

## The hundred days basket

Nirmala Lakshman

*A social audit of the functioning of the National Rural Employment Guarantee scheme in Villupuram district in Tamil Nadu revealed that despite many problems it enhances transparency and accountability in governance and offers a lifeline to the rural poor.*

In the rural hinterlands of Tamil Nadu, particularly in the poorer districts where chronic poverty and deprivation is not uncommon, a revolution of sorts seems to be happening. Under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), which came into force in February last year, close to 70 per cent of the households in Villupuram district have job cards which show an average of 25 days of employment since April this year. What is more, an astonishing 82 per cent of the women in Villupuram district have found employment under the NREGA earning Rs.80 a day as opposed to the largely arbitrary and discriminatory wages that they earned previously. By ensuring guaranteed wage employment for 100 days to any adult in a household who is willing to work, the NREGA is the first legislation that compels the state to provide a social safety net for the poorest people of this country and seeks to address the urgent issues of hunger and rural distress that afflict large parts of India.

Although Villupuram was chosen as one of the 200 districts for the initial phase of the scheme, the programme did not take off until recently. A surge in employment has occurred over the last few months indicating that there was an unprecedented response from the local population as soon they became aware of the scheme. A large-scale social audit was conducted in Villupuram district recently by an informal coalition of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) activists, women's rights organisations, and Dalit rights groups called the 'NREGA Watch Tamil Nadu,' to assess the impact of the programme on the people. This audit was part of the twice-yearly audit mandated by the NREGA Act and conducted by the gram sabhas. Unlike other audits, a social audit is a participatory process that involves both people and the government in verifying outcomes and thus helps to strengthen transparency and accountability at all levels. In Villupuram, in line with the NREGA guidelines, detailed verification of every aspect of the implementation was conducted such as the distribution of job cards, receipt of work applications, allotment of work to individuals, payment of wages, supervision and evaluation of the work done.

The social audit began with the gram sabha. Twenty-five gram panchayats in five blocks were considered, and the audit was followed by a district level public hearing at Villupuram. It was convened by the local administration; state officials as well as the members of the Central Employment Guarantee Council Aruna Roy, Annie Raja, and Jean Dreze participated. These members also made field visits. Jean Dreze observed however that everything that they saw in Villupuram only "strengthened our hopes for it. Whatever the problems, the programme does provide jobs and wages for the poor and deprived ... In terms of outcomes it is a positive picture, although in terms of processes and procedures, there are many issues that need to be addressed..."

Key among the positive findings of the audit was the fact that the daily minimum wage of Rs.80 was being paid to everyone and that too within a week. Contractors and machines seem to have

disappeared at the NREGA work sites and the over 80 per cent participation of women in the scheme indicates that it has become the mainstay for the women of the district, many of whom were working for Rs.30 to Rs.40 a day previously. Soumya Kidambi of the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS), who participated in the audit narrates how initially when the women heard about the scheme they rushed to work sites with whatever vessels and utensils they had to carry head loads at the site. As soon as they had some money to spare from their early wages, the first thing that most of them bought was a basket for greater convenience at work. The local shops then started selling this basket, which is now colloquially referred to as “the hundred days basket.” This symbolises the empowerment and growing economic strength of women in the area. The mobilisation of women is dramatically visible in the district; this in turn has the potential to positively impact on the economic conditions of the hitherto poor and marginalised rural communities.

There are however many areas of concern. The social audit found that across many villages, there was very little awareness of the entitlements of workers under the scheme such as the concept of work on demand, unemployment allowance, and the availability of work site facilities. Annie Raja however pointed out that awareness levels of entitlements jumped by about 80 per cent *after* the social audit. Discrepancies in the maintenance of job cards and muster rolls were also evident in many panchayats, the NREGA Council members observed. One audit participant said that the names of people who had gone to other districts to work were also found in some of the muster rolls. However there was not much evidence of any large-scale fudging, the audit noted. Among the more serious concerns was that employment is “rationed” in many gram panchayats and work is also “rotated” between different wards in successive weeks. Since different caste groups live in different wards, employment gets segregated by caste. As Aruna Roy pointed out, this contravenes the very intent of the Act which is meant to foster class solidarity and not intensify divisions.

The state administration has contended that “rationing” is the “democratic” way of giving work. This is incorrect, according to S. Kannayian of the Human Rights Law Network (HRLN). “The state is bound to give work on demand and this is a fundamental principle of the NREGA,” he said adding that rationing will disappear if there is a change from supply to demand driven employment. The need to identify a shelf of work which will end rationing was also stressed in the social audit. If a wide range of work could be identified in the NREGA including the development of Dalit and Adivasi lands it would also enhance asset creation in poor communities, said Mr. Kannayian. The need to enlarge the scope of NREGA work to include other community and development projects was emphasised by many participants.

During the district level hearing in Villupuram, many of officials involved in local administration pointed out that there were problems such as the lack of productivity and problems with the measurement of work. Jean Dreze said that while productivity needs to be improved, it should not in any way undermine the Rs.80 minimum wage which must be paid. The problem of work site measurement and a revised schedule of rates based on the nature of the work, the type of soil and other factors needs to be urgently re-examined. “There seems to be measurement illiteracy at all levels,” said Mr. Kannayian. “A fresh time and motion study needs to be done with the people who are participating in the NREGA with complete transparency so that a fair and reasonable

schedule of rates can be arrived at,” he said. The lack of adequately trained staff at the local levels to administer the scheme transparently is also a serious drawback.

Other issues of concern include the absence of adequate work site facilities such as the lack of water and child care arrangements at the work sites. Where water was being provided, money was often being deducted from the wages. As for child care facilities, in a statement that was widely reported in the press, the administration initially suggested that with the existence of multiple balwadis and anganwadis in the State, there is no need for crèche facilities at the work site. When it was clarified that work site crèches are mandatory in the Act, the government revised its view and agreed to look into the matter. A survey of 104 NREGA participants by the students of Stella Maris College, Chennai, found that around 65 per cent of them were unaware that there should be a child care facility at the work site. Nearly half of the women said that they left their children at home and about 19 per cent brought them to the work site. These women said that they were often harassed by the supervisors and their co-workers. In many cases as the survey revealed, very young children were often left at home unsupervised, and shockingly, there were a few cases where babies as young as 5 and 10 months were left alone at home unattended. Women with older children however did not report such difficulties as many of them were being sent to balwadis or schools.

In spite of a variety of challenging issues, the NREGA is still a big success especially when compared to other rural programmes. The government of Tamil Nadu has also not shown any intransigence in responding to the issues raised by the social audit. State officials have accepted that while the positive findings reflect the core strengths of the programme, there are many procedural problems that need to be urgently addressed. The Act itself if properly implemented in consonance with the Right to Information Act can enhance accountability and transparency in democratic governance and become a strong lifeline for the rural poor in India.