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## Long road to employment guarantee

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*Although marked by many procedural irregularities, the implementation of NREGA in Villupuram shows some real achievements.*

Intriguing findings have started emerging from the social audit of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) in Villupuram district (Tamil Nadu), launched on July 26. Viewed from the district headquarters, the programme is in the pink of health. Whether one enquires about job cards or employment levels or wage payments, the latest data are available from neat computer printouts and also posted on the Internet. While the programme was at a virtual standstill last year, in 2006-07, employment generation has surged during the last few months. The average job card holder in Villupuram has already been employed for nearly 25 days since April 1, 2007, compared with just about two days for the same period last year. Nearly 70 per cent of all rural households in the district have a job card.

Field visits, however, present a more complex picture. In terms of the procedural aspects of the programme, there is a good deal of confusion if not chaos. When one of the social audit teams reached Poiarasur village (Thiruvannainallur block) on July 29, it found that job cards had been distributed that very morning — just a few hours before the team arrived. Further, entries had been made in these job cards for months that preceded their issue, in a frantic attempt to ensure that they matched the “muster rolls.” This hurried window-dressing operation was not without glitches; in some job cards, whitener had been used to erase mistaken entries and replace them with “correct” entries.

There are many other procedural irregularities, big and small. The process of work application and demand-driven employment is non-existent in Villupuram: work is provided in a proactive manner by the administration and people are asked to report for employment as and when it is available. Since there is far too little employment compared to the potential demand, work is “rationed” in various ways. Only one household member is allowed to work at any given point of time, in violation of the Act. Worse, NREGA employment is “rotated” between different wards (three wards in the case of Poiarasur).

As it turns out, the wards are inhabited by different caste groups, so that employment is effectively segregated by caste, defeating an important purpose of the Act — breaking traditional social barriers and fostering class solidarity among labourers. Instead of contributing to social inclusion, NREGA in Villupuram is in danger of solidifying social divisions.

Other serious issues emerging from the social audit include low productivity levels, inadequate worksite facilities, and lack of transparency.

Having said this, the implementation of NREGA in Villupuram shows some real achievements.

As mentioned earlier, employment levels have shot up, and work was available on a substantial scale in almost every gram panchayat during the last few months. Most workers are earning the full minimum wage of Rs. 80 a day, that too within 15 days (or even one week) of the work being done, as mandated under the Act. In house after house, workers express great happiness with these new opportunities, and a keen hope that the programme will continue for many years.

NREGA also holds the promise of bringing major changes in the lives of women. More than 80 per cent of NREGA workers in Villupuram (or for that matter in Tamil Nadu as a whole) are women. As agricultural labourers, they earn a paltry Rs. 30 a day for four to five hours of back-breaking work. Today, they are earning the full minimum wage of Rs. 80 a day on NREGA.

As Maheshwari of Poiarasur put it: “When we work as agricultural labourers, we earn thirty rupees every day but it doesn’t seem to get us anywhere. Since we started working on NREGA, we have been earning Rs. 400 at the end of the week — for the first time we are able to save.” She has set some of her earnings aside in anticipation of her daughter’s delivery, due any time. Krishnaveni of Chinnanarikuppam village (Mailam block) has a similar story to tell. “Now we have the confidence to take loans,” she said, “because we know that we will be able to repay.” For the first time in her life, she has started contributing to a chit fund.

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