment guarantee assistant (EGA) was to be appointed in each gram panchayat, in view of the pivotal role of PRIs in NREGA implementation. According to the CAG report, 52 per cent of the 513 gram panchayats it surveyed had not appointed EGAs.

The state governments were also required to constitute panels of accredited engineers at the district and block levels. Without timely and transparent costing of works and their measurement and valuation by such a panel, neither sanction of works nor payment to labour can happen on schedule. CAG found the panel missing in as many as 20 of the states it studied. The state governments were also to appoint Technical Resource Support Groups at the state and district levels to assist in planning, design, monitoring, evaluation, quality audit, training and handholding. The CAG report finds that 23 states had not set up such groups at

the state or district levels. According to the report,

non-appointment of a full-time dedicated PO, who is pivotal to the successful implementation of NREGA, and giving the additional charge of PO to BDOs, who were responsible for other developmental schemes at the block level, strikes at the root of effective implementation of NREGA. In the absence of dedicated technical resources, the administrative and technical scrutiny and approval of works was, thus, routed through the normal departmental channels burdened with existing responsibilities. This was further compounded by the failure to specify time frames for processing and approval of proposals at different levels. This was reflected in the poor progress in taking up works (pp 16-17).

The CAG report summarises “significant deficiencies” and their impact on NREGA implementation:

The main deficiency was the lack of adequate administrative and technical manpower at the block and GP levels. The lack of manpower adversely affected the preparation of plans, scrutiny, approval, monitoring and measurement of works, and maintenance of the stipulated records at the block and GP level. Besides affecting the implementation of the scheme and the provision of employment, this also impacted adversely on transparency, and made it difficult to verify the provision of the legal guarantee of 100 days of employment on demand. Planning was inadequate and delayed, which resulted in poor progress of works. Systems for financial management and tracking were deficient, with numerous instances of diversion/misutilisation, and delay in transfer of state share. Monthly squaring of accounts at different levels to maintain financial accountability and transparency was also not being done. Maintenance of records at the block and GP levels was extremely poor, and the status of monitoring, evaluation and social audit was also not up to the mark (p 95).

All of this meant that of the 2.10 crore households who were employed under NREGA during its first year, only 0.22 crore received the full 100 days promised under the Act. The average employment per household was 43 days in 2006-07 and 35 days in 2007-08 [MORD 2008]. Field reports of the partners of the national consortium provide more details, confirming the picture presented in the CAG report.

Under-Staffing

In Bolangir and Nuapada districts of Orissa, BDOs are doubling up as NREGA programme officers. In Dahod and Panchmahals

districts in Gujarat, officers are being sent on deputation from other government departments, particularly the irrigation department, as POS. In Pohri block of Shivpuri district in Madhya Pradesh, the panchayat inspector is also the PO of NREGA. In Tikamgarh and Khandwa districts of MP, the CEOs of block panchayats have been given additional charge of NREGA. In Raigarh, Sarguja and Rajnandgaon districts of Chhattisgarh, uncertainty of tenure and resulting discontinuity have had an adverse impact on NREGA work. POS are demoralised and unmotivated and feel that the work done by them has come to nothing. In Orissa's Bolangir district, engineers of line departments have been given additional responsibility of NREGA. For a block of 140 villages, there are only four to five junior engineers (JES), two of whom are given additional responsibility for NREGA, while the others continue with their normal departmental work. These two JES in-charge of NREGA also look after other schemes such as the Backward Region Grant Fund, Indira Awas Yojana, Revised Long Term Action Plan for KBK, Biju-KBK Scheme, MPLAD and DPAP.

The documentation and procedural requirements of NREGA often make it an unattractive proposition as compared to these other schemes where financial leakages are seen to be easier. Thus, the whole process of planning and design of works, implementation, measurement and payment is marked with poor attention to quality and long delays. In Chhattisgarh, the situation is no different. In Wardrafnagar block of Sarguja district, for instance, four technical assistants are shared across 72 gram panchayats. There is no pool of engineers available at the district either. In Raigarh and Jashpur districts, where fresh JES have been appointed, their tenure is again for a period of one year, after which it has to be renewed. The number of such JES falls far short of what is required. Similar shortages of technical staff are reported from the Dahod and Panchmahals districts in Gujarat. In Tikamgarh and Shivpuri districts of MP, the Regional Engineering Services (RES) and other line department engineers have been given additional charge of NREGA. In Tikamgarh, some appointment of engineers at the block or district level have been made, but under contract

for a limited tenure. In Khandwa, there have been some contractual appointments but too few to make any difference. In Anuppur, also there is a shortage of technical personnel at the disposal of the GPS, as a result of which they are dependent on engineers of line departments posted at the block level.

3 Delays in Administration

This shortage of staff leads delays in execution of works and payment of wages. This is the experience in all our consortium districts but the most vivid illustration of the process comes from Bolangir and Nuapada districts of Orissa. The JE prepares the work plans and estimates. This itself takes time, since the JE is also overloaded with other responsibilities. Once the plan is made, it is submitted to the assistant engineer (AE) for approval. Since each AE is at times given the responsibility of more than one block, approval at the AE level also takes extra time. When the AE approves it, the proposal is sent to the PO (BDO) who has powers to approve a plan up to Rs 2 lakh. If the proposal is for more than Rs 2 lakh, it is sent to the district headquarters. Once the work is approved and funds released for it, the cheque is signed by the sarpanch, the panchayat EO and the PO-BDO. The BDO's signature is an additional requirement under NREGA; normal non-NREGA panchayat works do not need this signature. This further delays withdrawal of funds and execution of works.

Once work reaches a certain stage, the work done has to be valued and payments made to workers based on this valuation. This requires technical people who are in short supply. This means that measurement itself can sometimes take several months, although it is supposed to be done within a week. A utilisation certificate (UC) has to be submitted by the panchayat to the PO-BDO, for release of the next instalment. After measurement is done, the UC is prepared and sent to the PO-BDO. The PO-BDO then waits for all GPS to submit their UCS so that they can be pooled together and sent to the district panchayat (DP) for the next tranche. If one or two GPS delay submission of their UCS, onward submission to the DP is delayed.

In parts of Shivpuri district, Madhya Pradesh, delays of as much as two to three months in payment of wages have been

reported. Wage payments are delayed because of long gaps between execution and valuation of work due to paucity of engineers. In Rajnandgaon, delays in wage payments are reported by PRI leaders as one of the major problems facing NREGA works. In Sarguja, a shortage of technical personnel to do the valuation work is reported to cause delays in wage payments of up to three months.

4 Lack of People's Planning

Another serious consequence of shortage of professional staff is that there is little effort at social mobilisation without which there is no chance of NREGA emerging as a people-centred programme.

In Rajnandgaon, Raigarh, Sarguja and Jashpur districts of Chhattisgarh, works are focused mainly on activities for which standardised estimates are available. Plans are made and approved at the "top" and sent downwards for implementation by the GPS. For instance, in the entire Wardrafnagar block of Sarguja, 75 per cent of funds have been utilised on roads of different types. Since this area is one of the poorest tribal pockets of the country, with a long history of droughts, the focus should naturally have been on drought proofing. The topography is naturally suited to watershed works too. But these are not the priority of NREGA plans.

In Mandla district, MP there is an absence of annual plans. The shelf of projects exists but it is very broad in nature and the activities are not well defined. The general practice is that funds are first released by the DP and then activities are identified. In Shivpuri, the focus continues to be roads. The gram sabha is not aware of the plans nor do people know that without their approval, works cannot start or be completed. The perspective plans are photocopies of those prepared for the National Food for Work Programme (NFFWP). A list of such works compiled together has formed the perspective plan. The annual plans also are prepared in the form of lists culled out from previously prepared "plans". Activities may be subtracted from these lists or added to them by the PO and the RES engineers on their own.

In Tikamgarh district there are no annual working plans ratified by the gram sabha. The plans are prepared by the CEO

block panchayat and GP secretary and forwarded for fund release to the DP.

In Anuppur, plan ratification by the gram sabha was a mere formality since people were reportedly excluded from the whole process. The panchayats are forced to implement action plans made by the district. In Khandwa district too, gram sabhas are not actively involved in the process of planning. Focus seems to be on rural connectivity and wells to the exclusion of other works.

In Gujarat, the planning process again does not involve the people directly. While records suggest that the gram sabha was involved, field checks belie this claim. There has been very little effort to mobilise the people to take active part in plan formulation.

Poor Quality

Given the low level of support infrastructure provided for NREGA works, it is not surprising that quality of works undertaken is uniformly reported to be poor. In Rajnandgaon, the emphasis is more on spending a larger amount of money than on ensuring quality in works execution.

In Sarguja, shortage of technical staff is reported as adversely impacting quality. Also poor and thoughtless implementation strategies result in low quality work – planting is done but no provision is made for watering, nor is any protection (mechanical or human) planned against grazing. The plantations are thus destroyed fast.

In Jashpur and Raigarh districts, the poor quality of works is widely reported, particularly given the paucity of technical manpower resources at the disposal of NREGA projects. In Gujarat, the rates of work are an issue, due to which quality of work is adversely affected. In Madhya Pradesh, in Shivpuri, it is reported that quality of works is very poor. Farm bunding has been initiated without any proper technical planning because of which the quality of work is shoddy. In Tikamgarh, plants have already died because no arrangement was made for water. The condition of roads is variable and only a few may survive.

5 Sabotage

The field experience of our consortium partners shows that shortage of dedicated personnel is not the only problem. It

appears that the existing bureaucratic machinery is just not willing to play ball with the strict provisions of NREGA and are at times actively sabotaging its implementation. Where PRI leaders are keen to implement NREGA work, secretaries and executive officers of gram panchayats are seen to be working overtime to convince these leaders of the “perils” of getting entangled with NREGA.

In Bolangir, Orissa, executive officers of panchayats routinely dissuade sarpanchs from putting up a demand for work under NREGA by raising the bogey of getting caught under the strict provisions of the law. NREGA is apparently seen as a programme where making money is not only “unnecessarily complicated” but might also be “fraught with danger”. While critics of the Act have expressed fears that this scheme too will go the normal route of leakages, ironically many field-level functionaries perceive NREGA as a programme where corruption is very difficult, due to the numerous procedures that have been introduced.

In Rajnandgaon district, Chhattisgarh, there are reports that sarpanchs fear that getting work done under NREGA is tantamount to going to jail and that the unemployment allowance will have to be given out of the sarpanchs’ pockets. In Dahod and Panchmahals districts of Gujarat, the talatis are also being seen as putting the fear of NREGA into the sarpanchs and dissuading them from raising work demand.

An elaborate mechanism has been evolved in Bolangir and Nuapada districts in Orissa to escape doing NREGA work by suppressing such demand if it arises. When an applicant demands work in writing by submitting Form B-1 (work application or demand form) to the panchayat, the application has to be acknowledged in writing by the GP through a notice to the applicant for reporting to work (Form B-2 in Orissa). What the panchayat does is to duly fill up Form B-2 for each applicant but the form is never actually given to the applicant. It is kept with the panchayat. This is done so that work under NREGA does not start, but in case of an official inquiry, the sarpanch and the EO can claim that the job cardholders concerned were issued a written notice to appear for work vide Form B-2, but that they never

turned up at the work site. To discourage pos from keeping job applications pending, they are threatened that any unemployment allowance paid will be recovered from their salaries. This suppresses the demand for work, especially in the absence of time bound sanction and release procedures.

6 Inappropriate Rates

Work done on rural employment programmes in India is measured through the schedule of rates (SOR). This schedule provides rates at which work done by labour is valued. Workers are paid according to the value placed on their work by the SOR. What the government has overlooked is that the present SORS are meant for a system that uses contractors and machines to carry out public works. These contractors, as a rule, do not pay statutory minimum wages to labour and get most of their work done through machines like the JCB.² Deploying the same SORS under NREGA makes it impossible for workers to earn minimum wages. This is also because existing SORS make inadequate provisions for variations in geology and climate, discriminate against women, tend to underpay workers by lumping various activities together and do not revise rates in line with increments in statutory minimum wages [Vijay Shankar et al 2006]. Deploying the old SORS also makes it impossible for implementers like gram panchayats to correctly cost works undertaken by them. The result is a varying combination of a series of malpractices – more work is shown than actually undertaken on the ground, poor quality of work takes place, works are left incomplete as actual costs exceed sanctions, labour is underpaid, bogus workers are shown as paid while machines actually do the work, etc.

In Mandla, wage payments of as low as Rs 37 per day are also being reported because of the valuation as per the task rate. Here people are unwilling to work on a task rate basis because they get less than the minimum wage under the system. In Rajnandgaon, while minimum wages are being paid, the work actually extracted from workers is reported to be more than that mandated by the wage rate. In Panchmahals and Dahod districts of Gujarat, the use of JCBs for excavation has been reported. In

Orissa, village labour leaders appointed as EGAs were widely reported to be working as contractors. In Sarguja district, Chhattisgarh, 50 per cent of NREGA works that are to be implemented by line departments, are invariably found using machinery. But in Raigarh and Jashpur, the use of both contractors and machines has come down following public outcry against the same.

7 Mockery of Social Audit

All partners of our consortium report that there is no real social audit process taking place in any location nor is there any system in place to do so. Provision for mandatory availability of muster rolls on work site is also not followed. In Gujarat, while the administration in Panchmahals and Dahod claims that social audit has been conducted, actually no report of the proceedings of these audits is available for scrutiny. Nor has the necessary mobilisation been carried out before organising such events. Talatis also resist divulging any information, despite threats of using the RTI Act. In Chhattisgarh, monitoring and vigilance committees have been largely inert in Raigarh and Jashpur. In Rajnandgaon, social audits have been done to complete a formality. Monitoring and vigilance systems are either not present or inactive. In Sarguja, the social audits conducted have been far from satisfactory.

Field reports indicate that the frequency of these audits needs to be increased from the present once every year to once a quarter. In Madhya Pradesh's Tikamgarh district, only one social audit is reported, that too in October 2006. Even for this reports are not available for public scrutiny. In Mandla, no social audit is reported to have been conducted. The data on work done and payments is kept tightly under wraps. In Khandwa there does not seem to be any social audit arrangement in place. In Shivpuri reports clearly point to a lack of social audit and no village level vigilance committees.

Panchayat secretaries have floated vigilance committees by entering a few names from the GP in their records. These names are also used for "ratification" by gram sabhas of various decisions. However, these members do not themselves know

either of their membership of these committees or about their duties or powers. The worst thing that could have happened to social audit is the process of inviting tenders for conducting them.

In Shivpuri, it is reported that some agencies have tendered as low as Rs 27 per gram panchayat to do a social audit. In Khandwa, owners of photography shops, printing presses and manufacturing units had also submitted tenders to conduct this audit. Here the lowest bid was for Rs 100 per GP. Social audit is a qualitative process, needing tremendous efforts at grass root mobilisation and preparation of the community to understand what the audit process means and how they can use it to ensure that they direct development interventions in their own villages.

Thus, the process leading up to the social audit event and persistent follow-up after the event are as important as the event itself. Unfortunately, many so-called NGOs have also been unable to resist the temptation of bidding for social audit tenders at ridiculous rates, ending up making a mockery of one of the most radical and critical provisions of NREGA.

8 The Road Ahead

It is evident that both the number and quality of human resources deployed so far are completely inadequate for shouldering the complex and manifold responsibilities of NREGA implementation. It is obvious that governments have failed to recognise the enormous diversity of tasks involved and the skills required to execute the same with speed and quality.

8.1 Workload and Personnel Required

We have carried out a careful work study of NREGA and the staff currently deployed to identify precisely the additional personnel required at each level of implementation.

Our key recommendations (summarised and explained in Table 1 (p 46)) are: (1) Appointment of a full-time District Programme Coordinator dedicated only for NREGA.

(2) Constitution of Technical Resource Support Group at the district-level.

(3) Appointment of full-time Programme Officer at the block-level, dedicated only for NREGA.

(4) Appointment of three civil engineers in each block (not visualised in the official guidelines).

(5) Appointment of one Technical Assistant for a group of five gram panchayats as suggested by CAG (as against 10 GPs in the official guidelines).

(6) Appointment of one assistant programme officer for a group of five gram panchayats to undertake the task of social mobilisation (not visualised in the official guidelines).

(7) Appointment of Employment Guarantee Assistants in each village (as against each GP in official guidelines).

8.2 Costs

From April 2008 onwards, the NREGA will be extended to the whole country. In our own view, this is a decision that should have been taken only after the lessons of the first two years had been absorbed and necessary correctives put into place. Be that as it may, we have to now estimate the cost of the support structure we are suggesting, assuming that the employment guarantee will extend to the whole country from April 2008. Table 2 (p 46) presents the total cost of works under the employment guarantee. According to the *Seventh Report of the Rural Labour Enquiry* [Labour Bureau 2004], there were 13.71 crore rural households (RH) in the country in 1999-2000, of which 5.51 crore (40 per cent) were rural labour households (RLH). Projecting the number of RLH to grow at an annual compound rate of 1.93 per cent (the national rate of growth of population between 1991 and 2001), we get a figure of 6.42 crore RLH in the country in April 2008. If we assume that 80 per cent of them offer themselves for employment, the number of RLH for whom the 100-day job guarantee would have to be extended comes to 5.14 crore, (say, for the sake of convenience 5 crore households).³ Assuming a daily minimum wage rate of Rs 70 (which is the weighted average of minimum wages across states reported by the MORD 2008), the total wage cost of the programme is Rs 35,000 crore. The average wage: non-wage cost ratio of NREGA over the last two years has been around 70:30 [MORD 2008]. Thus, the total cost of NREGA works comes to Rs 50,000 crore, if the

programme is to be extended to the whole country by April 2008.

A quick cross-check with actual NREGA expenditure so far validates our figure of Rs 50,000 crore for NREGA works. The cumulative expenditure in 330 NREGA districts in financial year 2007-08 comes to Rs 10,133 crore as on January 31, 2008 (<http://nrega.nic.in>). This expenditure was sufficient only to provide an average of 35 days of employment per household. Thus, we would require nearly Rs 29,000

crore if we were to provide 100 days of employment to all households seeking work across 330 districts. Extending this guarantee to all 604 districts of India in 2008-09 would, therefore, require an expenditure of nearly Rs 53,000 crore (Table 3, p 47).

As we have argued above, NREGA needs an appropriate human resource support structure for it to truly deliver on its potential. The last two years have witnessed a fierce struggle within the government and the Central Employment Guarantee

Council (CEGC) over the so-called “administrative costs” of NREGA. These were fixed at 2 per cent when NREGA was enacted and

Table 2: Estimated Annual Cost of NREGA Works in April 2008

Rural labour households (RLH) in India (in crore)	6.42
RLH looking for work (in crore)	5
Daily minimum wage (in Rs)	70
Days of work guaranteed per year	100
Wage cost (Rs crore)	35,000
Wage cost as % of works cost	70%
Total NREGA works cost (Rs crore)	50,000

Table 1: Personnel Required by Level of Implementation

Personnel Required	Work Description	Current Situation	Our Recommendations
Level of Implementation: District			
District Programme Coordinator (DPC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Overall coordination and implementation of the scheme in the district Scrutiny, sanction and approval of plan proposals of all block panchayats Reporting to district panchayat Concurrent monitoring of field implementation Ensuring external evaluation in the district Conducting progress reviews Ensuring financial audit 	Full-time dedicated DPCs not appointed. DP CEOs doubling up as DPCs	Appoint full-time, professional DPC, carefully selected from the open market, on contract, fully answerable to the DP. Could also be an officer on deputation but s/he must go through the same selection process.
Technical Resource Support Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide technical guidance in planning, design and estimation of works Screen project proposals for technical feasibility and cost efficiency Training and handholding, with a view to improving the quality and cost effectiveness of works Field based monitoring and evaluation of technical aspects of project 	Not in place in 23 states according to CAG (2007)	This group can be constituted from existing officials, NGO members and independent experts who volunteer their services. They can be paid out of the overall 2% cost of monitoring and evaluation (as suggested below) when they undertake specific assignments
Computer Operators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Data entry Reporting to DPC 	Such staff is mostly already in place	
Level of Implementation: Block			
Programme Officer (PO)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Overall responsibility for coordination of NREGA works undertaken by gram panchayats and other implementing agencies Monitoring each stage of implementation Reporting to block panchayats and DPC 	CAG report (2007) finds that 19 states had not appointed these officers in 70% of the blocks they surveyed. The existing block development officers (BDOs) had been given “additional charge” of NREGA.	Full-time, professional PO, carefully selected from the open market, on contract, fully answerable to the block panchayat and DPC needs to be appointed. Could also be an officer on deputation but s/he must go through the same selection process.
Block Level Engineers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Guide the process of estimating, measuring and valuating works Building capacities of TAs, APOs and EGAs Visits to work sites to provide handholding support to TAs and EGAs Assist in monitoring of the programme 	Major lacuna in present set-up leading to enormous delays	Three full-time civil engineers, with experience of earthen works, carefully selected from the open market, on contract, fully answerable to the block panchayat and DPC (@ 10 GPs per one person) need to be appointed

Personnel Required	Work Description	Current Situation	Our Recommendations
Technical Assistants (one for every five GPs)	Planning: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Technical survey of possible work sites Preparation of technical drawings Preparation of cost estimates Execution: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Layout at work site Supervision and monitoring of works Measurement of work done Preparation of musters Maintenance of site-specific records Preparation of work completion certificates 	According to the CAG report, TAs are not in place in 35% of the blocks they surveyed. Official NREGA guidelines recommend one TA for 10 GPs; CAG recommends one TA for five GPs	We agree with the CAG that one full-time TA is required for every five GPs
Assistant Programme Officer (APO)	Responsible for social components of NREGA, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Raise awareness about provisions of NREGA Ensure registration of workers and issue of job cards Mobilisation for raising work demand Conducting baseline socio-economic surveys PRAs, transect walks and rural appraisal exercises for planning Finalisation of action plan with village community Presentation and approval of action plan in gram sabha Formation of local vigilance committees Organising gram sabhas for continuous approval of work done Organisation of social audits and social audit forums Capacity building of EGAs and PRI leadership 	No provision has been made for these most critical tasks under NREGA.	We recommended one full-time APO for every five GPs, considering the magnitude of work involved
Data Entry Operator (DEO)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Data entry at block level 	Two DEOs per block already in place	This is sufficient
Employment Guarantee Assistant (EGA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assisting TAs in surveys, layouts and measurements Supervising work at sites Assisting APOs in all social mobilisation tasks 	Official guidelines suggest one EGA for every GP. According to the CAG report (2007), EGAs are not in place in over 50% of the GPs they surveyed.	We believe that one EGA is needed in each village given the magnitude of the work involved. The EGAs are the lynchpin on which the whole of NREGA hangs.

subsequently raised to 4 per cent of total costs in 2007-08 after pressure from within the CEGC. But this is a debate couched in false terms. The expenses required to infuse NREGA implementation with quality are not so much administrative, as costs of professionalising the programme and introducing the critical inputs of capacity building as also monitoring

Table 3: Estimated Annual Cost of NREGA Works in 2008-09
(Alternative Estimate)

Expenditure on NREGA works in 2007-08 (till January 31, 2008) (Rs crore) in 330 districts	10,133
Average days of employment per worker household (till January 31, 2008) in 330 districts	35
Expenditure on NREGA works needed to provide 100 days of employment in 330 districts (Rs crore)	28,951
Expenditure on NREGA works needed to provide 100 days of employment in 604 districts in 2008-09 (Rs crore)	52,990

Table 4: Support Costs for NREGA, 2008-09

Professional support cost (Rs crore) (6% of works)	3,000
Cost of capacity building (Rs crore) (2% of works)	1,000
Cost of monitoring and evaluation (Rs crore) (1% of works)	500
Administrative cost (Rs crore) (1% of works)	500
Total NREGA support costs (Rs crore)	5,000
Total NREGA works cost (Rs crore)	50,000
Total annual cost of universal rural employment guarantee (Rs crore)	55,000

and evaluation, with all the seriousness that these tasks demand. Without these inputs NREGA appears almost programmed to fail. A very small investment could make a big difference in truly transforming NREGA outlays into enduring outcomes. These inputs must be regarded as "investments" and not as administrative overheads or contingencies, as currently understood.

Table 4 gives a summary of all the necessary support costs for NREGA. These are discussed in detail below.

In order to cover the costs of the Central Employment Guarantee Council and the State Employment Guarantee Councils, as also to support a system of regular monitoring and evaluation of NREGA, we suggest fixing 1 per cent of the total cost of works to meet these expenses. The professional support and administrative costs are estimated in Tables 5 and 6. These are illustrative exercises intended to establish the reasonableness in cost terms of our proposed structure of professional support for NREGA. By spending an additional 10 per cent, we are in a much better position

to ensure quality in the money spent on NREGA works.

8.3 Capacity Building

There is a need to continuously upgrade the capacities of the massive support structure of human resources needed for NREGA. An inadequate emphasis on capacity building has been a characteristic failure of rural development programmes in India [GoI 2006]. Indeed, we need to first recognise that this order of magnitude of trained people are just not available in rural India. This means that a major new initiative is required to build capacities of rural people in NREGA related work. For example, we need nearly 6 lakh Employment Guarantee Assistants and over 50,000 each of Assistant Programme Officers and Technical Assistants.

Government should seriously consider recognising a one-year diploma course on NREGA, conducted by the whole range of government and non-government training institutions spread across the country. This is the kind of preparatory work that was required even before NREGA was launched. But it is still not too late to initiate such a programme, in which institutions like CAPART can play a special role.

In Table 7, we have estimated the cost of training the personnel required under NREGA. It comes to only 2 per cent of the total cost of NREGA works. Even though we believe that capacity building must be a continuing process, there is no doubt that these costs would also come down as a fully trained cadre emerges over time.

8.4 Critical Role of IT

Information technology (IT) must be seen as a key player in NREGA reforms. The use of IT can effectively make possible:

- reduction in time taken for tasks such as estimation, planning and managing fund flows as also standardisation of procedures.
- reducing or eliminating the scope of "discretions" and "judgments" exercised to disguise malpractices.

– reduction in time taken over administrative decisions, particularly on sanction and releases by proactively offering information.

– making data transparently available on a network for monitoring, thus enabling concurrent vigilance and audits.

Table 5: Estimated Annual Professional Support Costs for NREGA

	Number	Amount Per Month (Rs)	Annual Bill (Rs Crore)
Salaries at district level			
District programme coordinator	604	22,000	16
Two data entry operators	1,208	5,000	7
Total at district level			23
Salaries at block level			
Programme officer	6,495	15,000	117
Assistant programme officers			
(One for every five GPs)	51,771	8,000	497
Three civil engineers	19,485	8,000	187
Technical assistants			
(one for every five GPs)	51,771	5,500	342
Two data entry operators	12,990	3,400	53
Employment guarantee assistant			
(one for each village)	5,93,731	2,500	1,781
Total at block level			2,977
Total professional support cost			3,000

There are 604 districts, 6,495 blocks, 2,58,857 gram panchayats and 5,93,731 villages in India [MoHA 2008; MoPR 2008].

Table 6: Estimated Annual Administrative Costs for NREGA

At District Level	Number	Amount Per Month (Rs)	Annual Bill (Rs Crore)
Salary of clerical staff for DPC			
(two persons)	1,208	3,000	9
DPC office rent	604	5,000	4
DPC office miscellaneous expenses	604	15,000	11
Travel allowance for DPC	604	8,000	6
Total at district level			29
At block level			
PO office rent	6,495	3,000	23
PO office miscellaneous expenses	6,495	10,000	78
Travel expenses for PO	6,495	4,000	31
Travel expenses for APO	51,771	2,500	155
Travel expenses for engineers	19,485	2,500	58
Travel expenses for technical assistants			
	51,771	2,000	124
Total at block level			471
Total administrative cost			500

Table 7: Estimated Annual Capacity Building Costs for NREGA

Personnel to be Trained	Persons	Days of Training	Person-Day	Cost/Person-Day	Total Cost (Rs Crore)
District programme					
coordinator	604	5	3,020	400	0.12
Programme officer	6,495	5	32,475	400	1.30
Assistant programme					
officer	51,771	5	2,58,855	325	8.41
Block level engineers	19,485	5	97,425	325	3.17
Technical assistants	51,771	10	5,17,710	300	15.53
Employment guarantee					
assistant	5,93,731	18	1,06,87,158	300	320.61
Mates (two per village)	11,87,462	15	1,78,11,930	300	534.36
PRI members (3 per GP)	7,76,571	5	38,82,855	300	116.49
Total					1,000

As the software deployed for NREGA in Andhra Pradesh [MORD 2006] has shown, all stages of NREGA work, from registration of workers to issue of job cards, preparation of estimates for works, muster rolls and transfer of payments to workers can be very effectively computerised, leading to reduction in time taken and administrative costs. Modules in the software related to estimation and planning make it possible for technical survey readings for a standard basket of activities,⁴ taken by a Technical Assistant or EGA, to be fed into the system and a work estimate generated on this basis. Works to be executed at any village can be identified by the gram sabha and data entered into input sheets. The identified work will have necessary measurements along with the leads. With the help of input sheets, work estimates are generated in the computer system and sent to the gram panchayat for scrutiny and prioritisation. Depending on its nature and type, every work has a given set of tasks. All the above details for a particular work are estimated task-wise and the total estimated work and material requirements for that work are computed. The estimate is given a unique ID, which is used to track the work, prepare muster rolls from the MIS system and also prepare orders for payments. The system also has modules for material management, maintaining a list of authorised suppliers, and integration of accounts.

Scope for MIS

The MIS has already ensured that most or all stages of NREGA implementation cannot bypass it. Thus, work estimates, pay orders, muster rolls, etc, must be generated from the system for work to continue. There is scope to take the NREGA MIS [MORD 2005b] even further. Given an integrated network with uninterrupted online access, the MIS has the ability to make proposals pending for sanction at various levels transparent over the network, as also the ability to accord sanctions online or to make observations on proposals available on the network. By also generating required note-sheets, the system has the capacity to lead the workflow rather than be an add-on for data storage, retrieval and post-facto monitoring. Such a feature can be effectively deployed to rule out standard transmission and distribution losses associated

with paper-work pipelines. These include delays in dispatch and receipts, long pendency of files, difficulties in more senior lines of authority getting to know about pending decisions, resultant delays in sanctions and finally, zero accountability.

Take for instance field reports regarding huge delays in receiving a sanction order for work. In a typical scenario this happens because a proposal is made on paper, signed and physically dispatched to the sanctioning authority. It may or may not be put up to the sanctioning authority on time. Even when it does, there may be a delay because the person in-charge simply does not sign the sanction order, either because of a lack of time or because he wants to delay the order, and uses the fact that the files are buried deep in his office to “duck”, as it were.

In a paper system, unless a senior official asks this sanctioning authority why the sanction order was not made, he may not even come to know that this was indeed the case. So there is no effective check on the sanctioning authority. Contrast this with a computer network where the same data is available to everyone concerned online. The time taken for the physical passage of paper files is removed. The proposal is “put up” online and sanctioned “on line” too. Moreover, the data on proposals pending for sanction are available to the sanctioning authority as well to his seniors up the line. The fact that this information is speedily available and the transparency this induces leaves fewer channels for escape and ensures that the task is done. The fact that different users have different accesses and privileges in the system also deters possibilities of misuse. In today’s age of core banking and money transfers across computer networks, the ability to take and communicate decisions online must be seen as an idea whose time has definitely come.

The other major contribution of this MIS is that it opens up NREGA for public scrutiny, thus engendering greater transparency and better public audit. Since each job card issued, each work undertaken and every payment made anywhere in the state has a unique identification code, and since all this information is just a click away on the web, anyone interested in doing so can access this information, identify the person and actually conduct an

evaluation to see whether what is reported is true or not. A great impediment to effective public audits – the lack of access to information – is thus taken care of.

To fully realise the potential of IT, there is an urgent need to

(i) Put a proper infrastructure in place so that the network is tightly integrated and uploads/downloads of data and decisions are as concurrent as connectivity allows. This means investments in connectivity. In the interest of rural governance reforms, extension of such communication highways to the most backward areas of the country must be a priority. (ii) Select and train personnel in data entry and posting, so that quality is ensured. (iii) Customise the software, wherever necessary, especially in estimation processes, in order to accommodate ground-level variations

8.5 Potential with Support

How much difference such a support system can make to the quality of NREGA implementation is illustrated by the work of the National Consortium of Grassroots Civil Society Organisations for NREGA initiated in 2007 by Samaj Pragati Sahayog. The consortium is a coming together of CSOs working across 30 districts of 7 states of the country. These CSOs have committed themselves to supporting PRIs in their areas to make NREGA a success. Many of these CSOs include panchayat leaders in their ranks. These CSOs have all been formally invited by the PRIs to help them plan, implement and social audit NREGA work. Consortium partners have worked to create awareness among people about the Act and its provisions, built a dialogue with PRI leadership, filled lacunae in the planning process and ensured greater participation of rural people in the functioning of the employment guarantee.

In Raigarh, Jashpur and Sarguja districts of Chhattisgarh, CSOs have identified and supported rozgar mitaans (friends) who perform the role of EGAs. Door-to-door campaigns for registration of workers and applications for job cards have resulted in significant increases in job card holders. More work is being demanded by people under NREGA. There has been an increased demand by people to diversify the type of works undertaken to include watershed activities.

For example, gram sabhas held in seven villages after a systematic campaign on NREGA by a consortium partner in Raigarh led to work proposals worth Rs 1.30 crore, of which a majority are water conservation works. Qualitative changes include an increase in attendance in gram sabhas, particularly of women, more active local vigilance committees, who question use of poor quality material in construction work undertaken by the panchayat, information sharing on NREGA in gram sabhas, better worksite facilities and transparent payment procedures.

In Madhya Pradesh too, encouraging results are reported. In Tikamgarh, job demand and registration of workers have gone up in panchayats where the consortium partners are working. There is now a greater awareness among people of their entitlements under the Act. In these panchayats work demand has increased and people are insisting on this work being provided at minimum wages. Some reduction in migration is also reported. Mobilisation campaigns in Shivpuri district have also led to increased awareness about the rights under NREGA. There is greater pressure on PRIS and the bureaucracy to deliver. In other blocks of the same district, thousands of people who were left out of the job card process were registered and their job cards issued after systematic mobilisation campaigns. In Khandwa district, at the specific request of the district administration, a consortium partner undertook an awareness drive across 50 villages with the aim of increasing work demand. Works valued at Rs 9 crore were demanded as a direct consequence of this drive.

In Orissa, one consortium partner convinced the district administration that plans be made for a variety of activities other than roads, with a clear sustainable livelihoods focus, such as water harvesting structures and plantation. This resulted in a sixfold increase in allocation to one GP alone. This clearly brings out the fact that it is the absence of proper planning that results in low offtake and utilisation of funds.

Everywhere consortium partners are helping panchayats by placing technical personnel at their disposal, who help GPs estimate, value and measure work and also directly help in work execution. Partners have also convinced the administration to

integrate simple water harvesting technologies into NREGA. In such cases, consortium partners are providing their engineers to help GPs and the block administration to plan, cost, layout, execute and measure works. In recognition of the power of this approach, the ministry of rural development, has provided pilot support for some partners of the consortium. The way forward is for the government to provide a clear mandate and support for CSOs to work with PRIS to effectively implement NREGA. This would help institutionalise the CSO-PRIS partnership, putting pressure on both CSOs and PRIS to build such relationships.

9 Conclusions

We would like to end with a brief reflection on the politics of NREGA. For it cannot be overlooked that the very enactment of NREGA is the product of a sustained struggle led by civil society and supported by left-leaning politicians across the political spectrum. The significance of this movement cannot be overstated as it represents one of the very few successful campaigns in favour of the rural poor in India, whose voice is almost unheard on the national scene. This is, of course, truly ironic for it is these “dumb millions” who fashion the destinies of those seeking to rule this country. But their cries for reform of the public sector in rural areas, which is often their sole lifeline, have gone completely unattended.

Over the last 20 years, governments so committed to an agenda of reforms for the corporates, appear to have absolutely nothing to offer to their main constituency, the rural poor. On the contrary, with the pressure on the state to shrink, expansion in scale of programmes is increasingly attempted using under-paid, poorly qualified “worker-volunteers”.⁵ Corners must be cut when it comes to the rural poor. Anything for them, it appears, can be of the lowest quality. Of course, we must also recognise that even during the Nehru-era, rural development was never seen as a professional activity. The legacy of Gandhian anti-state anarchism, where people know best and can manage their affairs on their own, without any external help, only reinforced this tendency.

The left, fighting for the very right of the public sector to survive, appears to have become so defensive as to completely

overlook the need for reforms, long overdue in a sector marked by massive corruption and complete non-accountability towards the “public”.

Our advocacy of reforms must not, of course, be seen as a stand-alone magic bullet, a kind of techno-managerial quick fix. We must recognise that without continuous public vigilance the most efficient of systems will inevitably be corrupted. Civil society activism has, therefore, tended to focus on perfecting the mechanisms of social audit. But it is also true that if we do not have the strength and imagination to demonstrate the possibility of positive results through an initiative like NREGA, there is a real danger that disaffection will express itself in frustration, cynicism and violence. This will lead to a spiral of negative outcomes, which will always return to hurt the most vulnerable. Neither a vigilant public nor a professional system is by itself sufficient in guaranteeing an accountable democracy, delivering development to the poor. Both must grow organically in tandem with each other.

The NREGA ranks among the most powerful initiatives ever undertaken for transformation of rural livelihoods in India. The unprecedented commitment of financial resources is matched only by its imaginative architecture that promises a radically fresh programme of rural development. However, for NREGA to realise its potential, it must focus on raising the productivity of agriculture in India's most backward regions. This can then lead further to the creation of allied livelihoods on the foundation of water security. This is also the only way we can envision a decline in the size of the work guarantee over time, as public investment under NREGA leads to higher rural incomes, that in turn spurs private investment and greater incomes and employment [Shah 2007].

At the same time, there has to be a continuous mobilisation of the rural poor so that NREGA can be powerfully social audited.

For works to be productivity enhancing and for effective social accountability, major reforms need to be introduced in NREGA implementation. These include:

(1) Deployment of full-time professionals dedicated to NREGA at all levels, but most crucially at the block level, which is at the cutting-edge of implementation;

(2) Intensive effort at building up a massive cadre of fully trained “barefoot professionals” required at the gram panchayat level through a nationwide movement for capacity building, engaging government and non-government training institutions;

(3) Provision of adequate resources and setting up systems for continuous monitoring and evaluation at every stage of the programme to ensure quality;

(4) Greater use of information technology to infuse more transparency, accountability and speed at all stages, from sanction of works, release of funds, wage payments to social audit;

(5) Revising the Schedule of Rates so that they (a) are in line with a programme that bans machines and contractors, (b) are gender-sensitive, (c) more accurately reflect variations in climate and geology (d) value separately the different activities that comprise works, and (e) move in tandem with changes in statutory minimum wages;

(6) Mandating a role for civil society organisations to work as support agencies for panchayat raj institutions in NREGA planning, implementation and social audit.

The NREGA programme, reformed on these lines, holds out the prospect of not only transforming livelihoods of the poorest people of our country but also heralding a revolution in rural governance in India.


NOTES

- 1 The CAG report covers 513 gram panchayats in 128 blocks of 68 districts in 26 states for the period February 2006 to March 2007. The more detailed field accounts of our consortium are from 15 districts in four states, for the period July 2007 to January 2008
- 2 The word “JCB” is now used colloquially as a genericised term for digger-excavator engineering vehicles, (now appearing in the Oxford English Dictionary), although the company J C Bamford (Excavators) still treats JCB as its trademark.
- 3 This is approximately the figure that Ghosh (2004) also arrives at.
- 4 The software allows for customisation in terms of adding activities or modifying estimation procedures
- 5 Such as the Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs) of the National Rural Health Mission and “shiksha karmis” and “gurujis” of the Education Guarantee Scheme. This appears to sit particularly comfortably with the prevailing orthodox notion of “reforms”, the obsession with getting things done cheaply rather than actually accomplishing one’s goals.

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