

Report of the work in progress on improving NREGS in Orissa by K.S. Gopal, Member of the National Employment Council and volunteered to assist Orissa state in delivering NREGS

I undertook three visits to Orissa to help improve its deliverance of NREGS and chose the state as it is currently at much below in performance when compared to other states while having high level of poverty. The first visit was from 8th to 11th December, the second in Jan 8th to 10th 2010 and the recent visit from 21st to 24th Jan 2010. Each visit had a specific purpose. The first visit helped familiarize what is happening on the delivery side and on the ground. The second was focused on getting NGOs to link with the Orissa government for concerted effort in delivering NREGS and third to actualize development on the pilots that was agreed during my first visit and discussions with district officials.

In my impression the primary reason for low NREGS deliverance is due to mild summer being short and for three months with the balance two summer months when the temperature is very hot. Even in such circumstances hundred days could be delivered but this is not happening as preparations such as work plans and its approvals are in place. So planning the preparations and time management to deliver within short time span must receive priority including its communication to the lowest village level functionary. Also the non-submission of UC by district officials is coming in the way of making funds available. The state must be asked to correct this deficiency. In short the diagnosis of the Ministry that institutional capacity needs to be enhance in this state is important along with making improvements in the deliverance and decision making systems.

There is need for providing adequate staff and streamlining the decision making and deliverance process so that implementation is fast and efficient. The govt. must develop a seasonal employment offer calendar that takes up works that are possible during the season and wherein people not engaged in agriculture can find employment. Also in Orissa another scheme that offers employment is the BRGF and its funds in some places equals NREGS. The BRGF is supposed to be implemented by the palli sabha but is actually done by contractor that is supposedly chosen by them. The panchayats are large and spread out and the staffing pattern is of one Executive officer assisted by one Rozgar Sevak and for each habitation they have a gram sathi. The cost of the business correspondent is placed at Rs 60,000 per gram panchayat and to date about 41,000 accounts have been opened with the banks.

While I do see government officials being concerned of NREGS poor performance in the state the attention of top officials is focused on aspects such as linking up with banks for wage payment and the banking correspondent model relegating other key aspects such as adequate works and taken up in time and enhancing people's participation and ownership. Also the direction of investment - for instance in Koraput district, 42%works amounting to 54% money is

spent on connectivity. However this year two important activities are actively promoted by the govt. – my farm ponds and development of FRA lands.

The villagers including its political leadership felt that the works sought by them is not taken up in NREGS. This is because priority is given to those added to the shelf of works at the higher levels and this is worsened by the fact that NREGS resource utilization is low.

NGOs here are used to project implementation framework and has taken considerable time for them to understand how “rights” can be used as instrument to talking poverty. Many are pushing own ideas of doing micro plans, awareness raising, seeking space for NGOs etc whereas what is required is concerted and mutually (govt. and civil society) agreed work, cooperation and mutual accountability plan. Efforts are on towards such arrangement and this and should be in place by end February. Towards this a two day meeting is being held wherein officials from the central and the state government could meet civil society and chalk out the course of action. The UNDP has a plan to shift people from employment to self employment of five thousand workers within two years and its roadmap and conceptualization along with the ground experience merits attention.

Some pilots with select NGOs are underway to show models of community choosing the works, ensuring hundred days of employment, transparency and provision of workplace facilities. Also FES has a unit that tracks NREGS performance and they are being requested to provide early warning on places where the employment performance is poor so that higher officials could be approached and asked to bestow the needed attention and corrective steps.

In the field visits I found that job card and pass book is not with the worker. Also the various rights listed in the Act and not being delivered. In many places work place facilities is minimal and I have not seen any crèche. I need to examine how reviews are being done at the district level on the progress and how the grievance handling is received and affected.

I see the need for a better understanding of why workers are not coming to NREGS as the reasons given are too commonplace for me to believe. I suggest a quick independent assessment would be helpful to plan the way forward. The government is planning some incentives to entice workers such as providing housing support of Rs 35,000 to all those who complete hundred days. Also delivering hundred days through a Govt.-NGO compact in selected places will have a cascading effort. Some district collectors are doing NREGS seriously but the scheme cannot be limited to individual commitment or whims of senior officers but delivered as a team and ensuring seeing its implementation as delivering on the “Rights”. I think the system of Ombudsman will create confidence among the people.

So I see that Orissa can deliver NREGS by making employment predictable and best done through advanced planning and approvals, confidence to workers by enhancing transparency

including having the job card and bank pass book, receipt of application for work and deliverance within fifteen days, motivating NGOs to take to NREGS by seeing it from a workers perspective, grievance resolution and above all regular and fixed time table for oversight and corrective measures and addressing confusion on the implementation aspects of NREGS among the officials and the non-officials such as say the SOR or the 60:40 ratio and on check measurements etc.

Given under the minutes of a meeting held in Bhubaneswar wherein the participants included the Minister, Principal Secretary, RD officials, UNDP and civil society representatives and me and I expect this agreed agenda to move forward and I am following it up on the same.

Meeting on energizing NREGA in Odisha, held on 10th December 2009, Venue: SIRD office

A meeting was organized on 10th December 2009 at SIRD, Bhubaneswar to discuss on the bottlenecks accounting for low performance of NREGA in Odisha as compared to other States and identify critical areas for development. The meeting was organized by SIRD in which Mr. Prafulla Samal, Hon'ble Minister Panchayati Raj, Mr. S.N. Tripathi, Secretary, Panchayati Raj, Mr. S.K. Lohani, Director SIRD, Mr. Saroj Dash, Deputy Director SIRD, Mr. K.S. Gopal, Member, National Employment Guarantee Council with other officers from SIRD, representatives from UNDP, NGOs -FES, RCDC, CYSD, Vikalpa, Nabakrushna Choudhury Centre for Development Studies participated.

Presenting the status of NREGA amidst various issues and bottlenecks the Commissioner cum Secretary Panchayatiraj Mr. Tripathy shared the new developments and initiatives taken by the government towards energizing NREGA as following

- Institutional arrangements: The state is not having enough (technical) man power that hinders the progress. The State is thinking seriously to bridge the gap.
- Empowering Gram Sathi to Gram Sanjojak – Gram Sanjojaks will be paid the wages of a semi skilled labour irrespective of how many labourers he mobilized. Initiatives in this regard are being taken.
- Taking bank to village: MoU has been signed with State Bank of India to put business correspondent to make wage payment at Panchayat level. Biometric identification to stop malpractice. The initiative has been taken to ensure payment of wages fairly and swiftly.
- Associating line departments: Line departments would submit their plans to District Planning Coordinator (Collector) and then the projects would be aligned to NREGS. The State has developed guideline in this regard.

- Social audit: The state has not been able to finalize its guideline which would be ultimately converted to rule; social audits would be conducted at block level and would be done by government agencies. Stakeholders may observe the audit process.
- PRIs are not having adequate capacity to deal with NREGS.
- The state has liberalized farm ponds as a new initiative – Rs. 50,000/- to each eligible farmer in each village from January 2010.
- Expectations from NGOs: Demand generation and organizing labours into small groups like SHGs; networking of NGOs to organize job seekers and give them work training; for the above kind of facilitation MoU with NGOs for social audit at block level and Panchayat level.

The following **action points** were taken in the meeting:

- To realize the potential of NREGA Mr. K.S. Gopal advocated for involvement of credible NGOs in NREGA process and suggested that some leading NGOs should come together and develop a framework on the basis of which **institutional space for NGOs in the NREGS** process can be properly worked out.
- UNDP proposed to organize a **National Meet in Odisha** on NREGA at the earliest, preferably by end of January 2010. It was suggested that efforts should be made to involve eminent people like Mihir Shah, Amrita Singh, Sandip Dixit, Aruna Roy and such other persons in the meeting, and the Chief Minister of Orissa be requested to be present. The proposal for the National Meet will be further taken up with UNDP and SIRD to materialize it.
- Mr. Gopal shared his ideas on **need of special software to undertake diagnostic research on NREGA** and maintain database on a regular basis. This will help in tracking progress of NREGA and help multi-dimensional research on NREGS. It was suggested that FES should initiate multivariate analysis and research basing on the available information from website and other secondary sources. Mr. Gopal also made a point that Concern WWI may be involved in facilitating such research and developing software to do the analysis.
- It was insisted that larger emphasis should be given on 100 days work, worksite facilities, weekend for workers and pro active transparency.
- The portfolio of the Gram Sathis should be expanded to proactive transparency.
- Priority shifting in shelf of projects – importance to Pallasabha plans
- Demand creation should be piloted giving people the choices on projects.

- There is a need of Government to sign MoU with NGOs on the basis of their core expertise and definite objectives. NGOs should be made confident as part of the process so that they can add value to their work
- PEOs should be given targets to complete.

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