



RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE ECOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL BENEFITS OF MGNREGA IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act-2005 provides the enhancement of livelihood security to each household in rural areas and put emphasis on conservation of land and water. Many studies unfolds its positive outcomes such as social benefits viz. social security, livelihood protection, increased wage rates, decreased migration, fostering social and gender equality and ecological benefits like water harvesting, groundwater recharge, drought-proofing, and flood protection, increased soil fertility, irrigation area and agricultural production, environment security and biodiversity conservation. This programme has led to significant changes in the lives of rural people and environment conservation. This scheme has become a tool for sustainable development in India. This paper throws lights on ecological and social benefits derived from MGNREGA being implemented since a decade.

INTRODUCTION

The Indian Constitution promised to uphold the right to life and livelihood (article 21) to all the people living in the state. It also directs the state to endeavor to secure to all citizens the right to work, a living wage, social security and a decent standard of living (article 41-43) and to protect the environment (article 48A and 51G) (Basu, 2002 and Saroniya *et al.*, 2015). To fulfill these obligations, the government of India made an act that legally promised to provide 100 days of wage employment in every financial year to unskilled persons of every rural household. This act came to known as the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act-2005. This act also provides the enhancement of livelihood security to each household in rural areas and put emphasis on conservation of land and water (the gazette of India). The act confers entitlements upon people of the village and puts their demand forward. It was initially started in 200 districts on 2nd February 2006, and later all district of India were covered from 1 April 2008. So, now it is about a decade long journey of this act, and it is need of the time to analyze its positive outcomes as well as shortcomings. This paper strives to analyze its positive outcomes such as ecological and social benefits of this scheme. These positive outcomes may play important role in sustainable development of the nation and the society.

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The MGNREGA Act

The National Rural Employment Guarantee (Amendment) Act-2009 renamed it Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). According to MGNREGA Sameeksha (2012) the objectives of the programme include:

- Ensuring social protection for the most vulnerable people living in rural India through providing employment opportunities.
- Ensuring livelihood security for the poor through creation of durable assets, improved water security, soil conservation and higher land productivity.
- Strengthening drought-proofing and flood management in rural India.
- Aiding in the empowerment of the marginalized communities, especially women, Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs).
- Strengthening decentralised, participatory planning through convergence of various anti-poverty and livelihoods initiatives.
- Deepening democracy at the grass-roots by strengthening the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs),
- Effecting greater transparency and accountability in governance.

This act also promised to pay unemployment allowance, when applicant does not get any work within 15 days of applying.

The Gram Panchayats are the key institute for its implementation. MGNREGA is quite different in its scale, architecture and thrust. It includes an integrated natural resource management and livelihoods generation perspective. The transparency and accountability mechanisms in this programme create unprecedented accountability of performance towards village communities.

The Social benefits

The MGNREGA programme has achieved many social and economic achievements which are being reported by various research scholars and government institutions (MGNREGA Sameeksha, 2012)

- Provided guaranteed wage employment of 100 days in a financial year, thus enhanced social security and living standards. It has provided around Rs. 1,10,700 crore as worker wages from FY 2006 up to FY 2011–12. It reveals a positive impact of this transfer on household income, monthly per capita expenditure, food security and health of the beneficiaries. In Chhattisgarh, Orissa, Jharkhand and Andhra Pradesh, income of rural labour households has gone up as a result of this programme.
- Provided work opportunities for women by reserving 1/3 of employment, which enabled women empowerment in rural areas.
- Various research reveals that this programme has led to an increase in agriculture wage rates and boosts the real daily agricultural wage rates by 5.3 per cent. The wage effect is equal for both men and women and is in favour of unskilled labour.
- Social audit increases transparency and trust among rural communities.
- Prevented seasonal or distressed migration towards cities and given work opportunity at native place and increased household income which is used for food security, education of dependents, health care and debt repayments. In some cases, earnings were utilized to acquire durable assets and created amenities in households (Kareemulla *et al.*, 2013).
- In village Besrapal, located in Bastar District of Chattisgarh, village Nawagarh, located in Gumla District and village Mahel, located in Khunti District of Jharkhand, the incidence of out-migration from the village to distant places for manual works had come down as a result of MGNREGA works.
- Provided work opportunities for weaker sections of the society, i.e. Dalits and Adivasis. Various studies revealed that MGNREGA has succeeded in high participation from marginalised groups including the SCs and STs. At the national level, the share of SCs and STs in the work provided under MGNREGA has been high at 40–50 per cent in each year. In FY 2011–12 alone, 40 per cent of the total person-days of employment (84 crore out of 209 crore) were provided to SCs and STs.
- The increase in employment and wages resulted in an increase in household income. In Chhattisgarh, the increase in household income ranged from 23–160 per cent (as compared to 2005–06), in Jharkhand it ranged from 60–70 per cent and in Odisha it ranged from 30–40 per cent (Banerjee and Saha, 2010).

- Build rural infrastructure thereby strengthening the village communities.
- This also improved bargaining power of the labour and child welfare as wage security has been improved (Kareemulla *et al.*, 2013). A survey conducted across six states revealed that 82 per cent of the widows regarded MGNREGA as a very important source of income, and of the total sample, 69 per cent of the women accepted that it helped them avoid hunger. Different studies also observe that post MGNREGA, women have greater control over their wages and have been spending them on repaying small debts, paying for their children's schooling and bearing medical expenses, etc.
- Provided equal opportunity for all workers without any discrimination based on caste, religion or gender.
- Provided opportunity for social gathering and harmony, thereby building trust and cooperation among village communities.
- According to Pamecha and Sharma (2015) the findings have revealed that the programme has brought the changes in the lives of the beneficiaries.
- This scheme enhanced mobility which comes with the higher status of being income-earning workers. Women managed their family relations in employment and in the formulation of social protection policy. This scheme also increases social skills like communication, mobility, participation, decision making among women beneficiaries (Karthika, 2015, Sarkar *et al.*, 2011).
- It enhanced financial inclusion of beneficiary to Indian economy as the wages given through bank accounts and post offices.

Various self-help groups and civil society organisations have been encouraging women participation in MGNREGA.

The Ecological Benefits

The MGNREGA programme also put emphasis on conservation efforts for protection of land and water. The works undertaken through MGNREGA give priority to activities related to water harvesting, groundwater recharge, drought-proofing, and flood protection. Many studies revealed the success story of conservation and protection of environment

- Karimulla *et al.*, (2013) and Sarkar *et al.*, (2011) observes that this programme enhanced the capability of natural resources like soil, water bodies, plantations, irrigation facilities, drought resistance/flood control, roads to connect the rural areas.
- By the creation of sustainable rural assets, water conservation and forestry works, MGNREGA contributed to ecological restoration and generate environmental benefits through increased livelihood security, especially for rural women to climate change and other shocks (MGNREGA Sameeksha, 2012).
- A comprehensive study revealed that MGNREGA works across eight districts of Bihar, Gujarat, Kerala and Rajasthan the water related assets like irrigation, ponds, wells were found durable and they were fully utilized (MGNREGA Sameeksha, 2012).
- According to the Indian Institute of Science (2013), a study revealed that in four districts of four selected

states, namely, Medak (Andhra Pradesh), Chitradurga (Karnataka), Dhar (Madhya Pradesh) and Bhilwara (Rajasthan), the MGNREGA has shown considerable environmental benefits like water conservation and harvesting works, drought-proofing, irrigation provisioning and improvement works, and renovation of traditional water bodies, improved groundwater levels, increased water availability for irrigation, increased land area irrigated by ground, surface water sources, and finally, improved drinking water availability for humans and livestock, and improvement in land resources such as land levelling, conservation bench terracing, contour and graded bunding, field-bunding, pasture development, silt application and drought proofing. It also contributed to improved soil organic carbon (SOC) content, reduced surface run-off and soil erosion, enhancement of crop diversity and crop yields and positive impacts on forests, plantations and fruit orchards.

- Some studies observed that availability of water was the main reason for changes in crop pattern and increased cultivated area in Sidhi district of Madhya Pradesh, where *Jowar*, *Bajra*, *Kodo*, *Makka* and *Arhar* crops have been replaced by wheat, gram and vegetables. The same was also found in Kerala and Bihar (MGNREGA Sameeksha, 2012).
- A scientific study in Chitradurga district of Karnataka clearly indicates that the MGNREGA has provided various environmental services and reduced vulnerability, apart from providing employment and income to rural communities. The environmental services include groundwater recharge, water percolation, more water storage in tanks, increased soil fertility, reclamation of degraded lands and carbon sequestration. These services contributed to, and had positive implications for, increased crop and livestock production. The NREGA activities were found to reduce the vulnerability of agricultural production, water resources and livelihoods to uncertain and low rainfall, water scarcity and poor soil fertility (Tiwari et al 2011).
- ILO (2010) found in its study in Kaimur District, Bihar that MGNREGA is creating 'Green' and 'Decent' works by ensuring labours rights and legal entitlements, providing social protection and employment and environmentally sustainable works that regenerate the ecosystem and protect biodiversity, thereby mitigating climate change and adaptation activities. This is also fruitful in many cases.
- A study by IIFM in M.P., shows that the irrigated land area under MGNREGA increased by 26 percent in district Ujjain, 19 percent in district Dhar, 35 percent in Chhindwara and 30 percent in Panna. The changes in crop pattern have been possible due to increased availability of water.
- Narwaria (2013) also observed in his study in district Shivpuri (M.P.) that due to work under MGNREGA, water conservation was carried out in most of the villages by building dams, check dam, wells, ponds. These water bodies played positive role in irrigation and drought protection.
- Sebastian and Azeez (2014) appreciated the biodiversity conservation efforts under MGNREGA and pointed out the need of preparation of panchayat level biodiversity register supporting individual and institutional efforts in

biodiversity conservation and the formulation of appropriate policies.

Conclusion

The government termed this act as the largest and most ambitious social security and public works programme in the world. The various researches proved that the activities related to water harvesting, groundwater recharge, drought-proofing, and flood protection under MGNREGA played main role in conservation of environment. The social security and protection as well as water conservation efforts may lead to sustainable development of the nation. The shortcomings must be removed without affecting its positive outcomes. This scheme has changed the life of village communities and the changes are visible enough to appreciate them. This scheme has immense scope and potential with some modifications and transparency to change the life of poor people living in villages of India. Now it is the duty of every citizen to appreciate such programmes in large scale and achieve the targeted benefit for peaceful, harmonious and happy living. In future this scheme may be a tool for achieving sustainable development.

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