

Millennium Development Goals through MNREGA

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Abstract

Almost all discussion on development issues all over the world are now centered around the MDG's. It is most ambitious dream put forward by the United Nations Organization a decade ago. Since its introduction in September 2000, all the 192 countries which agreed to work hard to materialize all the MDG's by 2015, began to introduced different types of development programmes. India too followed suit. India is on course to move forward to Inclusive Growth and achieve the targets of millennium development goals which has accelerated its pace of poverty alleviation strategies by mobilizing greater budget resources, creating time frames for quantifiable deliverables, linking, with global frameworks of action. Major strides have been made under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA), is landmark legislation in India, which was enacted after a successful struggle for employment guarantee legislation. It has a direct connection with the efforts to accelerate the achievement of the MDGs and Inclusive Growth in India; efforts are on towards total eradication of poverty by 2015. MNREGA, with its Rights Based framework, is a paradigm shift from all other development programmes that were traditionally supply led. Centrally funded entirely through domestic resources, the implementation of this law is supported by a budget based on demand for employment. Apart from providing livelihood to millions of households, over the last six years, the Act has become a significant vehicle for strengthening grass root level democratic processes and regeneration of India's depleting natural resource base.

The present study is an attempt to evaluate the impact MNREGA on the welfare of poor women in rural India. Moreover, it also deals with the analysis of the performance of MNREGA in poverty alleviation and generating employment opportunities to the rural poor. MNREGA has also been able to contribute to ecological restoration through its design.

Hence, the present study discusses seriously the impact of MNREGA on the employment scenario, ecological regeneration and poverty in rural areas; which are the integral parts of MDG's. The study is focused on the women workers of MNREGA. Not only that the paper discussed the major visible and invisible impacts of MNREGA on poor women in rural areas.

Keywords: MNREGA; MDG; Women empowerment; Employment generation

Introduction

Lack of satisfaction at the pace of human development in the 1980s inspired the United Nations to convene a series of global conferences in the 1990s to identify the problems involved and to commit the world community to addressing those problems [1]. These World Summits set a series of goals, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which has become the anchor around which international agencies have since tried to organize their developmental activities. The ongoing discussion on the modus operandi and the feasibility of achieving these targets has focused largely on the lack of resources. While resources are no doubt important, it is equally important to adopt the right kind of policies and institutions. This paper argues that a well-designed employment policy will go a long way towards promoting some human development outcomes linked to the Inclusive growth and MDGs.

Despite high overall economic growth rates in many Asian countries like India in the past 2 decades, many policy makers in Asia and in international organizations have become increasingly concerned that this growth has been too uneven and often accompanied by rising income inequality. In addition, it appeared that disadvantaged groups, including members of ethnic minorities, people in remote rural locations, and women, have not benefited proportionately from this rapid economic growth. The possibility that growth might leave poor and disadvantaged people behind was highly relevant in political debates in India during the 2004 national election. The new government targeted inclusive growth as a strategy to overcome these inequalities and disadvantages. Indeed, India's Eleventh Five-Year Plan, 2007–2012 was entitled "Inclusive Growth" and included concrete strategies to promote the well-being and participation of disadvantaged groups (Government of India 2006) [2].

India is on course to move forward to Inclusive Growth and achieve the targets of millennium development goals which has accelerated its pace of poverty alleviation strategies by mobilizing greater budget resources, creating time frames for quantifiable deliverables, linking, with global frameworks of action. Major strides have been made under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), is landmark legislation in India, which was enacted after a successful struggle for employment guarantee legislation. It has a direct connection with the efforts to accelerate the achievement of the MDGs and Inclusive Growth in India; efforts are on towards total eradication of poverty by 2015 [3]. NREGA, with its Rights Based framework, is a paradigm shift from all other development programmes that were traditionally supply led. Centrally funded entirely through domestic resources, the implementation of this law is supported by a budget based on demand for employment. Apart from providing livelihood to millions of households, over the last six years, the Act has become a significant vehicle for strengthening grass root level democratic processes and regeneration of India's depleting natural resource base.

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Received August 06, 2015; Accepted August 24, 2015; Published September 04, 2015

Citation: Gupta PK (2015) Millennium Development Goals through MNREGA. J Pol Sci Pub Aff S1: 002. doi:10.4172/2332-0761.S1-002

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As part of poverty reduction efforts, India's Ministry of Rural Development emphasized that NREGA supports the achievement of three MDGs:

Goal 1 – Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger;

Goal 3 – Promote gender equality and empower women and;

Goal 7 – Ensure environmental sustainability.

The United Nations Global Assessment Report (GAR), praised MNREGA as an endorsed employment programmes and cash transfer to marginalized section of the society as important strategies that have the potential to reduce disaster risk and achieve the Millennium Development Goals and other nations to emulate the programme that has helped empower millions of marginalized [4].

Eradication of Hunger and Poverty through Employment Generation

The first Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of, Eradicating Extreme Poverty and Hunger aims at reducing the proportion of people whose income is less than \$1 between 1990 and 2015 by half. These include, reducing the headcount ratio of consumption poverty by 10 percentage points, raises real wage rate of unskilled workers by 20 percent and creating 70 million new work opportunities. According to the National Sample Survey Organization, 300 million Indians live in extreme poverty. The estimates of Tendulkar Committee show that, between 1993-94 and 2003-04 aggregate poverty head count ratio of India has fallen only marginally from 45.3 percent to 37.2 percent. Similarly, the rural poverty has declined from 50.1 percent to 41.8 percent only and urban poverty has declined from 31.8 percent to 25.7 [5]. These numbers convey that, out of every hundred rural people around 42 people are still unable to get a decent livelihood. There has been a "significant dent" in poverty in rural areas by increasing employment opportunities and proper wage disbursement through implementation of MNREGA which has increased earning of rural households resulting in an increase in their purchasing power. During the first year of implementation (2006-07) in 200 districts, 2.10 crore households were employed and 90.5 crore person days were generated. In 2007-08, 3.39 crore households were provided employment and 143.59 crore person days were generated in 330 districts. In 2008-09, 4.51 crore households have been provided employment and 216.32 crore person days have been generated across the country. In 2009-2010, 5.29 crore and in 2010-2011 come down to 5.49 crore households have been provided employment [6].

Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women

The Employment Guarantee Act can also help to empower women, by giving them independent income-earning opportunities. MNREGA provides that 30 percent of the employment provided, should be given to women. Implementation of MNREGA has contributed to very high levels of women empowerment, particularly in the following aspects that as the work is organized by women's groups, the gender perspective gets built in automatically, for the first time equal wages are really paid and this has boosted the earnings of women. As the bank deposits are increasing, the intra-household status of the woman has also been improving commensurately as she controls substantial cash resources and withdrawal can be only on her decision.

Women's empowerment was not among the original intentions of the MNREGA, and is not among its main objectives. However, provisions like priority for women in the ratio of one-third of total workers (Schedule II (6)); equal wages for men and women (Schedule II

(34)); and crèches for the children of women workers (Schedule II (28)) were made in the Act, [7] with the view of ensuring that rural women benefit from the scheme in a certain manner. Provisions like work within a radius of five kilometers from the house, absence of supervisor and contractor, and flexibility in terms of choosing period and months of employment were not made exclusively for women, but have, nevertheless, been conducive for rural women. Nevertheless, women have availed of the paid employment opportunity under MGNREGS in large numbers. Interestingly, this occurred largely spontaneously. Women's participation under MGNREGS, measured in person-days, also exceeded their participation in erstwhile employment generation programmes like the Sampoorna Gramin Rojgar Yojana (SGRY) and the Maharashtra Employment Guarantee Scheme (MEGS). There are wide variations across states, within states and across districts in the share of work days for women. At the national level the participation of women has increased significantly from 40.65 percent in 2006-07 to 47.72 percent in 2010.

The state level like Kerala (90.39) followed by Tamilnadu (82.59), Pondicherry (82), Rajasthan (68.34) is show high percentage of women participation with lowest participation of states like Assam (26.4), Bihar (28.5), Arunachal Pradesh (33), Punjab (33), West Bengal (33), Mizoram (33) during financial year 2010-11. Participation of women has increased significantly. In several states, participation of women has surpassed men's participation. In states of Kerala, the social organization like Kudumbashree is playing a critical role in the women participation which account for more than 90 percent of women and it became a "Women Program". In areas where rural women are traditionally homebound, such as Uttar Pradesh, the Employment Guarantee Act has an even more significant role to play as a means of empowering rural women and curbing gender discrimination. Thus, it shows that the underprivileged majority is not completely marginalized in this elitist political system. With adequate political organisation, their demands can prevail over privileged interests.

MNREGS: A Tool for Ecological Regeneration

An ecological act is one of the best features of the MNREGA as it designates a balance between human action and natural resources creating a sustainable economic security through green jobs and ensures the Millennium Development Goal of environmental sustainability. The MGNREGS must be strengthened and revamped to provide not just wages for work done but work that will make ecological regeneration possible. MNREGA has also been able to contribute to ecological restoration through its design. The activities under the MGNREGS are largely linked to water, soil and land, which are the key natural resources determining agricultural and livestock production. They can have a positive or negative influence on these natural resources, affecting their ability to provide environmental services. Environmental services include recharging groundwater, increasing rain water percolation, conserving water, increasing the area irrigated, reducing soil erosion, increasing soil fertility, conserving biodiversity, reclaiming degraded crop and grazing lands, enhancing the supply of leaf manure, fuel wood and non-wood forest produce, and carbon sequestration. The goal of MGNREG Activities has to be conserving natural resources and enhancing environmental services to sustain food and livestock production, increasing the supply of fresh water for drinking, and increasing grass and forest product production. The benefits accruing from the activities implemented under the MNREGA can be described as "services provided". The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MEA 2005) considers humans an integral component of the natural ecosystem unlike classical approaches, which differentiate

humans as non-natural. The approach also addresses the sustainability of resources and livelihoods by considering human wellbeing a parallel theme to the functioning of the natural ecosystem. Out of nine preferred areas of works under the MNREGA, seven focuses on water and soil conservation. The attention of the scheme is on the following works in their order of priority:

- Water conservation and water harvesting
- Drought proofing (including afforestation and tree plantation)
- Irrigation canals (including micro and minor irrigation works)
- Provision of irrigation facility to land owned by households belonging to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes or to land of beneficiaries of land reforms or that of the beneficiaries under the Indira Awas Yojana of the Government of India
- Renovation of traditional water bodies (including desalting of tanks)
- Land development
- Flood control and protection works (including drainage in water-logged areas)
- Rural connectivity to provide all-weather access

Any other work, which may be notified by the central government in consultation with the state government. The priorities of the work to be undertaken include watershed management and water conservation, drought-proofing, flood protection, land development, minor irrigation and rural connectivity. Such work is important to strengthen the ecological foundations of sustainable agriculture. The MNREGA is probably the world's largest ecological security programme. With the key proviso that investments in an employment guarantee programme must be in productive, eco-friendly assets. This would ensure that the resultant growth dynamic is both sustainable (by regenerating the environment) and non-inflationary (by easing the agrarian constraint) [7].

The Union Ministry of Rural Development has taken steps to achieve convergence of brain and brawn, by enlisting the support of Ministries and Departments. Such convergence of expertise for sustainable development will help to enhance farm productivity without causing ecological harm. There is also a need to raise the self-

esteem of MNREGA workers, making them feel proud of the fact that they are engaged in checking eco-destruction. Due recognition could be given to the MNREGA groups that have done outstanding work in water harvesting, watershed development and soil healthcare with "Environment Saviour Awards". This will help spread awareness of the critical role MNREGA workers play.

Conclusion

MGNEGS is India's policy and programme commitment to achieve Millennium Development Goals and efforts are on towards total eradication of poverty by 2015. UNDP's network links and coordinates global and national efforts to reach these Goals. The year 2009, marked crossing of half-way point of MDGs, Yet crucial development policies and finance are not systematically aligned with MDGs. As part of its poverty, reduction mandates UNDP is working to bridge this gap. UNDP is supporting a unique low cost ATM pilot initiative for NREGA implementation. In addition, the Ministry of Rural Development and UNDP are in the process of piloting an IT initiative to link 200 District Collectors virtually under the UN Country Team Solution Exchange Model. UNDP is in the process of commissioning up to 20 additional TV spots that document best practice implementation on MNREGA from across the states an five major research institutions were established to undertake a review of MNREGA implementation and compliance.

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This article was originally published in a special issue, **Political Science and Government Systems** handled by Editor. Dr. James A. Mitchell, California State University, USA