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Development

Mahatma Gandhi NREGA: Is there a system for tracking outcomes?

Comments based on ICRG Implementation Experience

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Submitted By:



IPE GLOBAL LIMITED

IPE Global House,
B - 84, Defence Colony,
New Delhi - 110 024, India
www.ipeglobal.com

In association with



Introduction

The paper seeks to examine whether there is a system for tracking the outcomes envisaged by the schemes formulated under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)¹. Towards that end, first step analysis is understanding what those outcomes are that are envisaged under MGNREGA, and whether they are even envisioned at an outcome level or does it stop with output level achievement. For this we first examine the Act, then the Guidelines of the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD), Government of India, who is the custodian of the Act and the Scheme. Having specified the outcomes envisaged under the policy documents, the paper examines if the MIS, that is supposed to track implementation, reports on outcomes.

At the outset, it needs to be clarified that the paper does not enquire into the extent or veracity of benefits to the workers, nor the quality of works executed or the assets created or their impact. It is limited to an enquiry into the policies that govern the understanding of outcomes and methods of reporting on them.

About MGNREGA

To understand the outcomes envisaged under MGNREGA, the objectives of the Act must be understood. The Act makes several statements about its rationale and objectives. The Preamble to the Act situates MGNREGA in a context of unemployment or underemployment in rural areas. Its objective is to provide employment to those who seek it. It also seeks to empower the poor by investing them with rights to demand work, so that they are not at the mercy of discretionary allocations.

Schedule One of the Act has been amended to elaborate upon the objectives originally in the Act. Schedule One states that “The core objectives” of the Scheme shall be the following

- (a) Providing not less than one hundred days of unskilled manual work as a guaranteed employment in a financial year to every household in rural areas as per demand, resulting in creation of productive assets of prescribed quality and durability
- (b) Strengthening the livelihood base of the poor
- (c) Proactively ensuring social inclusion; and
- (d) Strengthening Panchayat Raj institutions”

These core objectives dictate the desired outcome from the ACT.

Envisaged and Desired Outcomes of MGNREGA

Outcomes under MGNREGA are to be seen within its framework of a right-based law. As such they are related first to workers and then to works, because the main body of law, which can only be

¹ Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Act, 2005, Ministry of Rural Development, www.nrega.nic.in

amended by the Parliament, explicitly guarantees a set of entitlements to the workers. Outcomes related to “permissible works” under the Act are described in the Schedule One of the Act.

3.1 Outcomes related to entitlements

The first set of outcomes considered here relate to the entitlements of the workers. The Act, being a rights based law, mandates certain processes that are the triggers of the operations under the Act. These are not just ‘procedural’ details; they are themselves non-negotiable assertions of rights. As such, the conventional framework of input-output-outcomes sequence is not suitable to understanding outcomes under MGNREGA. Mandated processes are not a means to an end (outcomes); they are outcomes of the exercise of rights invested in the workers by the Act and are perceived as ‘empowering’. Here, the process and outcomes are integrally one and are expressive of entitlements.

3.1.1 Workers’ entitlements as outcomes

The outcomes envisaged as a result of the exercise of the Workers’ Rights include

- Registration
- Job cards
- Application for work
- Dated receipt that acknowledges the work application and initiates the guarantee
- Quantum of work for the period and duration asked for
- Wages paid within stipulated time
- Unemployment allowance
- Compensation
- Worksite facilities

3.1.2. Tracking outcomes related to workers’ entitlements

The MIS tracks the number of workers getting employment, the duration of employment, the wages paid and the time taken to pay them. The benefits are recorded in the ‘Job Card’ that bears details of employment over a period, indicating the dates and days worked. The link opens into works on which the employment was provided and the Muster Rolls bearing the details of the amount of wages earned, the per day wage rate, the amount credited into the bank account, the date when credited and the time between the wage earned and the wage credited in the bank account. This data is available for every individual who has worked on the programme from the first-time s/he worked. This is impressive transparency and keeps a continuous track of employment provided and the wages earned on it. The MIS, thus, tracks work allocations. MIS R. 7.1.2 is a statement of ‘Outlays and Outcomes’, which shows how the budget allocations translate into employment generation in terms of numbers employed, days employed and the wage rate, and the works taken up.

Tracking requires systems that link different aspects of information cohesively to show how funds and benefits flow. In the reports available on the MIS, the data does drill down to disaggregated levels – from the state aggregate to the gram panchayat. But this data on benefits does not get linked with the persons who are recipients of the benefits. This would have been possible if the data could be linked with the Job Card level, if, for example, at the gram panchayat level, the MIS reports on outlays and outcomes were to get linked with the Job Card reports. That would be true tracking, as outcomes

expressed as numbers are connected to and visible in terms of persons and works, so that the exact beneficiaries are known. To sum up, reports on outcomes reveal the number of physical units into which funds have been spent; however, information on what the money is spent on and on whom, is not linked with this information. Perhaps MIS R 7.1.2 needs to be linked with Job Cards that tracks the workers' wages over a period and tracks wages received down to the bank account as well as authenticates the work by linking it with work details and Muster Rolls.

Another important aspect to analyse is whether the MIS also tracks the workers' entitlements, starting with the right to demand work. The Job Card which is the primary unit of MIS data indicates the month and date from which employment is requested, period and work on which employment is offered, period and work on which employment is given under which is a column 'Month & Date from which employment requested' (requested again rather than given). All the dates, periods of employment match each other, so obviously there is no question of unemployment allowance. The equally obvious reason is that there is no process of demand triggering employment. The trigger to employment is the opening of work. As a result, there is no data on unemployment allowance. MIS report R.3.1 'Work Demand Pattern During the Financial year: 2018-2019 shows some data as 'demand'. The aggregate number of demand data drills down to the village panchayat. However, at this level, it does not get linked with the Job Cards' demand data, though presumably it must be an aggregate of the employment request data in the job cards. Even if it did, it might not help track the actual sequence of demand and employment, because as stated before, demand and allocation dates are identical. Similarly, MIS Report R 5.1.1 gives data under three columns that differentiate between employment demanded, employment offered and employment provided with differing numbers in each column to suggest a process where there are different stages of employment being tracked from demand to response to demand. The numbers drill down to the gram panchayat levels. However, these are just numbers. They are not linked to any documents mandated under the Act that record the exercise of workers' rights, and not the work applications, no dated receipts, not even to the Job Cards where there is corresponding data on employment demanded and provided (even if here, they are identical). Therefore, recording and tracking data of 'demand' on the MIS is not an indicator of an entitlement such as a worker's exercise of her right.

3.2 Outcomes related to productivity

The second set of outcomes relate to productivity. Productivity is an outcome of the work done by the workers and is enumerated as benefits generated by the work. Schedule One of MGNREGA details the list of permissible works under four categories. The list of works mixes an 'outcome' with a structure (output) or an activity (input). A few examples of this are below

- Water conservation and water harvesting structures to augment and improve groundwater like underground dykes, earthen dams;
- Afforestation through tree plantation and horticulture etc.;
- Improving productivity of lands through land development etc.;
- Improving livelihoods through horticulture, sericulture, plantation and farm forestry;
- Development of fallow or waste lands is also an outcome;
- Works for promoting agricultural productivity;
- Providing all-weather rural road connectivity;
- Works for improving disaster preparedness;
- Rural sanitation related works; and
- Maintenance of public works.

Certain works are outputs - the outcomes not being part of the list. Some examples include

- (i) Unskilled wage component in house construction is an input
- (ii) Creating infrastructure for various economic activities
- (iii) Construction of food grain storage, playgrounds

Thus, the design of the law is quite explicit about outputs and outcomes.

3.2.1 Implementation policies to ensure work outcomes

Implementation policies to ensure that the works are of required standards to effect desired outcomes include an array of strategies.

Systems and processes measuring outcomes

The Annual Master Circular has detailed statements about the outcomes of MGNREGS works and how outcomes are to be measured. The concerned sections of the Annual Master Circular in this regard are reproduced below

“7.12.2. Productivity/Outcome: The productivity/outcome should be strictly monitored by measuring the ‘expected’ outcomes, before any work is placed before the Gram Sabha/Ward Sabha for approval and should not be closed without measuring the actual outcomes. States will prepare a module to guide the functionaries on the expected outcomes for each type of work and train the functionaries in using it. Typical units of expected economy, durability and outcome/productivity of Mahatma Gandhi NREGA asset is as given below for reference: (GP/Block/District/State) wise yearly report”. This is followed by a table that clearly stipulates outcomes of each type of work. This is reproduced in Annexure 1 offers a glimpse at the productivity outcomes envisaged in the Annual Master Circular of the MoRD, 2019. This has been a recurring feature of all Master Circulars each year.

Section 7.12.4. lays down a rigorous method of measurement of works. It states; “Measurement of works: All measurements of work done, shall be recorded in the measurement book (MB) duly authorized and issued by competent authority. The relevant entries are to be entered in NREGA Soft to determine the valuation of work done. All payments shall be made only after measuring the value of work done; and after check measurement by the Junior Engineer/authorized technical personnel, in the manner as prescribed by the State Government. The measurement entries in MB will be recorded by the JE/TA/Authorized technical personnel at the GP/Block level and check measurement be done by the AE/Authorized personal.

A Case Record/ Work File should be initiated by the Junior Engineer before start of the work.” This is only a brief glimpse of the detailed instructions on Outcomes of works and their measurements.

Creating technical capacity

An elaborate system of building technical capacity is envisaged for ensuring the quality of works. This includes the following

- Engaging staff dedicated to technical work: right from barefoot engineers to highly qualified engineers.
- Many technical manuals for delineating processes and standards
- Training programmes for planning and executing and evaluating works

- Documents for recording each work.

Convergence

MGNREGS policies recognise, from the beginning of the Act, the importance and value of convergence. Guidelines for convergence have been issued repeatedly. Convergence has acquired the status of a legal mandate as it has been incorporated in Schedule One of the Act. Para 6 of the Schedule states:

“The State Government shall take concrete steps to achieve effective implementation of inter-departmental convergence till last mile implementation level of the works under the Scheme with other Government Schemes/programmes so as to improve the quality and productivity of assets, and bring in synergy to holistically address the multiple dimensions of poverty in a sustainable manner.” The strategy of convergence is motivated by the objective of productivity, durability quality of works and nudging workers towards various exit paths from poverty. These also define the outcomes of works envisaged. Elaborate convergence guidelines and detailed data is available on different convergence initiatives, such as Jal Shakti Abhiyan.

3.2.2 Tracking outcomes of works

The Annual Master Circular states that NREGA soft suite contains ‘Anything, Everything, Anytime’ information and that ‘MIS reports generation for crores of assets’ are available. We examine here the MIS reports for works to elicit information on outcomes

MIS reports related to works undertaken are in the Section R.6. The MIS records the physical completion of each work. R. 6.7 is a report on Assets created and is a useful report. It records works state wise, category wise. The data drills down to the Asset register. The asset register, in turn, is linked with the Muster Rolls that is linked with the Job Card of each worker as well as with the worker’s bank account in which the wages are credited. Thus, R.6.7 disaggregates the numbers into specific works at village level, situates each number as an identifiable work performed by an identifiable job card holder and recorded in a muster roll. This makes the aggregate numbers transparent but the question on whether this is outcome tracking remains. The outcomes for different categories of work is enumerated in the Guidelines (Annexure 1).

Each work has specified outcomes. This data is not captured in the MIS. Possibly it is in the Measurement Book (MB) referenced in the Muster Roll, but the MB is not tagged with the MIS. There, is in fact, no report of the kind that the AMC mandates that is available on the MIS.

A new feature of the MIS is the geo-tagging of assets. R24.4 Asset Generation Status against Total Work Completed. Asset and work here are not substantively different. It is just that the work data is re-entered on geo tag with a new identity. Further, the geo tagged assets do not link up with any data on any work. The geo tag tells us where a MGNREGA work is. It does not tell us its outcomes. Initially, the Geo-tag was one time. It is not dynamically modified according to the changes that occur in the work-the wear and tear or other physical changes. Since 2018, the geo tag is now required at three stages – at the site selection; while the asset is under construction and once the asset is completed. This geo tag does not help track outcomes of the work.

Examples from works listed in Schedule One illustrate the contrast between output and outcome. Water conservation leading to recharging ground water is the outcome. Water harvesting structures like check dams and underground dykes are outputs. According to the Annual Master Circular, water harvesting structures need to have a durability of 15-25 years (if ‘pukka’) and 5-10 years for a ‘kuchcha

‘work. Its ‘outcome/productivity is to be measured in terms of ‘number of wells recharged, area brought under irrigation/increase in production and in ground water table. ‘Afforestation’ is to yield ‘benefit per tree till its total age i.e. 20-25 years’ measured in Rupees. That is true for all other outcomes mentioned both in Schedule One and the Annual Master Circular. (Annexure 1). But such outcomes are neither measured, nor monitored and tracked. Besides, such a long trajectory of time is not factored either in the design of the work, nor any tracking process.

Table 1: Expected outcome from different kinds of MGNREGS works			
CRW - MGNREGA Works	Economy	Durability	Outcome/Productivity
Water conservation and water harvesting works	Cost of construction per unit of storage of water/unit area benefitted	Pucca work: 15-25 years Kaccha work: 5-10 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of wells recharged • Area brought under irrigation • Cropping intensity • Increase in production • Increase in groundwater level/table • Change in land use
Afforestation and tree plantation	Cost per unit area/plant till the tree grows (3-4 years)	Afforestation trees, 15-25 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic (fodder, fruits etc.) • Plant survival rate Carbon content
Irrigation canal including micro and minor irrigation	Cost per unit area brought under irrigation	15-25 years	Increase in productivity in a year by taking number of crops in a year
a) Irrigation facility/horticulture/plantation b) Farm bunding/land development	Cost per unit area brought under irrigation/plant till its productive/unit area developed	a) 15 -25 years b) 10-15 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Area covered under irrigation/plantation/land development • Increase in productivity in a year by taking number of crops in a year
c) Renovation/repair of traditional water bodies including de-silting of tanks	Cost per unit increase in storage capacity of water/silt removed	10-15 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in storage capacity of water • Increase in groundwater table
Flood control and flood protection works	Cost per unit area developed	10-15 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Area developed Increase in productivity per annum
Land development	Cost per unit area developed	15-25 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Area developed Increase in productivity /annum

Table 2: indicator wise data source								
MGNREGA Works	Economy	Durability	Outcome/Productivity		Source		Frequency (in a year)	Time of collection
					Format	Location		
Water conservation and water harvesting works	Cost of construction per unit of storage of water/unit area benefitted	Pucca work: 15-25 years Kaccha work: 5-10 years	Number of wells recharged		Format 1	2 nearest wells in in the command area of CRW	Thrice	Pre-monsoon, post monsoon, Mid-year
			Area brought under irrigation		Format 2, DPR and ICRG-MIS	In the command area of CRW	Twice	Pre-monsoon, post monsoon, Mid-year
			Cropping intensity		Format 2	All plots in the command area	Once	July
			Increase in production		Format 2	All plots in the command area	Once	July
			Increase in groundwater table		Format 1	Covered under indicator 1.	Thrice	Pre-monsoon, post monsoon, Mid-year
Afforestation and tree plantation	Cost per unit area/plant till the tree grows (3-4 years)	Afforestation trees, 15-25 years	Economic (fodder, fruits etc.)	Kind of plants Number of each kind	Format 1	To estimate from plants data	Once	August
			Plant survival rate		Format 1			

			Carbon sequestration	Area of plantation Average age of plant	Calculation for primary data from Format 1			
Irrigation canal including micro and minor irrigation	Cost per unit area brought under irrigation	15-25 years	9. Increase in productivity in a year by taking number of crops in a year		Format 2	Captured in point 4		
c) Irrigation facility/horticulture/plantation d) Farm bunding/land development	Cost per unit area brought under irrigation/plant till it is productive/unit area developed	a.15 -25 years	Area covered under irrigation/plantation/land development		Format 1, DPR and ICRG-MIS	Captured in 2, 3 6-8		
		b.10-15 years	Increase in productivity in a year by taking number of crops in a year		Format 2	Capture in 4		
Renovation/repair of traditional water bodies including desilting of tanks	Cost per unit increase in storage capacity of water/silt removed	10-15 years	Increase in storage capacity of water		Format 1 and DPR	Captured in 1		
			Increase in groundwater table		Format 1	Captured in 1		
Flood control and flood protection works	Cost per unit area developed	10-15 years	Area developed		Format 1, DPR and ICRG-MIS			
			Increase in productivity per annum		Format 1	Captured in Format 4		
Land development	Cost per unit area developed	15-25 years	Area developed					
			Increase in productivity per annum			Captured in Format 4		

The Monitoring and evaluation framework created under the ICRG programme, detailed out in the tables above could help bridge this gap between output and outcome. This enables data collation, compilation and analysis right from the time of DPR preparation, while keeping the focus on employment generation and demand rates.

4. Challenges to outcome based works

There are challenges to outcome based works that are intrinsic to the design of the Act. The Act places no obligation on the worker to complete the work he is engaged in. Workers can drop in and drop out which is in keeping with their right to choose to work when they want to work. Workers are paid a flat wage rate notwithstanding policies of tasks outcomes based on schedule of rates as basis of wages. These factors do not support a steady commitment to outcomes.

Tracking outcomes is also challenging because of factors extrinsic to the Act and the schemes under the Act. For example, water conservation or recharging of ground water would depend not only on MGNREGS works but an ecosystem of water use.

The gap between the intent to ensure that works taken up result in outcomes and the actual implementation and monitoring systems in practice makes it difficult to track outcomes. Outcomes are largely reported on select sample basis, and that too not over a time period, not the time trajectory nor the scale suggested in the policy guidelines.

References

1. Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, (MGNREGA), 2005
2. Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, MGNREGA, Annual Master Circular, 2019
3. www.nrega.nic.in, official website of MGNREGA

Annexure 1. Table on Productivity Outcomes given in the annual master circular, MoRD, 2019

S. No.	Mahatma Gandhi NREGA works	Economy	Durability	Outcome/ Productivity
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
1	Water conservation & water harvesting works	Cost of construction per unit of storage of water/ unit area benefited	i) Pucca work 15 -25 years ii)Kachha work-5-10 years	Number of wells recharged/ area brought under irrigation/increase in production and increase in Ground Water Table (in mm)
2	Afforestation & tree plantation	Cost per unit area/ plant till the tree is grown up (3-4 years)	Afforestation trees, 15-25 years	Benefit per tree till its total age i.e. 20-25 years (in Rs.)
3	Irrigation canal including micro and minor irrigation	Cost per unit area brought under irrigation	15-25 years	Increase in productivity in a year by taking number of crops in a year (in Quintal) Area covered under irrigation (Ha)
4	a) Irrigation facility excluding canal/ horticulture/ plantation/ b)farm bunding/ land development	Cost per unit area brought under irrigation/ plant till it is productive/ unit area developed	a)15-25 years b)10-15 years	Area covered under irrigation (in Ha.)/ plantation/ land development(in Ha.)/ Increase in productivity in a year by taking number of crops in a year (in %)
5	Renovation/ repair of traditional water bodies including desilting of tanks	Cost per unit increase in storage capacity of water/ cum silt removed	10-15 years	increase in storage capacity of water (in cum) and Ground Water Table (in mm)

6	Land development	Cost per unit area developed	15-25 years	Area developed (in Ha.) / / increase in productivity per annum (in %)
7	Flood control & Flood protection works	Cost per unit area developed	10-15 years	Area developed (in Ha.) / / increase in productivity per annum (in %)
8	Rural connectivity (a) CC roads (b) Gravel/ WBM road	Cost per Km. length of connectivity	(a)10-15 years (b) 5-10 years	Number of villagers & villages benefitted Total length of road (in km.)
9	Building works	Cost per unit covered area	45-60 years	Number of villagers & villages benefitted (In numbers)
10	Agriculture related works (bio-fertilizers)	Cost per unit capacity of producing manure at a time	5-10 years	Capacity to produce compost/manure per annum (in kg)
11	Livestock related works (shelters)	Cost per unit covered area	10-15 years	Number of beneficiary provided with poultry/goat/cattle (In number)
12	Fishery related works	Cost per unit fish produced per annum	5-10 years	Fish produced per annum (In quintal)
13	Works in coastal areas a) fish drying yards b) belt vegetation	a) Cost per unit covered area b) Cost per unit covered area/ number of plants	a)10-15 years b)15-25 years	a) Quintals of fish can be dried per annum (In quintal) b) Area benefitted (in Ha.)
14	Rural drinking water related works such as soak pits, recharge pits	Cost per unit cum water recharged/ earth excavated	3-5 years	Area benefitted/ quantity of water recharged

15	Rural sanitation related works	Cost per unit toilet/ solid liquid waste management	10-15 years	Households benefitted (In numbers)
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