

Advantages of Social Networking in MGNREGA: An Analysis of Village Panchayat in Tamil Nadu

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Introduction

The impact of information on corruption and effective implementation is Janus faced. In this paper household level data has been used to address the issue of corruption in the MGNREG program in Pudukottail village panchayat, Dindigul District, Tamil Nadu. It has been discovered in the course of the research that at the entry level, information about the MGNREG has the effect of increasing the entry of non-poor while the acutely poor, who possessed neither TVs nor cell-phones, nor attended public meetings nor were connected to social networks did not know and therefore did not participate in the program. At implementation level, information enabled those who possessed it to avoid being Short changed by the administration. The non-poor benefited more from the MGNREG in all villages, and the ethnographic evidence from different villages in the district show that the non-poor even misused the program.

So, information has generated corruption on the part of some informed beneficiaries. Conversely, in areas where poorer and illiterate participants are in greater numbers, they are likely to experience more corruption from government officials during the implementation because they possess less information on the benefits accruing to a participant in the MGNREG. The picture from the village under study shows that, while the entry level capture by the non-poor is relatively low, the corruption at the level of implementation is higher. Here, lack of information on the part of the beneficiary reduces the monitoring potential and effective implementation and enables corruption.

Social networking (and the access to information) increases the likelihood of participation by the affluent but decreases the likelihood of participation by non-affluent and the poor. This implies that the non-affluent is not able to act even if they have information. This needed to be explored further. The results from the village under study back the rationale for the importance of a right to information and suggests that the government should invest more in advocacy campaigns about their programs, particularly in the poorest areas. At the same time, it is important to carry out periodic information drives among the beneficiaries to ensure that they are aware of the components of the scheme and it here that the importance of social networking sites comes into the picture.

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme

The MGNREGA of 2005 is perhaps the most significant social policy initiative in India in the last decade. Its main objective is “to provide enhancement of livelihood security of the households in rural areas of the country by providing 100 days of guaranteed wage employment to every household in unskilled manual work,” at the minimum wage on demand within 15 days of asking for employment (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2005). Some of its unique features include a time-bound employment guarantee and wage payment within 15 days (otherwise the government is penalized), prohibition of the use of contractors (to check leakage of funds) and machinery (to enhance direct benefits of the program to the participants), and a mandatory 33 per cent participation for women.

The MGNREG’s design conforms to Galasso and Ravallion’s (2005) prescription of a targeted program. They posit that capture by the non-poor occurs when public spending is on a private (excludable) good targeted to the poor, and there is no self-targeting mechanism to ensure that only the poor want to participate. Targeting is touted as one way to reduce capture; instead of relying on an administrator to choose the beneficiaries, the program relies on the beneficiaries to select themselves by creating incentives so that only the poor will participate in the scheme. The cost of participation rises as income rises, but benefits remain the same thus making it less attractive to the non-poor. MGNREGS has a self-selecting mechanism, which is supposed to ensure that anyone who can earn above the minimum wage will opt out of the program.

In practice, however, the self- selection mechanism has been weakened in areas where the MGNREGS wage was higher than the prevailing market wages. An audit by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG 2007) also revealed glaring weaknesses and leakages in the program, and sparked a contentious public debate on the efficacy of anti-poverty programs. For instance, only 3.2 per cent of the registered needy households in 200 of India’s poorest districts received the guaranteed 100 days of employment in a year. The benefits varied across states: Rajasthan emerged among the top performers – the average employment per participating household was 77 days of work. Kerala, a state with a good record of human development was at the bottom. Other failures relate to the distribution of job cards and the leakages in the selection, design and execution of projects. This paper examine whether access to information about the components of the MGNREGS played a role in increasing the effectiveness of targeting and the delivery of the scheme. Information about the MGNREGS was disseminated on TV, newspapers and at public meetings organized by the panchayat and ward committees.

In August 2005, the Indian Parliament passed the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), which mandates the provision of 100 days of guaranteed employment (unskilled manual work) to any rural household in India. The passage of the Act saw the culmination of a lively debate with many (including the Act's most ardent supporters) predicating that corruption and poor service delivery mechanisms would together undo any potential benefits that the Act could have on the poor. So much so that one of India's most well-known economists infamously suggested that the likelihood of money reaching the poor would be higher if we 'simply drop the money by helicopter or gas balloon into rural areas' than route it through employment programs.¹

These concerns over corruption and poor delivery stem from India's past experience with delivering welfare programs to the poor. Rajiv Gandhi famously estimated that 15 paise of every rupee allocated actually reaches the poor. This could not be truer than in the case of rural employment programs. Past experience suggests that greatest beneficiaries of rural employment programs were private contractors who received 'work orders' and together with the local political bosses officials fudged muster rolls (attendance registers that determine wages to be given) to produce inflated figures and misappropriate funds. As a result most participants in these programs rarely accessed the minimum wage- according to estimates from an India wide study of rural employment programs, 65% of those who participated in these programs were paid between Rs. 30 and Rs. 60 per day. This is far less than the minimum wage set by the government.² An important reason for this appalling scenario has been the lack of transparency and accountability in our delivery systems that have allowed corruption to proliferate unchecked.

In response to the corruption problem and to ensure that benefits reach those who need it, a number of transparency and accountability measures have been built in to the MGNREGA making the MGNREGA one of India's most unique experiments in strengthening governance systems. There are three pillars around which these accountability mechanisms have been constructed:

1. Decentralized planning and implementation: Decentralization of governance systems lies at the core of an accountable system. The MGNREGA draws strongly on this principle. Accordingly, section 13 (1) of the MGNREGA mandates that 'Panchayats at the district, intermediate and village levels will be the principal

¹ Aiyar, Swaminathan A S (2004), 'Poverty Reduction by Helicopters', December 19, 2004, Times of India <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/963942.cms>

² Government of India (2003), 'Concurrent Evaluation of Sampoorna Grameena Rozgra Yojana (SGRY)', Ministry of Rural Development, www.rural.nic.in; Government of India (2005), '10th Five Year Plan Mid Term Appraisal', Planning Commission, www.planningcommission.nic.in, Government of India (2005), 'Concurrent Evaluation of Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana (Orissa)', Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India

authorities for planning and implementation of the schemes'. Further empowering the Gram Panchayat, it stipulates that a minimum of 50% of the funds and relevant works be executed by the Gram Panchayat. To ensure that planning and works selected reflect the needs and priorities of the local citizens, section 16 (3) (4) of the Act states that 'every Gram Panchayat shall prepare a development plan and maintain a shelf of works.' This shelf of works is prepared based on recommendations of the Gram Sabha. These recommendations are in turn forwarded to the Program Officer. A similar system is followed at the intermediate and district Panchayat level.

2. Proactive disclosure: Access to regular, reliable and relevant information is an important pre-requisite for accountability. Accordingly, the MGNREGA guidelines mandate that all levels of government maintain proper records containing information on inputs, processes, outputs and outcomes related to the MGNREGA. To ensure that this information is proactively disclosed and made available to citizens, the MGNREGA guidelines stipulate that all information will be displayed to the public through display boards and paintings on the walls of the Panchayat offices. In addition, all Gram Panchayat level MGNREGA accounts and summaries of these accounts are to be made publicly available for scrutiny. The guidelines also mandate that all rural households are entitled to a job card in to which employment and wage details must to be entered, and muster rolls are to be kept on the worksite and read out in public at the time of payments.

Building on the provisions of the Right to Information Act, the MGNREGA stipulates that all information requests related to the MGNREGA be made available to the applicant within 7 days, as opposed to the stipulated 30 days in the RTI Act. To facilitate ease and access to information, an integrated Monitoring and Implementation System has also been developed. The guidelines stress that all MGNREGA related documents be digitized and regularly uploaded onto the MIS systems both at the state and central government level.

3. Social audits: Social audits or the process of cross-verification of government records with realities on the ground completes the feedback loop in the accountability chain. It creates a platform for the poorest and most disempowered to participate in governance. Section 17 of the MGNREGA mandates that regular social audits be conducted in the Gram Sabhas at least once every six months. The MGNREGA guidelines dedicate an entire chapter to the social audits process. It identifies 11 stages of the program where an individual or group can intervene to ensure public vigilance. The last stage is the mandatory six monthly social audit forum, where the gram sabha comes together to assess and verify progress.

The accountability and transparency measures enshrined in the MGNREGA have proved to be a catalyst for some state governments and civil society organizations to take innovative steps towards developing and

institutionalizing accountability tools into the governance system. One of the most interesting examples of these innovations can be found in the state of Andhra Pradesh (AP) where the government has initiated a systematic process of undertaking social audits for all MGNREGA works across the state. The Andhra experience is unique because it marks the first time that the government has proactively taken steps to open itself up to scrutiny by citizens. This has facilitated the conduct of social audits at an unprecedented scale and thus offers some extremely important insights in to the effectiveness of a social audit as a tool to strengthen accountability systems within the state as well as for citizens to demand accountability.

Importance of the study

The use of social media in rural India has grown 100 per cent in the past year with 25 million people using the Internet to access Twitter and Facebook, according to a report. “Accessing social media is one of the key reasons for people to access the Internet. In fact, for many people accessing the Internet for the first time, social media was the reason they embraced Internet,” said the IAMAI-IMRB report on social media. Across India, there are 143 million users of social media. Urban areas witnessed a growth of 35 per cent with 118 million users as of April 2015. On the other hand, the number for rural India stood at 25 million, up from close to 12 million last year, showing a growth of 100 per cent. Facebook emerged the leading social media website with 96 per cent of urban users accessing it, followed by Google Plus (61 per cent), Twitter (43 per cent) and LinkedIn (24 per cent). The largest segment of users was college-going students (34 per cent), followed by young men (27 per cent), the report said. Schoolchildren constitute 12 per cent.

India has been implementing many welfare schemes and programmes yet Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) takes place significant aspects that the programmes provide legal guarantee to work for the citizens. It confers a right based development among the vulnerable those who still in the edge of the society. The MGNREGA is a self-targeted programme and it is a demand driven who wants to work on the scheme for the wage prescribed as per the law and allowed them to avail themselves of up to 100 days of work. The MGNREGA gives the constitutional safeguard to the citizens and act as rural poverty alleviation programme. The main objectives of the MGNREGA are to create a sustainable development through the natural resource management, to strengthen basic infrastructure which is utilized by the poor for their livelihood, to enhance the social inclusion, and to strengthen the Panchayati Raj Institutions. It's also working for creation of durable asserts for vulnerable through the natural resource management, public and rural infrastructure facilities and so on. While implementing the MGNREGA all over the states, Tamil Nadu is the state to implementing the MGNREGA very successfully. Tamil Nadu is a pioneering state to implementing various social welfare programmes for the poor and marginalized for their livelihood. In that context, social

networking in MGNREGA has created significant impact on the household level as well as village level through the economic development, poverty reduction, decision making process, participation and so on. The Social media and its networking pave the way to improve transparency and accountability through the sharing information and disseminate knowledge among the stakeholders in MGNREGA. Hence, this study aims to capture the advantages of social networking in MNREGA in the village level as well as household level. In that context, the network enabling the village panchayat as well as the citizen through disseminate of information of MGNREGA through using various applications. Is information an unadulterated good? Does access to information about a government program on the part of the public always lead to beneficial consequences in terms of better program delivery and lower leakages?

In this paper, the relationship between the type of information possessed by the program's beneficiaries and the efficacy of India's Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) was assessed in Pudukottail village panchayat, Dindigul district, Tamil Nadu State. The research findings suggest that the link between information, corruption and the delivery of the program is not straightforward. Information can increase the propensity for the program to be accessed by those who are not its primary target population, and can also increase the efficacy of delivery of the program to such beneficiaries. Lack of information, on the other hand, decreases the ability of a citizen to access the benefits of an anti-poverty program. The advantage of social networking in MGNREGA is an important one and playing a vital role in disseminating the knowledge through the social media and other applications. The study mainly focuses the advantages of social networking in village level as well as household level. The study is analyzing the information gap between the citizen and implementing agencies.

Objective of the Study

The main objective of the study is to examine the advantage of social networking in MGNREGA. Specific objectives are:

- To study the Advantages of Social Networking in the MGNREGA
- To find out the role of social networking in the MGNREGA at the village level
- To study the impact of social networking in the MGNREGA at household level.

Hypotheses

1. First, those with information about the benefits of a government program will be more likely to enroll in the program than those who do not possess such information. So, a rural household's access to information about the NREG influences their participation in the scheme.

2. Second, taking into account the different ways in which the implementing authorities administered the scheme in the three states, we assume that the NREG will work well for those beneficiaries who possess more information about the different aspects of the program. For instance, beneficiaries with more information about the measurement of work, wages and the promise of a hundred days of wage employment will earn more and work for a greater time period than the beneficiaries without such knowledge.

Sample Design

The present analysis draws upon household data from Pudukottail village panchayat, Dindigul district, Tamil Nadu. A representative sample was designed as follows. First, Pudukottail village panchayat was selected for the study, followed by a random selection of households. Twenty five households were selected from the village. Apart from household level information individuals within households were also interviewed. The data include information on caste, occupation, landholdings, household size, MGNREGS participation, type of ration card, and PDS participation. The number of individuals interviewed for the village was 50.

Alongside the survey, detailed interviews were conducted to the functionaries of the Pudukottail village panchayat. Besides, qualitative methods such as - focus group discussion, observation and interactions - have been adopted. Some interesting cases have also been taken up for case study.

The interviews contain anecdotes and examples of corruption, the decision making process of the panchayat (village governing body), the choices made in the MGNREGA, the influence of political parties in village level issues, the impact of caste and income on the ability to influence decisions, the information available to the respondent about the program, among others.

Participation equation was constructed to establish a causal link between attendance in public meetings (a proxy for access to information) and participation in the MGNREGA. A probit specification was employed where participation takes the value 1 for a participant and 0 for others. Explanatory variables comprise: gender, age, age square, married (versus single), Education (primary, middle, secondary, above secondary versus illiterate), social group (SC, ST, OBC versus Other), land owned (in bigha), number of adult males in the household, number of adult females in the household, ratio of MGNREGA wage to agricultural wage, land inequality in village (gini), interaction between ratio of MGNREGA wage with land inequality, average distance of worksite from the village, number of villagers who attended a public meeting in the previous year, and number of households that owned a TV and a cell phone in a village.

Advantages of social networking in MGNREGA at Village Panchayat

The village panchayat is a primary institution to implementing the MGNREGA at grassroots level. The 73rd and 74th amendment to the constitution of India has given constitutional entity to village panchayat and has given assigned functions. There are three tier panchayat systems namely district panchayat, block panchayat, and village panchayat those panchayats are playing predominant role in implementing the MGNREGA scheme. There are the officials to monitoring, evaluating and implementing the MGNREGA at district, block and village level with the coordination of the elected representatives of all the three panchayats. District Programme coordinator is a principal authority to implementing the scheme at district level. In the village panchayats, have some assigned functions in MGNREGA. The functions are:

- Verification and issue job card
- Planning to work
- Entrust the work to the beneficiaries
- Labour budgeting
- Conducting social audit through gram sabha
- Work evaluation and technical support
- Monitoring and evaluation
- Worksite facilities
- Maintenance of record
- Fund management and accounts
- Reporting
- Payment of wages
- Unemployment allowances
- Grievance redressal

In this context, Social network is empowering the panchayat in a way to disseminate the information through using the social media. Hence, it makes the panchayat as transparent and accountable. In the national, state and district level for disseminate ad source of information, the government has created the separate website for the MGNREGA to disseminate the information and documents related to progress of the scheme. However, the government used some important strategy to access the information about the MGNREGA through using some materials in the national and state level. They are:

- MGNREGA website
- Creating and opening page for MGREGA in social media (Facebook and Whatsup)
- Mobile communication
- Aadhaar Link
- Uploading documents and photo gallery in the website for progress
- Uploading videos and documentary
- Uploading guidelines for MGNREGA
- Uploading articles and press report for MGNREGA
- Giving linking websites

The above tools are very effective to disseminate the information at grassroots and national level. It is creating effective communication of messages to the people through using the social media tools.

Village Panchayat activities in Social Networking on MGNREGA

The MGNREGA has a separate web portal for disseminate the information about the works categorized as State wise, District Wise, Block wise and Village Wise. The Concern village panchayat have to prepare the details of the beneficiaries to upload in the web. They have separate staff for data entry. The data entry operator has to prepare the balance sheet on payment of wage and has to be sent to the block office. For that purpose, they have separate Mail ID and User ID for uploading the status of the MGNREGA in the website through the proper channel like block office to district level.

Pudukottai Village Panchayat

The panchayat have internet facilities for sending immediate information to the authority. In Pudukottai village panchayat have good infrastructure facilities and technical support. Village panchayat is maintaining Management Information System (MIS) like muster roll, attendance, worksite details, beneficiaries' details, Job card details. The above all the details have been send to the block level office through using the social network to the concern authority. The block Development office and District coordinator have to conduct the social audit at village level periodically. The audit statements are being prepared by using network such as tally, statistical package. Fund management and Accounts are maintaining in the Excel sheet in Pudukottai village panchayat. That information has also been sent through the mail to the block office and District office. If the authority wants immediate, the panchayat officials are sending the information immediately through using applications to the block development office.

On worksite facilities

- Engineering personnels are appointed in the block and gram panchayat level
- Generally one overseer and assistant engineer is appointed in the village panchayat to estimate and to measuring the progress of the worksite
- The engineer and overseer are measuring the work carried out by the workers and send the details to block level office through using the social media
- In worksite, the progress of the work has been captured as photograph and send that details to the block level engineer through using whatsapp
- And they have separate application to calculate and measuring the worksite in their smart phone

Adhaar Linking and Grievance Redressal

- The Gram Panchayat have to send their beneficiaries' Aadhaar details to the block development office
- The panchayat officials are using the UDI to verify the beneficiaries' Aadhaar details
- They have attaching the beneficiaries Aadhaar details with payment and bank account
- Grievance redressal is important one to register the complaints immediately through using the MGNREGA's Web portal.

Observations

Murugan (43), who working in the village panchayat more than four years as a secretary. He is using a smart phone with android applications. He used to disseminate the information about the MGNREGA through the whatsapp and Mail with his colleague. Creation of Form Pond is an important one in the MGNREGA works. It is an agriculture allied activities carried out by the MGNREGA in village. The secretary does not know about how to create a form pond. He used his contact with agri officials to come to know about the creation of form pond. The agri officials send their knowledge to the secretary through whatsapp and sharing some related form pond's images with full details. Then he entrusted the form pond work to MGNREGA workers. Later, he formed a whatsapp group among the panchayat officials for dissemination of information related about the panchayat activities not only with officials also with SHG members and women in the village panchayat. He also created group called "Vivasaya kuzhu" and sharing knowledge and information getting from agriculture officers through the whatsapp.

Social Networking on MGNREGA at Household

In MGNREGA most of the beneficiaries are women. Women are interesting to engage them in the MGNREGA work than men. They have separate bank account for getting payment. Opening bank account for women is important one, because they get financial empowerment through opening bank account. In India, before MGNREGA women does not have own bank account and they were depending their husband. Now they are getting wage from MGNREGA and they have separate account and they can freely take the money from the bank without his husband permission for family purpose. Most of the women beneficiaries have mobile phone and some of them have not. Their mobile number also linking with bank accounts. If the payment is credited, they come to know through the mobile because they registered their mobile number with bank account. And some of the women's family members have smart phone and they are using android application like payment wallet, paytm, bank applications. The women are transferring the money to their husband's account or son's account through using mobile banking with the help of the son or husband.

Conclusion

The social networking in MGNREGA is giving lot of benefits to the beneficiaries as well as panchayat officials. Women are getting digital literacy. The information gap between the panchayat and beneficiaries has been reduced and information are disseminating through using social media to the beneficiaries. SHG members are play a role to mobilize and disseminate the information related MGNREGA through using social media. The social network makes the panchayat as transparent and accountable towards the good governance at grassroots.

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