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Implementation of MGNREGS in Mokokchung district Nagaland: Issues and challenges

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Abstract

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) is a flagship program launched by the Government of India in 2005. The main objective of the scheme is to improve the livelihood security of the rural poor by providing at least 100 days of guaranteed employment opportunities in a financial year. This study reveals that though there is visible improvement in building the community asset, the program has failed to achieve its core objective of improving the livelihood of the rural poor. This paper discusses the problems in proper implementations of the schemes and also suggest ways to improve it by way of spreading awareness about its major provisions and using the available technology.

Keywords: MGNREGS, livelihood security, problems, suggestions

Introduction

MGNREGS or previously known as the NREGA is a flagship scheme which was launched in 2005 by the Government of India. It is a right based welfare scheme with the objective of providing guaranteed employment opportunities to the adult member of the households who are willing to do unskilled work. The main objective of the scheme is to improve the livelihood security of the rural poor by providing at least 100 days of guaranteed employment opportunities in a financial year. It also envisages the creation of sustainable community assets besides protecting the environment, addressing the issue of migration and improving the lives of rural women. It has been more than 10 years since the launch of this ambitious scheme of boosting rural employment, however today it is marred by controversy on the issue of poor implementation and mismanagement of funds. Despite its imperfect implementation data reveals a positive impact on rural livelihood. The proper implementation of the scheme can play a crucial role to boost rural employment by providing an unemployed adult member of the household guaranteed employment opportunities during the lean season.

Statement of the problem

The main objective of MGNREGS is to improve the livelihood of the rural poor by providing guaranteed employment opportunities which will enable them to earn additional income thus improving their purchasing power. However, funds for wages under the scheme are mostly used for buying materials for assets creation which benefits the village but does not improve the livelihood of the intended beneficiaries. Therefore, an attempt has been made to study the issues and challenges in the implementation of the scheme.

Review of literature

L.J. Charlas & J.M. Velmurugan (2012) talks about the issues and challenges of MGNREGA implementation in Tamil Nadu. Sahunta Kumar Mishar (2011) ^[11] emphasis on the proper monitoring of assets created for enhancing its productive value in three districts of Madhya Pradesh. Santosh Kumar H (2014) in his paper highlights the role of MGNREGA in generating employment, improving the rural livelihood and empowerment of women. Saikia & Borah (2017) ^[13] found that the MGNREGA has not been much of a success. It has failed to provide employment opportunities to the unemployed in the Kamrup district of Assam. Bathacharya points out the positive impact Mgnrega has on the empowering of women and advocate for them to give their 100 percent effort to get the maximum benefits from the

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scheme. Imrongsungba (2015) [6] in his paper discusses the impact of government schemes like MGNREGA and SGSY in improving the living standard of the Nagas. Tiajungla Longchar, K.K. Jha and J. Longkumer (2018) [8] highlight the constraints in the implementation of the scheme in Mon district like low wages and fewer working days. Chubakumzuk (2019) highlights the importance of schemes like MGNREGS in Nagaland for increasing the income level of the villagers.

Objectives

To study the issues and challenges in the proper implementation of the MGNREGS.

Methodology

The paper is qualitative in nature on the basis of primary data collected from face to face interviews. A stratified random sampling method was used for the selection of study areas and respondents. A total of eight (8) villages and 160 respondents were selected out of which 100 males and 60 females were interviewed. The respondents include chairman, council members, women groups, job card holders, government officials, RTI activists, NGO workers. The secondary source is also used to support the primary data analysis.

Historical background of Mokokchung district, Nagaland

Mokokchung is located at 26°20'N 94°32'E 26.33°N 94.53°E. [1] It is located at an elevation of 1325 meters above sea level. Mokokchung has a mild climate throughout the year. For ten months of the year, maximum temperature hovers in the mid-twenties. It is a major district of Nagaland in India and its district headquarter is located in the main

urban center of the district also called Mokokchung town. It is mainly occupied by the Ao Naga tribe who consider it their home and politically the most significant urban center in northern Nagaland. It is bounded by the state of Assam to its north, Wokha district to its west, Tuensang, and Longleng district to its east, and Zunheboto district to its south. Mokokchung is the third most prominent district in Nagaland, India, besides Dimapur (the commercial hub of Nagaland) and Kohima (state capital). Its headquarter is Mokokchung Town which is the main urban center in Northern part of Nagaland (Mokokchung district census, 2011) [12]. According to the 2011 census, it has a population of 194,622 population with 91.62 literacy rate and a sex ratio of 92.5 sex ratio. 95% of the population practice Christianity and 91.68 belong to the scheduled tribe. The literacy rate in urban areas is 93.62 and 90.8% in rural areas. It has a sex ratio of 875 in urban and 946 in rural areas. 71.27% of population still lives in rural areas and majority of the villagers are still engaged in farming and other self-employed occupation. There are 86 villages that are covered under MGNREGA.

Discussion

MGNREGS is known as 100 days job or NREGA among the villagers. It the most popular and recognized welfare scheme of the central government. Both the literate and illiterate are aware of it and hold a positive view of the scheme. It is the major source of funds for the villages for carrying out welfare and developmental activities. Till date 73,979 assets were created under the scheme which can be seen in table 1 and table 2. Though there is visible asset creation, it has not been able to address the real objective of improving the capacity building and livelihood of the economically weaker section of the society.

Table 1: Number of the asset created from 2008-2010

State	Rural Connectivity	Flood Control and Protection	Water Conservation and Water Harvesting	Drought Proofing	Micro Irrigation Works	Works on Individual Land	Renovation of Traditional Water Bodies	Land Development	Rural Sanitation	Any other activities	Total Assets created
Nagaland	34801	1396	2394	1987	3155	101095	16048	19442	54	15836	50002

Source: Dr. P. Srinivas & Mr. K. Pandyaraj (2016) [16].

Table 2: Number of the asset created from 2013-2019

Year	Rural connectivity	Flood control and protection	Water conservation and water harvesting	Drought proofing	Micro irrigation works	Works on individual land	Land development	Rural sanitation	Any other activities	Rural drinking water	Fisheries	Total Assets Created
2013-14	56		18						9			83
2014-15	254		4				1		98			357
2015-16	458		43	89			53	77	177	1	4	902
2016-17	299	5	96	274	20	3	32	243	139		38	1158
2017-18	106		10	98	10	5	23	77	46		14	390
2018-19	48	4	9	34		1	2		2		5	105
2019-20	26	6	9	11		5	4	18			1	80
Total												3075

Source: www.nrega.nic.in

Problems

Corrupt practices

1. Job card not in the possession of the beneficiaries:

Job card is an important document for the beneficiaries. Based on it they are entitled to various benefits. However, as in other states, it is not in the possession of the beneficiaries. In fact, in almost all the villages under

Mokokchung district, job cards are kept by the village council. Such an arrangement has let to misuse of funds at the cost of beneficiaries as there as cases of fake payment entries being made in their job cards without their knowledge.

2. Manipulation in issuing job cards: One of the corrupt practices under the scheme is that of issuing a large

number of bogus job cards. In fact, even the government employees are registered as a beneficiary under MGNREGS which is clearly against the guidelines of the scheme. Such manipulation is done or encouraged by some of the government officials in order to receive a fair share of funds from the central government. However, in reality, it does not benefit the village or the villagers at all. Since the bulk of the funds are siphoned off by middlemen or those who are at the helm of decision-making. Further, on the pretext of the existence of the bogus job cards, some government officials pressurize the village council to ignore the anomalies found over the misuse of funds.

3. **No action against the corrupt officials:** Despite constant proof provided by different activist regarding the gross misuse of funds by officials, due to the deep-rooted nexus from top to bottom, there is no seriousness shown by the state government to take any actions against the corrupt officials. It is not only the state officials but even the central inspection teams are bribed to provide a good report regarding the implementation of projects under MGNREGS. Such faulty reports benefit a few sections of the society at the expense of a large section of rural poor who rely on such schemes for improving their livelihood security.
4. **Projects only on paper:** Another factor regarding the poor implementation of MGNREGS is the faulty data collected by the central and state inspection team. Some of them in nexus with the government officials and council members purposely enters the wrong data by approving the existence of those schemes and projects which in reality exist only on paper. In some cases, the council members show the inspection team private farms and projects and claimed those as projects initiated under the MGNREGS. Officials explained how a pond was dug up several times, or a road re-laid more than once since there was no way to monitor the assets on a real-time basis. This can be clearly seen in comparative study of table 1 and table 2. Within two years from 2008-10 around 50, 000 assets were created. But with better monitoring in the form of geo-tag in 9 years from 2013-2019 only around 3000 assets were created.

Administrative lapses

1. **Non-contribution by the state government:** MGNREGS is a center-state project. The central government provides 100 percent funds for labour wages and 75 percent for material cost. Rest has to be provided by the state government but most of the time it fails to contribute its share. Further after cuts from various corners, the village councils are provided with funds that are hardly sufficient to pay for only 4-5 days of work wages after buying materials. Thus insufficient funds not only affect the wages of the beneficiaries but it also affects the quality and durability of the asset created in the village.
2. **Delay in wage payment:** One of the persistent issues the villagers face is the delay in wage payments to workers. Though the central government releases the funds, the state delays in distributing the wages to the beneficiary. This was highlighted by Nagaland Public Rights Awareness and Action Forum (NPRAAF). (Nagaland Post, 2019) ^[17]. Further, the release of funds

gets delayed due to the non-submission of previous years' financial audited fund statement and other necessary paper works within the stipulated time.

Technical issue

Technology-driven scheme

The government in order to bring more transparency and accountability has made the implementation of MGNREGS highly technology-dependent. The adoption of technology like Aadhaar payment was done to check corruption and reduce leakages. However, this has also created problems for the workers because earlier problems like missing attendance details and wrong account numbers can be easily fixed at the local level, but now it requires the intervention of block-level functionaries (sometimes even district- or state-level functionaries) who are difficult to access for most workers (Aggarwal 2017) ^[1]. There is also an issue of lack of bank facilities nearby village, as a result, they have to spend certain amount of money just to withdraw their wages.

Denial of individual rights

1. **No control over their wages:** In order to ensure that the money goes directly to the beneficiaries, the central government has introduced Direct Transfer Benefit (DTB). However, some of the village council have found a way to deal with this by making bogus bank account of the beneficiaries. Once the account is activated, the ATM card and passbook are kept by the council. In extreme cases, they order the beneficiaries to withdraw the money from their account and hand over to them. Thus even with the introduction of the DTB system, the beneficiaries still do not have possession of their wages.
2. **Individual rights sacrificed at the cost of village development:** There is no doubt increase in the creation of the assets of the village in the form of the village road, retaining wall, dustbin, concrete steps, etc. however, this is achieved at the expenses of individual rights as most of the funds for wages are utilized to buy materials, as a result, the beneficiaries are hardly given Rs 500-1000 annually as wages. Some village council defends such arrangements with the argument that they use the money for paying off electricity bill, underground yearly tax and for other social services activities which benefits the villagers as a whole. However such practices of diverting a chunk of the funds for developmental activities is one of the major factors which has prevented it from fully achieved the real objectives of improving the livelihood and purchasing power of the economically weaker section of the society.

Lack of accountability and transparency

No social audit

In order to maintain transparency and accountability, there is a provision of social audit. However, most of the villagers are not aware of the concept of social audit and even the existence of some are ineffective. In this regard Andhra Pradesh government has set up: Society for Audit Accountability and Transparency (SAAT) as an autonomous body to ensure effective implementation of the MGNREGA program.

Such initiative should be adopted in the state too so that

accountability and transparency can be maintained in the program.

Others

1. **The misconception of Low wage:** One of the shortcomings highlighted by the implementing agencies is the low wage under MGNREGS. Due to the low wage, people are not willing to take up work under the scheme and prefer to take up other work. For instance, the present wages under the scheme is Rs 192 whereas the normal daily ranges between Rs 400-500.
2. **Lack of proper awareness of the scheme:** Most of the beneficiaries are hardly aware of the important provisions and their rights like unemployment allowances if not provided job within 15 days after applying for work. As a result, they are not able to assert rights and raise their voice against the officials. The government has also not shown much keenness of spreading awareness about the important provisions of the scheme. In fact, in some cases, the council members request government officials not to highlight the major provisions of the scheme.
3. **Wrong priorities of work:** Provisions of the MGNREGA clearly states that the use of labour displacing machinery and involvement of contractors are clearly prohibited. But in reality, most of the works are being done by use of machinery and work allotment being given to contractors because of this, the rich and influential people are getting much of the benefits under this scheme instead of the economically weaker section of the society.

MGNREGS is no doubt the most recognized and popular scheme among the villagers and it has helped in asset creation of the villages but due to its poor implementation, it has not achieved its main objectives of strengthening the economic base of the poorer sections of the society, thereby enhancing their livelihood security. Therefore there is an urgent need to review the implementation and utilization of funds under the scheme on the ground level in order to fully realize the core objectives of the scheme. It is even more important for a state like Nagaland where 70 percent of the population lives in the villages and where most of the villagers are seasonal farmers.

Suggestions for better implementation

1. The implementing agencies must ensure that the Job cards are in the possession of the beneficiaries and they must also ensure that the village council fills it regularly and properly.
2. Strict guidelines must be followed in issuing of job cards. Those having a government job but still availing job cards must be suspended or asked to resign from their job. Such rules will act as a deterrence for corrupt practices. In this regard, one of the officials pointed out that due to bogus job cards, the beneficiaries' average workdays come to only 30-40 days, however, if they filter the bogus cards the real beneficiaries will be getting more than 100 workday's wages. Thus, there is a need to properly check the process of issuing job cards so that the benefit of the scheme reaches genuine beneficiaries.
3. Use of appropriate technology like Aadhaar link and geo-tagged been successfully implemented to detect

multiple bogus cardholder and fake schemes. Thus the government must adopt more innovative ways to check leakage and corrupt practices. There is also an urgent need for the central government to take strict actions against corrupt officials and representatives.

4. For its proper implementation, basic infrastructure like bank facility nearby village, effective grievance redressal system and adoption of workers friendly technology is essential.
5. Spreading awareness about the rights of the beneficiary will enable individuals to be more vocal about their rights. For instance with increasing awareness of the schemes through newspaper, RTI, and information available in the mass media, people are now asserting their rights. Like in one of the village under Mokokchung where the beneficiary compelled the village council to return their job after serving an ultimatum
6. Government after proper survey specially conducted by the independent body must prepare a list of projects to be carried out under this scheme which will generate rural employment and improve the capacity building of the marginal section of the society and also will address the issue of migration.
7. There is a need to make it mandatory to set up an autonomous social audit body to bring more transparency and accountability on the implementing agencies which will lead to effective implementation of various schemes.

Conclusion

A revolutionary right based welfare scheme like MGNREGS should not be allowed to paralyze. It should not be a symbol of scams, corruption, and a means to plunder national resources by those in power at the cost of the socio-economically and politically weaker sections of the society. The government need to judiciously use the available technology like Aadhaar linkage, geo-tagged and other means for proper implementation of the scheme and to check corrupt practices by officials. The central government must be committed to ensuring that the real objective of the scheme is lost in the midst of corruption and poor implementation by ensuring workers are not denied their wages under any circumstances.

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