



International Seminar on



NATIONAL RURAL EMPLOYMENT GUARANTEE SCHEME IN INDIA
Impacts and Implementation Experiences

A Report

Prepared by

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The Institute for Human Development (IHD) and Centre de Sciences Humaines jointly organized an International Seminar on ‘**National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme in India—Impacts and Implementation Experiences**’ on 16–17 September 2008 at New Delhi. The conference was supported by the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD), National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganized Sector (NCEUS), and ActionAid India. Its objective was to bring together National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) policy makers, practitioners, and researchers for an overall assessment of the Scheme after its completion of two years, and to assess the extension of its coverage to all the 615 districts of India.

About 100 participants from India and abroad attended the two-day conference. Rita Sharma, Secretary, Ministry of Rural Development gave the keynote address and B.N.Yugandhar, Member, Planning Commission inaugurated the conference. Raghuvansh Prasad Singh, Union Minister for Rural Development gave the valedictory address. The participants included several prominent persons including leading academicians, senior government officers, members of the civil society, and those closely involved with the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) since its inception. Some lawyers, social workers, and media persons also attended the workshop.

Various issues related to the NREGS were discussed during a number of sessions:

- ***An Overview of Two Years of Completion of the Scheme:*** A stock-taking of the Scheme, the issues of right to employment, inclusion, and dignity, and its potential contribution to full employment.
- ***Experiences of the Implementation of the NREGS:*** Challenges facing the scheme as revealed by a number of empirical studies.
- ***Practitioners’ Perspectives and Lessons from the Field:*** Experiences of social audits and community participation in Andhra Pradesh, work allocation in Kerala, group measurement of work by ‘mates’ in Rajasthan, and ground realities in Madhya Pradesh.

- ***Livelihood Security, Wages, and Migration:*** Tribal beneficiaries of the NREGA, mixed experiences of reduction in migration from Maharashtra and the northern Hindi-speaking states, and other implementation experiences from Bihar and West Bengal.
- ***Democracy, Social Mobilization, and NREGA:*** Faultlines in the NREGA, innovations in governance such as *Kudumbashree* in Kerala, the role of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in NREGS delivery in Andhra Pradesh, political processes and translation of the scheme on the ground, and the use of 'Process Influence Mapping' in NREGA analysis.
- ***State Experiences of Implementation:*** Viability of the rights perspective and the ground realities in Punjab, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh, and a Naxal-affected region in Bihar.
- ***Governance and Institutional Issues in NREGA Implementation:*** Reconceptualizing the governance framework, inefficacy of the NREGS as a poverty alleviation programme in the long term and workability of the demand-driven aspect of the Scheme, wage payment through post offices in Andhra Pradesh, and impetus provided by the Right to Information (RTI) Act in Rajasthan.
- ***Women, Children, and NREGS:*** Impact of NREGA on women and the rural labour market, the neglected area of child care in the provisions and implementation of the NREGA, with field observations from Tamil Nadu, Rajasthan, and the Hindi-speaking states.
- ***Asset Creation and Development of the Local Economy:*** The scope and challenges of asset creation, ownership, and preservation.
- ***NREGS—the Way Forward:*** Issues of adequate and efficient grievance redressal mechanisms, defining the nature of NREGA as a programme of transfers or investment or both, quality of employment under the NREGA, and the roadmap to be followed for future success.

INAUGURAL SESSION

The conference began with the welcome address of **Alakh N. Sharma**, Director, IHD, New Delhi. He said that the NREGA is one of the most progressive legislations for the welfare of the poor in independent India. He highlighted the fact that the weak institutional framework is a mere teething problem at the moment. However, the Scheme has tremendous potential for the future. Outlining the purpose of the conference, he elaborated that it was intended to serve as a forum for showcasing the success stories and getting constructive feedback, based on the experience of researchers, development practitioners, policy makers, and members of the civil society, to identify the way forward for better implementation of the Act.

Basudeb Chaudhari, Director, Centre de Sciences Humaines, elaborated that the NREGA, as a flagship programme of the Indian Government, is attracting international attention. He lauded the Act for its inbuilt enabling framework for ensuring entitlements, rooted in both government action as well as the initiative of the people.

In her keynote address, **Rita Sharma**, Secretary, Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, provided an overview of the Act and its impact on poverty, food security, and the environment. She said that the Scheme was operational in all the 615 districts of the country and that scheduled castes/ scheduled tribes (SCs/STs) constituted 56 per cent and women comprised 49 per cent of the beneficiaries. The average wage rate in August 2008 was Rs 80 per day, and it was expected that by the year end there would be an average employment of 50 person-days per household. She also projected that about 4.5 crore households would become beneficiaries of the Scheme by the end of this financial year. Highlighting some impacts of the Scheme, she said that apart from a reduction in distress migration, the increased capacity of workers to negotiate minimum wages and the financial inclusion of 3.3 crore persons (wage payment through bank accounts/post offices) would have a dramatic impact on wage earners' conditions in the long run. The environment and rural livelihoods would benefit from the recharging of water tables, increase in land productivity, and afforestation. Rural infrastructure and democratic and participatory processes are also expected get a boost from the Scheme. Further, she emphasized that NREGA workers could now be seen as a unique identifiable group of rural poor. This

identification can be used for targeting for other pro-poor schemes such as the *Janashree Bima* and *Rashtriya Swastha Yojanas*. Using innovations in ICT technologies to operationalize the Scheme, having superior monitoring and information systems (MIS), streamlining the flow of funds, and enforcing the grievance redressal mechanisms by institutionalizing NREGA helplines and appointing ombudsmen were proposed. A novel suggestion was to ensure increased financial flows to rural communities by allowing them to engage in carbon trading.

B.N. Yugandhar, Member, Planning Commission, Government of India, presided over the inaugural session and remarked that the uniqueness of NREGA lay in its rights-based approach, which made it less prone to the vulnerabilities of patronage-based, targeted programmes. Quoting Y.K. Alagh, he said that in the history of civilization of India, prior to the Act, nothing had freed wage labour from the clutches of the landlord to the same extent as the NREGA had done. He further noted that the chief aim of the Act was to provide supplemental employment opportunities and income to the rural poor, and that this should not be forgotten by tying it up with other objectives such as extending bank linkages and incorporating arrangements for carbon trading. He advised against frequent social audits which would hamper the Scheme and favoured K.P. Kannan's suggestion to remove the cap of 100 days of employment in districts where more than 50 per cent of the beneficiaries belong to SCs and STs.

Ashok Pankaj, Seminar Co-ordinator, gave the Vote of Thanks. He re-emphasized the need for a thrust on decentralization for the successful implementation of the Act, and cautioned against overloading the Act with too many objectives.

PLENARY SESSION I: AN OVERVIEW OF TWO YEARS OF THE NREGS

Amita Sharma, Joint Secretary, Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, chairing the session said that one should consider the multiple suggestions and experiences of NREGA in a dialectical manner, allowing room for differential responses to the Act and dealing with dynamic micro situations. Paradigms of innovative action were thus sought to be developed, so as to evolve capacities for the most vulnerable.

Ashwani Saith, Institute of Social Studies the Hague, drew attention towards the various modes of primitive accumulation, describing four different regimes under which accumulation can take place—accumulation with ownership, without ownership, without ownership and with predation, and pure predation. He slotted the NREGA into a mode wherein there was accumulation without ownership and with predation. He elaborated that under the NREGA, workers engage in the construction phase of public works but do not get any further downstream benefits that may have accrued from asset ownership. He called this a variant of the ‘poor subsidizing the rich’ model, as the investment made on asset creation ultimately turns out to be a windfall to land owners on whose land the assets are created. Only one-fourth or one-fifth of the benefits reach the most needy, with predation manifesting itself in the form of siphoning of money by local vested interests, fudging of muster rolls etc. He suggested serious consideration of providing the intended beneficiaries a stake in the asset ownership process, so that they too can become shareholders of national capital, and subsequently derive greater value addition from their contribution to the work. He also noted the inadequacy of the wages provided under the Scheme, pointing out that this does not compensate for the bodily deficits caused by the hard labour required at the worksite.

Jayati Ghosh, Jawaharlal Nehru University, spoke of how the NREGA was an incredibly ambitious scheme and, therefore, to ensure its success, certain minimum pre-conditions need to exist. Salient among these are: information dissemination about the programme, capacity building (administrative and technical), willingness and co-ordination on the part of the local *panchayats* to run the Scheme, mobilization of the people to conduct social audits without fear of repression, and effective redressal mechanisms. She affirmed that there were huge implications

for class relations in the countryside with the launch of the Scheme and that local or national resistance was inevitable. She concluded on an optimistic note saying that while the corruption and other complaints were inevitable, the Scheme is moving towards success.

Indira Hirway, Director, Centre for Development Alternatives, Ahmedabad, explored the potential of the NREGS to lead the economy towards a labour-intensive growth path, especially in light of the low and declining growth rate of productive employment. She emphasized that the Scheme needed to be seen in a long-term perspective, with a strong planning component, dovetailing it with ongoing development efforts, incorporating decentralized planning and implementation, skill training, maintenance of public assets, and by absorbing wage-earners into mainstream employment. She suggested that the path towards full employment lay in strengthening the sectors where the poor are located and stabilizing their income, improving their asset base, constructing basic socio-economic infrastructure at the local level, ending unpaid work for women and the poor, enabling access to paid work opportunities, and imposing an overall upward pressure on market wages. All these links are realizable through the NREGA.

K.P. Kannan, Member, NCEUS, Government of India, drew attention to the fact that out of the five states that were doing well under the NREGA, four were southern states (the fifth being Rajasthan). He cautioned against the overambitious projections of the multiplier effect that could be generated at the village level as predicted by Hirway. He reiterated that land redistribution was a major factor that remained unaddressed in the rural economy, and rather than generating work fare projects for mere employment generation, there should also be a focus on skill training, capacity building, and establishing a wage floor. An important aspect of the NREGA was the social dignity of public employment, as there was an absence of the patron–client relationships in the work equation. Kannan also suggested that rather than allowing the operationalization of works only on the lands of SCs/STs and *Indira Awas Yojana* beneficiaries, they should be extended to marginal and small farmers' lands, as the latter too cannot finance upgradation of their own land. Further, he suggested that there should be some arrangement so that work activities offered under the NREGA could be coupled with the provision of social services, by channeling the supply of labour into activities such as preparing meals for the Mid Day Meal Scheme, and housekeeping services for primary health centres etc.

Prabhu Ghate, another discussant, held that it was unrealistic to think that the *gram sabha* would be able to carry out a social audit unassisted, and suggested that social audits be conducted by a coalition of non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

PLENARY SESSION II: EXPERIENCES OF IMPLEMENTATION OF NREGS

Santosh Mehrotra, Senior Advisor, Planning Commission Government of India, presented a macro picture of the employment provided under the NREGA. He elaborated that in the year 2006–07, the national average of number of person-days of employment provided per household was 43 days, with the share of SCs in total employment being 27 per cent and that of STs 32 per cent. Women constituted 46 per cent of all persons working in 2007–08. Also, in terms of total number of days, NREGA generated more employment than the *Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana* (SGRY) and the National Food for Work Programme (NFFWP) taken together. Among the states, Madhya Pradesh, Assam, Rajasthan, Chattisgarh, and Andhra Pradesh, may be considered as the good performers and Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Orissa, Gujarat, and Maharashtra may be considered lagging behind. The self-targeting nature of the Scheme was such that errors of targeting as a result of inclusion and exclusion were eliminated. The 60:40 ratio of wage and material costs was seen to be a useful, though not unique, safeguard, having been implemented in the earlier wage employment programmes as well. Out of the total works constructed, 63 per cent accounted for water conservation, 17 per cent for road connectivity, 14 per cent for land development, and 6 per cent for drought proofing. Also, 3.57 million households had completed 100 days of employment in 2007–08. The challenges ahead include institutionalizing a regularized system of social audits led by gram panchayats but with the support of NGOs, popularizing awareness through information, education, and communication (IEC) activities, releasing a greater amount of government resources for bearing the administrative costs of the Scheme, and allowing for greater technical support.

S.M. Vijayanand, Principal Secretary, Local Self Government, Government of Kerala, elaborated the overall experiences of NREGS in Kerala. He pointed out the notable contribution

of Kudumbashree, a network of neighbourhood groups of below poverty line (BPL) families that helped in the execution of the scheme at the village level, and also the pivotal role of the area development supervisor (ADS) in the implementation of the NREGA. The Scheme also received support from workers' organizations, the village panchayat leadership, and gram sabha facilitators. Payment through banks only, taking up works of natural resource management, vigilance and monitoring committees for each work, and about 80 per cent women beneficiaries characterize the implementation experience in Kerala. The success of the Scheme was attributed to the strong base of social capital prevalent in Kerala. Minimal level of corruption was also claimed to be observed in Kerala. However, weak integration with the People's Plan Movement and with other departments was observed, and tribal beneficiaries did not benefit optimally. Difficulties remain in identifying works in plantation / coastal areas.

Abusaleh Shariff, International Food Policy Research Institute (Asia), New Delhi, made a presentation based on a district-level quantitative and qualitative study of 200 households in 16 districts across seven north Indian States—Bihar, Chattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh. The survey reveals that there is hardly any social discrimination in terms of enrolment; and better-off households have also enrolled under the Scheme. However, the Scheme was found to be less beneficial to the poorest of the poor. Factors influencing the number of NREGA employment days included institutional participation of women in the village, families reporting high food adequacy, and households with migrant family members, who refrained from maximizing their enrolment.

Smita Gupta, Fellow, Indian School of Women's Studies and Development, New Delhi, based on a study of 100 worksites in 32 villages in eight states, held that while there had been a three-fold increase in the number of work days, the minimum wages were still not being paid in a number of places. Distress outmigration was seen to have reduced, and enrolment in schools was seen to have marginally increased. Though it is a demand-driven project in 'name', the demand for work was still subject to the availability of employment opportunities, which were often exhausted after a certain upper limit. The low demand, in turn, was attributed to a lack of awareness and exclusion of people (for example, widows) based on the problematic definition of a household in the Act. Procedural delays in the disbursement of wages from the Centre to the

states and from the state to the districts, failure to pay unemployment allowance, poor worksite management, non-standard measurement of work, and inadequacy of staff and engineers were the other problems that were observed. It was also seen that the scheme had been implemented effectively where NGOs and social organization have mobilized the people and where there is a committed team of officials at the district level.

Manish Ranjan, Deputy Commissioner, Pakur (Jharkhand) explained the implementation experiences of Pakur, a tribal dominated district with very low literacy rate. Tribals constitute 45 per cent of the total population of the district and the overall literacy rate is a mere 30 per cent (*Santhals* and *Paharias* are the main tribal groups). He explained that customized IEC activities played a major role in generating awareness about the NREGA. As the region has a low literacy rate, innovative means such as beating of drums, showing leaves of mango trees (*patta ghumana*), and dance dramas and songs about the NREGS in Santhali and Bangla were used to attract attention to details of the Scheme. Further, the message about NREGA was spread through hoardings, workshops, and cultural programmes. The social audit, conducted as a part of 'NREGA Watch' of the National Institute of Rural Development, revealed the absence of contractors and machines, *kutchra* muster rolls, presence of first aid facilities at stone quarries and mines, payment of wages through bank accounts, convergence with health and *aanganwadi* schemes, better quality of governance and better attendance at gram sabhas. Some positive results of the Scheme are seen in terms of reduction in migration and improved food security with wages being channeled into incurring expenses on food, health, education, and repayment of loans. Changes in attitudes were also seen to have given a fillip to the *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan*, rural infrastructure, and rural connectivity.

Jean Dreze and Reetika Khera, G.B. Pant Institute of Social Studies, Allahabad, presented findings of a survey conducted in six states—Bihar, Chattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh—focusing on the perceptions of workers. They found that the reasons for low levels of employment under the NREGA included low level of funds, poor flow of funds due to political and administrative hurdles, the demand principle not operating truly, and corruption manifesting itself at the worksites. It was seen that most NREGA workers belonged to the most disadvantaged groups, and most of them had a high demand for 100 days of work, with

50 per cent of the sample even demanding that the Scheme provide work throughout the year. Wages earned through the NREGA had helped workers in financing their food and health requirements (with 69 per cent of the wages earned being spent on food and 47 per cent on illness). There was also an observed reduction in migration. A significant proportion of women collected (79 per cent) and kept the wages (68 per cent) that they had earned, and thus, benefited from having a work opportunity at their doorstep. It was observed that the NREGA wage had also raised the bar for the determination of agricultural wages. However, transparency norms were seen to be routinely violated.

D. N. Reddy, formerly of Hyderabad University, attributed the success of the NREGA in Kerala to the existence of strong grassroots institutions and a history of social mobilization movements. He suggested that there was a valuable lesson to be learnt from the experience of Kudumbashree, of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) sourcing work to local people's groups. This sharing of the responsibility of implementation of NREGS with other groups (for example, women's groups) was suggested as a model to emulate.

K.S. Gopal, Centre for Environment Concerns, Hyderabad, argued that it was necessary to consider the NREGA from the point of view of the worker, attaching importance to workers' aspirations, dignity, and satisfaction rather than by looking at the Scheme from the angle of corruption and other macro problems. He appealed for expanding the scale of works so that 100 days of employment could actually be provided to accommodate the bulk of demand for work, and not to turn away prospective job seekers.

PARALLEL SESSION I: PRACTITIONERS' PERSPECTIVES AND LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

K.S. Gopal, Centre for Environment Concerns, Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh, illustrated the role of the civic community and civil society in promoting women's empowerment by explaining how women in Abbavandla Palli village in Kadiri *mandal* women protested against discrimination in allotment of NREGS work and forced the authorities to give them work. A crèche was also piloted with the help of the Rural Environment and Development Society (REDS) in Nalla Sinagyagiri village of Nallamada mandal, where older women were employed to look after groups of 11 children, while the mothers worked at the NREGA worksites. When the system was institutionalized, REDS requested the district officials for nutrition supplements for the children, under the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS), as well as immunization benefits, free institutional hospital delivery etc. as well as other provisions of the ICDS. Food security was ensured by organizing workers into groups and providing them with the capital to buy food in bulk every month, to be repaid by their wages, as and when they received them. Problems in wage measurement were also explained, particularly in the 'lead' and 'lift' tasks that are mostly carried out by women, who suffer because of this difficulty. He also emphasized that NREGA has resulted in the reinforcement of minimum wages in agriculture in the state.

Joseph Abraham, Project Director and Deputy Development Commissioner, Ernakulam, Kerala, discussed the NREGA experience in Ernakulam and Kottayam districts of Kerala and stressed that the upper tier of PRIs should be allowed to play a more active role in the execution of NREGS, as they had been doing a good job in implementing other governmental schemes. It was pointed out that the key roles of programme officer and joint programme coordinator (JPC) were still being performed by the block development officers, and there is a need for full-fledged personnel dedicated to the NREGA for successful implementation of the Scheme. It was found that a large number of lower middle class women were attracted to the employment opportunities provided by the NREGA, owing to the status of government work that it provides. However, ad hoc decisions were often taken regarding the selection and execution of works, owing to the absence of village monitoring committees. Additionally, it was seen that the overseers of the

work were not present regularly at the work sites. It was suggested that the wage employment seekers be informed in simple terms about the provisions pertaining to unemployment allowances, as well as the medical and insurance benefits envisaged under the NREGA. For ensuring continued services of contract technical personnel, it was recommended that they be paid higher salaries and be given compulsory induction training.

Yamini Aiyar, Centre for Policy Research, discussed the inbuilt accountability mechanisms in the NREGA and elaborated that decentralized planning and implementation and proactive disclosure of records through display boards, public scrutiny of accounts etc. have contributed to transparency in the implementation of the scheme. Detailed entries in job cards, reading out of muster rolls, and information requests have also contributed in the same. She asserted that social audits have played a significant role in increasing the awareness levels of workers and where they have been conducted regularly, the confidence of labourers to engage with officials has increased. Her findings were based on a study of the World Bank in partnership with the Strategy and Performance Innovation Unit of the Rural Development Department of Andhra Pradesh (covering three districts—Cuddapah, Khamam, and Medak). She further explained that social audits serve as an immediate grievance redressal mechanism, involving the exercise of procuring official records, studying them, and presenting them to the public to verify whether the reported expenditures were actually made in the manner that they were claimed on paper. The *jansunwai* or public hearing was seen to be the most pivotal, serving as a platform for exposing divergences in government records of the implementation of the Scheme and the actual ground realities. This occurred through testimonies of workers and opportunities given to officials to publicly defend their actions. Social audit by civil society was found to be more useful as the implementing agency cannot be a judge of its own work. Thus, the role of vertical form (or the demand side) of accountability whereby citizens hold the State to account was highlighted, rather than the conventional horizontal or supply side accountability (on the part of agencies internal to the State). This was seen as allowing the entitlements-based approach to take root, by empowering citizens to demand their rights. The role of the civil society in partnership with the government was seen to be critical in this framework. The experiment of customized ICT in Andhra Pradesh was observed to have proved very useful.

Reetika Khera, G.B. Pant Institute of Social Sciences, Allahabad, discussed group measurement of work as experimented in the Jalore district of Rajasthan. The study was conducted in February 2008 and covered nine worksites in the Raniwara and Jalore blocks. She explained that the process of group formation of about five workers at NREGA worksites, headed by a training 'mate' or worksite supervisor has allowed in part for increased productivity of workers through better clarity of tasks to be undertaken by the smaller groups. The role of 'mates' has been defined as maintenance of muster rolls, work measurement for the group, maintenance of the measurement sheets, and ensuring the provision of worksite facilities. It was observed that group formation had taken place at most worksites, and this had allowed for better worksite supervision through peer monitoring as work shirkers could be easily spotted. Group measurement as opposed to collective measurement, however, had not been initiated. Collective measurement means that all labourers get the same wage based on measurement of the total output as per their joint effort. This serves as a disincentive, as it allows for 'free riding', with some inefficient labourers benefiting from the hard work of other members of the group. As an alternative to this, the measurement of work output of the smaller group by the mate was done on a daily basis, thereby allowing for higher work incentives, labour productivity, and wages, with the workers being more directly associated with the rewards of their labour. However, it was seen that while the mate may be allocating work at the beginning of the day, there was no evidence that work measurement was undertaken at the end of the day.

C. Subba Reddy, Programme Officer, Poverty Learning Foundation, Secunderabad, based on a study of six districts (Betul, Chhatarpur, Seoni, Shivpuri, Tikamgarh, and Umaria) in Madhya Pradesh, suggested that the awareness levels of workers regarding the detailed provisions of NREGA are very poor. About 90 per cent of them were not informed of provisions about unemployment allowance, additional wages beyond 5 km, minimum wages, social audits etc. The majority of the workers did not know that they had to apply for work nor were they aware about the procedure for registering complaints. It was found that better training for district, block, and village level officials was needed for the preparation of perspective plans and shelf of projects. It was observed that only a small proportion of workers received 100 days of employment and unemployment allowance was not received by anyone. Some people reported the existence of village monitoring committees but others claimed that they were not functioning.

Organization of regular meetings at the village or block level and quarterly newsletters about the NREGS was recommended for ensuring the rights and entitlements of the workers.

PARALLEL SESSION II: LIVELIHOOD SECURITY, WAGES, AND MIGRATION

Jos Chathukulam and K. Gireesan, Director and Senior Fellow, Centre for Rural Management, Kottayam, in a study covering the Wayanad district of Kerala, discussed to what extent the NREGS has benefited the tribal communities. Having been bypassed in earlier employment schemes such as *Swarnjayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana* (SGSY) and SGRY, where there were zero benefits to tribal communities, the employment guarantee scheme showed marked improvement in this respect, with the share in of SCs and STs in NREGA employment being 21.32 per cent and 6.66 per cent, respectively. Exclusion of tribal beneficiaries, when it occurred, was attributed mostly to a lack of sensitivity to tribals in the system and processes of the Scheme, the unfriendly attitude of local managers, and lack of publicity and awareness.

B. K. Jha and Rajiv Kumar Sinha, Agro-Economic Research Centre for Bihar and Jharkhand, examined the performance of NREGS in Bhagalpur district and pointed out the tardy implementation of the Scheme. They suggested that various provisions of transparency and accountability needed to be strengthened. They emphasized the need to include motivational factors in the scheme design as the gram panchayat head and rozgar sewaks were found to be quite indifferent towards its implementation.

Dilip Kumar Chatterjee, West Bengal, discussed the dynamics of seasonal migration to and from Burdwan district in West Bengal and observed the poor nature of planning of projects as seen by the co-existence of high fund utilization ratio, high project completion ratio, and extremely low average person-days created per claimant household under the NREGS. An enhanced material component in the NREGA was suggested, so that the guarantee of employment could be realized.

B.S. Jhadav, SRTM University, Maharashtra, discussed the impact of NREGS on village out-migration in the Marathwada region of Maharashtra, observing that the work made available

under the Scheme was not of a long duration and hence, did not have a sufficient impact on migration. Also, giving of advance wages by contractors, for employment for 200 days, meant that the workers were often lured away from NREGA work. Worksite politics was also seen to exist, with the upper castes being favoured by distributing to them soft soil worksites, while the lower castes were given hard soil ones. Also, illiterate workers were paid less than their due, since they were unable to grasp the measurement intricacies of the scheduled rates.

Karthika Bhatia, G.B. Pant Institute of Social Sciences, Allahabad, based on a survey of six states (Bihar, Chattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh), found that 57 per cent of the workers preferred to remain in their native place to avail of job opportunities, instead of migrating. The decision to migrate was looked upon as a discrete decision and any move to guarantee employment near their residence stopped them from going to far off destinations for work. Also, an urgent need was felt for an agricultural wage policy, as casual labourers working in agriculture are also the main beneficiaries of the NREGA.

PARALLEL SESSION III: DEMOCRACY, SOCIAL MOBILIZATION, AND NREGA

Kaustava Banerjee, Fellow, Council for Social Development, New Delhi, highlighted the denial of registration to female-headed households, registering of joint families, and charging payments for forms. It was observed that the job cards were being given on a 'quota' basis in Jharkhand. No receipts were given at the time of application of work and no crèche, drinking water, shade, or first aid facilities were present at the worksites. It was found that machines were being used and contractors were present. Compensation given on the basis of task rates was found to be far below the minimum wages, with workers being paid as little as Rs 10. Further, measurement was not done in front of the workers, payments were not made on time, and delay in payments occurred even after money had reached the panchayat level. Muster rolls were not found available at the worksites, and unemployment allowance was denied. Too much attention was seen to be paid to roads and big ponds instead of creating productive assets which would meet local needs. The administration was not able to align itself to the demand-driven developmental policy model that lets people demand job cards, work etc. Corruption, stemming from asymmetric information about the rights of workers, allowed middlemen to extract rents,

resulting in lower wages reaching the rural workers. Fraud was seen to occur as names on muster rolls were bogus, or the names on muster rolls were correct but the days of work and wages recorded were false. Detailed analysis of the wage payment, minimum wages, mode of wage payments, and distribution of works was undertaken in Andhra Pradesh, Chattisgarh, Jharkhand, and Madhya Pradesh.

B. Vijaykumar, Principal, Kerala Institute of Tourism and Travel Studies, Trivandrum, appreciated the role of Kudumbashree, a state-level poverty eradication mission, in the implementation of the NREGS. Under Kudumbashree, grassroot level neighbourhood groups consisting of 15–40 families, each represented by a woman, are federated into area development societies (ADS) at the ward level. These are, in turn, federated into community development societies (CDS). The ADS provides a woman volunteer who helps in organizing the work, ensures proper maintenance of muster rolls, attends to worksite facilities, and oversees the measurement of work, thereby acting as a substitute for the contractor. The ADS volunteers are thus given a pivotal role in labour mobilization and work execution. Gender-sensitive planning and implementation is also ensured through equal wages, gender-friendly work sites with an *ayah* where there are children below the age of six years. This, in turn, helps in checking migration of women to cities and other states to work in the unorganized sector.

Raabe Ketharina, International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), **Ragina Birner**, IFPRI, and **Madhusri Shekhar**, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, pointed out that large-scale rural development programmes such as NREGA are inherently confronted with governance challenges owing to elite capture, misuse of funds, and corruption. Further, owing to the scale of the programme, control over day-to-day aspects becomes difficult, with flexibility, rather than standardization, being the requirement. In this regard, based on a study of a village in Nalanda district of Bihar, an analytical framework of ‘Process-Influence-Mapping’ was suggested as a participatory tool to be used with focus groups or individuals, to help map the implementation process. It involves identifying the actors and actions needed for implementation and also factoring in how much influence the actors have on the outcomes. This helps in identifying the critical entry points and strategies to increase transparency and empowerment. It was observed that too much power was concentrated in the hands of the village employment worker, however,

with limited accountability. The caste system was seen as responsible for determining the power dynamics in the Scheme, with differences among castes affecting the processes of issuing and distributing job cards and leading to inequitable access to the Scheme.

Devina Dutt, Research and Communications Consultant, discussed the role of ICT in NREGS delivery in five districts of Andhra Pradesh (Rangareddy, Medak, Mahbubnagar, Nalgonda, and Khammam) and commented on the usefulness of ICT in implementation of the Scheme. The software system provided by Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) is modeled in such a manner that each mandal office has a client–server system where all data and work/wage related entry is done by a computer operator. The system provides details regarding registration of wage seekers, management of shelf of works, work progress, monitoring and payment, management of funds and shares reports and analysis. All the data from the blocks is later integrated at the state level. Notable observations after the implementation of the NREGS included considerable debt clearing on the part of beneficiaries, sending of children to school, and increased income accruing from cultivation of barren land belonging to SC families. There was a preference for wage payment under the Scheme as opposed to the food for work programme, where very poor quality rice was distributed.

Sandip Ghatak, Reader in Political Science, Asansol Girls' College West Bengal, discussed transparency and accountability aspects of the NREGS in Salanpur and Raniganj blocks of Burdwan district of West Bengal and revealed that in a few cases, beneficiaries are communist party, CPI(M) workers, who merely withdraw money from the Scheme without working at the site. Thus, it was seen that most panchayat offices are controlled by the dominant party of the locality. It was suggested that the success of the Scheme would be determined to a great extent by the constructive role of the opposition party. In some cases, job cards were found to be retained with the agent. It was also found that the same person had multiple entries on muster rolls for a single project, signing at one place and offering a thumb impression at another. The bogus nature of muster rolls was further exposed as a school-going child was documented as having received work under the scheme. The most important issue was seen to be the failure to provide employment to those who demanded it. For example, in Dendua, only 187 of 654 families that applied for work were provided jobs and in Ratibati, only 232 of 765 families were

provided jobs in 2006–07. Poor participation of women, non-availability of records of projects undertaken, and going ahead with unapproved schemes were some other glaring problems.

PARALLEL SESSION IV: STATE EXPERIENCES OF IMPLEMENTATION

P. Madhavi, Reader, PG College for Women, Secunderabad, was of the view that rights are valuable only when the option of realizing them exists. It was asserted that certain preconditions are needed for the rights-based employment programme to ensure its uniform application, without which intra and inter district variations are inevitable. Thus, the guarantee aspect of the NREGA was questioned, owing to the workers' inability to optimally exercise the right to employment.

Ranjit Singh Ghuman and **Parvinder Kaur Dua**, Punjabi University, Patiala, Punjab, discussed the implementation of NREGA in Hoshiarpur district of Punjab and found that a large proportion of NREGA beneficiaries were agricultural labourers and that most of them belonged to BPL families. Marginal land holders were also beneficiaries in some cases. Employment person-days generated were low and only 17 per cent of the workers had completed 100 days of employment. It was recommended that the list of works be expanded using the suggestions of workers.

Jamal Kidwai, Director, AMAN Trust, New Delhi, examined the implementation of NREGA in the Naxal-affected Arwal and Jehanabad districts of Bihar and pointed out that successful implementation of the NREGA would wean people away from the Naxal movement, as a large number of its cadre are drawn from the poor and unemployed youth. Job cards being hoarded by the *mukhiya*, fudging of the muster rolls, the gram sabha not being held, and shortage of staff were found to be prevalent. It was seen that landless labourers engaged in the construction of works under the NREGA had no commitment to work productively as they would not benefit from the use of these assets at a later date. Also, members of the Muslim community were not taken into confidence in the selection of these works.

Sarit Kumar Rout and Manas Ranjan Kar, Research Scholars, CESS, Hyderabad, studied two districts of Orissa (Kandhamal and Sundargarh) and found that the involvement of PRIs in NREGA was minimal. Projects agreed upon in the gram sabha were not sanctioned and it was observed that village-level workers and the panchayat secretary largely controlled the planning process. Aged persons and women were found to be not benefiting from the scheme. Also, 76 per cent of households in Kandhamal and 56 per cent in Sundargarh had received work for a period of only 25 days.

Pratima Yadav, Institute of Economic Growth, Delhi, provided an overview of the situation in Uttar Pradesh. She discussed that government figures indicate near equality between the demand for and supply of employment. However, in reality, the job cards issued and actual employment provided to job seekers show considerable mismatch. Evidence reveals that about a fifth of the total financial allocations remain unspent.

WEDNESDAY, 17 SEPTEMBER 2008

PLENARY SESSION III: GOVERNANCE AND INSTITUTIONAL ISSUES AND NREGA IMPLEMENTATION

Surjit Singh, Director, Institute of Development Studies, Jaipur, presented his findings showing the mixed experiences of the NREGS in Rajasthan, owing to differences in the rural economy of different regions, irrespective of the number of years of operation of the Scheme. The RTI Act and the active support of grassroots civil society organizations and NGOs was seen to have regularized the system of social audits. He pointed out that though bank accounts have been opened in the name of the beneficiaries, actual disbursement of wages was not being done through banks and post offices in a large number of cases. He, therefore, suggested introducing mobile banking that would also reduce the costs of traveling to and from banks.

Ravi Srivastava, Member, NCEUS, Government of India, elaborated a framework wherein governance was constituted by three critical elements—vision, commitment, and capacity. The Centre needed to understand that the programme had to have some incentives for the states. Additionally, tension was seen in the definition of local PRIs as they needed to be viewed both as

instrumental units at the lowest level of service delivery, whilst also enjoying their own autonomy, specific to their local conditions. Thus, some states were more susceptible to rent-seeking and corruption, stemming largely from the wider social dynamic and manipulations of the wider political economy. The fundamental difference between the NREGA and previous wage employment programmes is the principle of enforcement of demand and accountability. Accountability of the PRIs, in this instance, was to be ensured largely through proactive governance and pressure from autonomous civil society organizations.

A. Murali, NREGA Commissioner, Government of Andhra Pradesh, focused attention on the distinguishing features of the scheme in Andhra Pradesh, such as wage payment through banks and post offices, use of ICT and transaction-based MIS to track every rupee. A detailed layout of the payment cycle was provided, with work measurement being readied by day 6, after which preparation of cheques, conveyance of cash, and the final disbursement to post offices occurred by day 13, well within the stipulated 15 days. Computer software, in collaboration with TCS, was also used for most operations such as job card distribution, etc. There was also a focus on promoting social audit and work–time–motion studies. Evolving of an Employment Guarantee Scheme calendar so as to avoid conflict between farmers and labourers was sought. Recommendations included having separate staff and a separate implementation mechanism for social audit and also central rules for accountability of the implementing agencies along the lines of an election act.

Rohit Nandan, Principal Secretary, Rural Development Government of Uttar Pradesh, suggested that the Act was too academic and required an impossible amount of paperwork, and advised that the scheme be made more worker-friendly. Also, the theoretical assumption that an illiterate person having no political consciousness would demand work was challenged, given the nature of the power structures existing in the villages. Thus, the workability of the demand-driven aspect of the scheme was seriously questioned. It was suggested that the social audit remain the preserve of the gram sabha as the presence of outsiders creates a sense of distrust. Videography of the social audit could be kept as a record for the future. The number of days being fixed as 100 was also contested, and it was suggested that in distress situations of calamity, the 100 days bar be removed.

Manoj Srivasatava, Additional Commissioner, Departmental Enquiry, Government of Bihar, contended that while a demand-based approach was desirable, a better understanding was required to see who were the people demanding such employment and what were their capacities to demand the same. It was observed that workers' agency alone may not automatically drive the Scheme, with the iniquitous social structure not allowing all persons to partake equally and demand work as envisaged. Also, the incentive dimension was recognized as being extremely pertinent to the functioning of the Scheme on the ground. It was pointed out that with the multiple layers of supervisors at the district, block, and village levels, the transaction costs of operation may turn out to be extremely high.

K.S. Vatsa, Secretary to the Government of Maharashtra, explained that though the NREGA has the potential to work as a social safety net programme in the short term, it may not be as successful as an open-ended, long-running, poverty alleviation programme. He felt that it would be likely to fall prey to administrative and institutional failures. He also emphasized that a social safety net, poverty alleviation programme, and asset creation programme each needed a different design. It was observed that inter and intra state standards of performance were very different and that a key element for the success of the Scheme was to mobilize and organize the rural poor. He pointed out further that the NREGS cannot simply be seen as a matter of wage payment, and that it had to be linked to the issue of sustainable livelihoods. Therefore, dovetailing of development objectives to this schema was of immense importance.

PLENARY SESSION IV: WOMEN, CHILDREN, AND THE NREGS

Shantha Sinha, Chairperson, National Commission for Protection of Child Rights, explained that the NREGA allowed women the opportunity to participate in income-earning opportunities rather than in petty production or domestic chores. However, she pointed out that the challenges of ensuring maternal entitlements and making adequate provisions for children under the NREGS were paramount, while also recommending that these should go hand in hand with greater wages and greater dignity.

Ratna Sudarshan, Director, Institute of Social Studies Trust, New Delhi, based on preliminary findings from Malampuzha block, Palakkad district of Kerala, discussed the impact of NREGA on the rural labour market, with a special focus on women's participation. She emphasized that NREGA was very important for women's work as they are paid equal wages under this Scheme. For example, women workers earned Rs 70 upwards in the open market and Rs 125 under the NREGA. However, for male workers the open market wage rate starts at Rs 150 upwards and, hence, NREGA is not an attractive work option.

Kiran Bhatta, Consultant, UNICEF, New Delhi, based on a survey of women and children in Dungarpur district of Rajasthan, emphasized the need to consider children and child care as not merely a mandatory worksite facility, but an important objective in itself. Though many mothers availed of the work provided under the NREGA, very few knew about the entitlement of a crèche (only 13 per cent of the sample), and left their children at home. Under these conditions, mothers work under emotional strain and fear about the safety of their unattended children. It was suggested that breast feeding breaks be incorporated into the work schedule of women with young children at NREGA worksites. A useful recommendation was to create a cadre of skilled care givers who could operationalize the concept of a crèche. Convergence with the ICDS was also recommended. It was additionally observed that medical facilities at the work sites were lacking and that the schedule of rates was not sensitive to the nutrition and health requirements of working women. It was advised that work under NREGA should be adapted to allow greater participation of women without adverse impact on their health. It was, nevertheless, noted that the NREGA is a unique opportunity that provides independent earnings for many women, and half the sample of women were quoted as saying that they would remain unemployed if it were not for the NREGA.

Sudha Narayanan, Research Scholar, Cornell University Ithaca, USA, based on her study of Viluppuram and Dindigul districts in Tamil Nadu, elaborated that the share of women in total employment generated under NREGA was very high (Tamil Nadu-73.2 per cent, Viluppuram district-80 per cent and Dindigul district-73.8 per cent). A large proportion of women claimed that it was their own decision to work, and that they preferred wages in the form of cash payment, most of which they kept for themselves. For mothers with children below five years of

age, balancing NREGA work and caring for infants was seen to be very trying. Redundancy of crèches had been observed by M.K. Stalin in the light of existence of *aaganwadis* and *balwaadis* in each village. However, it was found that an overwhelming majority (85 per cent of sample) of mothers would prefer to bring their children to the worksite if there were adequate provisions for their safety and care.

Nandini Nayak, Research Scholar, SOAS, London, highlighted the findings of a survey in Bihar, Chattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh, and found that the NREGA provided a unique employment opportunity for women, with 70 per cent having had no other source of cash income in the past three months. Availability of local, paid work with the opportunity for primary wage earning responsibilities, and the dignity of government employment were seen as major pull factors. A significant proportion of women workers were seen to collect (79 per cent) and keep their wages (60 per cent). However, obstacles were found in terms of social norms imposing controls on women—poor attendance at gram sabha meetings, harassment at the worksite, and contractors preferring able-bodied men for the jobs, etc.

Govind Kelkar, UNIFEM, New Delhi, made a very pertinent observation that while women were coming out in large numbers to earn money under the NREGA, this could not necessarily be directly linked to their empowerment. Though the inclusion of women in the workforce was occurring, it was necessary to consider the terms of inclusion and also see whether there existed adverse elements of exclusion. She warned that though women may be emerging as breadwinners for the first time, it was yet to be seen whether this was accompanied by a subsequent change in gender roles and relations. She pointed out that the changes in self-perception and self-esteem of women needed to be taken into account, and it was essential to examine if there had been a decrease in social violence.

Preet Rustagi, IHD, New Delhi, summarized the salient features of the session—the gender differentials in wage work, the dignity of government work for women, and the neglected area of child care facilities and suggested that more men should also be equally concerned with child care.

PLENARY SESSION V: ASSET CREATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE LOCAL ECONOMY

Amita Shah and Sunny Jose, Gujarat Institute of Development Research, Ahmedabad, elaborated that whereas the right to work could enhance and help realize the full potential of rural economies, it was essential that work under NREGS was planned, synchronized, and placed within the larger context of developmental initiatives. It was warned that this convergence was critical, and without it there may be a perpetual dependence on wage income earned through employment guarantee schemes. Convergence with other development programmes would, in turn, add to the strength and effectiveness of the concerned schemes.

Mahendra Dev, Chairperson, Commission for Agricultural Cost and Prices, New Delhi and **S.C. Galab** and **E. Revathi**, Centre for Economic and Social Studies, Hyderabad,, discussed the first round benefits of the Scheme in Warangal and Mahbubnagar districts of Andhra Pradesh. These are increased income, higher wages for women, increased respectability, reduction in seasonal fluctuations in employment and seasonal migration, and decline in labour forms such as annual farm servants. Second round benefits include completion of works on common property resources, SC/ST land development, increased water storage, recharge of ground water, and increase in land productivity.

Nicolas Gravel, GREQAM, Marseilles, France, **A. Mukhopadhyay**, Indian Statistical Institute, and **Himanshu**, Jawaharlal Nehru University, based on a study of Sonbhadra and Barabanki districts in Uttar Pradesh and Dhaulpur and Karauli districts in Rajasthan, enumerated the sequential process of getting NREGS employment—applying for a job card, receiving a job card, applying for NREGS work, and receiving NREGS work. It was seen that self-selection for the Scheme was high for STs. People with high per capita land were also found to be less likely to work under the NREGS.

K. Hanumanth Rao, National Institute of Rural Development, Hyderabad, elaborated on how ownership and quality of assets, integrating of works with natural resource management, and watershed development plans were crucial points to consider for the NREGS. Convergence

activities were seen to have immense scope. Dovetailing with other initiatives such as the National Horticulture Mission was also recommended. Absence of any clear vigilance and monitoring committees was noted.

Prem Vashistha, IHD, suggested that land development under NREGA should be permitted on non-SC/ST household lands as well. He also stressed the high degree of participation of the gram sabha in the demand-driven approach. Emphasis was placed on asset creation maintenance.

PANEL DISCUSSION ON ‘NREGS: THE WAY FORWARD’

Yoginder K. Alagh, Chairman, IHD and National Institute of Rural Management, and Former Union Minister for Science and Technology, was of the view that greater fiscal devolution was necessary from the Centre to the states to allow them freedom of operation. He also pointed out that more time needed to be spent on planning of the Scheme so as to incorporate a proper system of incentives and disincentives. Community organization was suggested to provide impetus to the functioning of the Scheme. Panchayat staff was pointed out as being overburdened.

Jean Dreze, G.B. Pant Institute of Social Sciences, Allahabad, focused on the issue of grievance redressal mechanisms and insisted that there should be safeguards in place to protect against the routine violation of entitlements stemming from a blatant disregard of procedures, processes, and guidelines. It was thought necessary to appoint someone who could be approached in case of such violations, (for example, NREGA helpline), and subsequently issue suitable corrective actions when complaints and irregularities are reported. It was also necessary to ensure that the system would not turn against the whistleblowers. A suggestion was put forth for an Employment Guarantee Mission or an empowered external authority to the system such as the district ombudsman, so that there may exist an ultimate grievance redressal authority. It was proposed that complaints should be received not only from complainants, but also from NGOs, civil society organizations, labour unions, etc. It was seen that corruption could be stemmed even if the already included provisions in the Act were strictly enforced, viz. the right to redressal of

complaints and issuing of fines in case of certain listed irregularities. He also suggested that the Operational Guidelines, though only advisory, needed to be followed, otherwise this would allow room for misinterpretation at the discretion of the state. The question of resolving the issue of royalties charged by the state governments to the Centre, which allowed for siphoning off of funds, also remained to be addressed. Also, acknowledgements needed to be given for state action—awards for successes and penalties for failures.

Ajit Ghose, former Senior Economist, ILO, Geneva, questioned whether the NREGA was a programme of transfers for the poor, with employment as a screening mechanism or if it was a programme of investment. He cautioned that this sort of confusion about the nature of the programme should not pre-empt other programmes of investment.

Rizwanul Islam, Special Adviser on Growth, Employment, and Poverty Reduction, Employment Sector, ILO, Geneva, was of the opinion that attention should be paid to the kind of jobs being created and their role in poverty reduction. Other concerns such as whether the assets are pro-poor in nature, provisions for basic safety at the worksite, basic sanitation and health at the worksite, planning and design and quality of assets created, and the technical competence needed to be looked into. Further, it was noted that the long-term impact of the Scheme on poverty remains to be seen in terms of immediate income effect and ensuring that people continually remain above the poverty line. Sustainability of the programme needs to be accounted for, with an examination of exit opportunities post-NREGA also needing consideration.

Abhijit Sen, Member, Planning Commission, Government of India, saw a conflict between employment generation and asset creation. He said that the types of assets to be created and their control for use are important considerations. He, therefore, pleaded for ensuring that the benefits of the assets go to the poor and there exist accountability mechanisms that ensure this.

Ashwani Saith, Institute of Social Studies, the Hague, affirmed the question of the identity of NREGA as a transfer programme, and if so, whether it was targeted or universal. He suggested that in case the NREGA was simply a transfer programme, then direct cash transfers could be

considered as a workable mechanism. Cash transfers as and when instituted through smart cards, would be a relatively costless exercise, but, in turn, would not ensure delivery of necessary public services or even well-being. Further, the kind of employment provided by the Scheme was challenged as the wages paid (according to the schedule of rates) was less than the replacement cost of the body.

K.P. Kannan, Member, NCEUS, New Delhi, was of the view that prior to the implementation of the NREGA, the basic social security of the people needed to be ensured, so that they were on a more level playing field to claim their entitlements. He suggested that the NREGA should be undertaken in a framework which does not rely critically on the bureaucracy for its implementation. Instead, he advised that mobilization of people through an agency of networks and co-operatives could be a more effective driver of the Scheme, as it might help in stemming systemic rent-seeking tendencies.

B.N. Yugandhar, Member, Planning Commission, Government of India, clarified that the NREGA is merely a scheme to supplement livelihood opportunities of the poor and should not be taken to be a social protection programme. It is relevant to the poverty geography of India which is fraught with social discrimination; and the Scheme has a focus on participatory processes and empowerment. Asset creation helps in filling infrastructural gaps and providing opportunities for paid work.

VALEDICTORY ADDRESS

Raghuvansh Prasad Singh, Union Minister for Rural Development, Government of India, correlated the demand for wage employment under the NREGA with poverty measurement and said that poverty would not be eliminated as long as the demand for wage employment remained under NREGA. He outlined a roadmap where NREGA would be followed by a universal SGSY Scheme, with subsequent job placement, thereby giving a thrust to self-employment opportunities, based on skilled labour. As regards the provisions of the NREGA, he justified the 100 days limit, arguing that if this limit was raised, it might disturb the supply of labour to the agriculture sector. It was suggested that the number of households actually coming to work under

the NREGA could serve as an indicator of actual BPL families in the country. Novel initiatives included the appointment of national level monitors (NLMs), requesting the Comptroller and Auditor General to conduct an audit of the Phase II and III districts, and initiating a *Rozgar Jagrukta Puraskar* award for the most active NGO in creating awareness about the NREGA.

SUGGESTIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS EMERGING FROM THE CONFERENCE

Policy recommendations

- Removal of the cap of 100 days of employment in districts where more than 50 per cent of the working population belongs to SCs and STs, or in distress situations of calamity.
- Land development and upgradation on lands of marginal and small farmers (besides SC/ST and *Indira Awas Yojana families*).
- Engagement of workers after the construction phase of public works to allow them downstream benefits of asset creation.
- Clarity on the definition of ‘household’ as described under the Act.
- Devising means by which provision of unemployment allowance can be strictly enforced.
- Stemming inefficiencies in the release of funds.
- Integration of works with natural resource management and watershed development plans.
- Convergence with the health and *aaganwadi* schemes to ensure greater emphasis on creating sustainable livelihoods. Coupling of work activities offered under the NREGA with provision of social services (for example, involving workers in activities such as preparing meals for the Mid Day Meal Scheme, housekeeping services for primary health centres, care givers for crèches, etc.).
- Evolution of strict grievance redressal mechanisms for reporting of violations and issuing corrective action (for example, Employment Guarantee Mission/ district ombusman to serve as an empowered external authority, receiving complaints from complainants, NGOs, civil society organizations, labour unions, etc.).
- Use of an employment calendar to avoid conflict of NREGA work with the demand for labour in agriculture.

- Incorporation of breast feeding breaks into the work schedule of women at NREGA worksites.
- Incorporation of skill training and capacity building and efforts towards establishing a wage floor.
- Making the scheme more worker-friendly by reducing paperwork.
- Ensuring sustained political will and commitment in undertaking the Scheme.
- Examination of exit opportunities after the NREGS.
- Clarity on the purpose of NREGS as the Scheme suffers from an identity crisis, being simultaneously considered as a poverty alleviation programme, a social safety net, a programme of investment, and a wage employment programme.

Suggestions to improve implementation

Beneficiaries

- Increasing awareness among beneficiaries of rights and entitlements under the Scheme and also roles and responsibilities of implementing agencies.
- Incorporating tribal sensitivity into the systems and processes of the scheme.
- Arresting worksite politics at the time of allocation of work and wage payment.
- Allowing rural communities benefits from carbon trading.
- Using ‘Process-Influence–Mapping’ as a participatory tool to understand the influence enjoyed by various actors at different stages of the scheme.
- Seeking greater participation of beneficiaries in translation of the Scheme.

Wages and Wage Payment

- Reviewing the schedule of rates for wage payment, based on gender-sensitive concerns and geographic factors.
- Replicating a clearly defined wage payment cycle, as instituted in Andhra Pradesh, with wages disbursed through post offices within 15 days.
- Introducing mobile banking to prevent costs of traveling to and from banks.
- Introducing the ‘mate’ system of work measurement to increase worker productivity.

Works

- Expanding the scale of works so that 100 days of employment can be provided in the long run to all job seekers.
- Expanding the list of works to be undertaken on the recommendation of the workers.
- Issuing dated receipts following application for work to ensure that work is provided within 15 days.
- Focusing greater attention on the quality of assets created.
- Identifying new players responsible for asset maintenance and conservation.

Social Audit

- Involving of civil society groups and NGOs in social audit to ensure objectivity.
- Videography of social audits as a record for the future.
- Devising central rules (along the lines of an election act) for the accountability of implementing agencies.

Personnel

- Making provisions to ensure that there is no staff shortage in implementation of Scheme.
- Providing compulsory induction training for technical staff.
- Institutionalizing incentive mechanisms for staff awards for successes and penalties for failures.