



The Meeting Point

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The smallest good deed is better than the grandest good intension

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Round Table Conference on the Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Act/Scheme

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Venue: Asha Nivas, Chennai

Foreword/Background:

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA) is the first and foremost Act in India that has placed the social and economic rights of the people in the legal framework. The MNREGA came in to existence in response to the people's movement and the much felt needs of the rural masses. Naturally, it has assured employment opportunities for the poor, marginalized and below poverty line families – at least for 100 days in a year with a minimum legal wages.

Introduction of the MNREGA has assured employment guarantee to the rural poor and enhanced their purchasing power. It is important for women for it assures equal wages to both men and women. It has prevented family migration at the grassroots level by guaranteeing employment opportunities at their own places. With the implementation of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MNREGS) works, surface water bodies, irrigation canals and feeder canals have been desilted and their storing capacity has been restored or even raised. As a result, the ground water table in the vicinity of the tanks and ponds has also risen. Since the MNREGS remains lifeline for the rural poor and the workers belong to the unorganized work sectors, they all welcome the scheme.

However, the success of the MNREGS is fragile due to certain flaws in the implementation mechanism. Unfortunately, the legal wages of this scheme Rs.80 is not paid to the workers on the pretext that they do not fulfill the tasks of digging, dredging and the like assigned to them by the officials. People say that the nature of soil is not uniform all over and it is hard or loose or rocky accordingly. The wages has been legally increased from Rs.80 to Rs.100 from 2010 onwards. However, Rs.100 is paid to the workers in many of the panchayats. So, the workers fight for the legal wages prescribed by the MNREGA in all the panchayats in Tamil Nadu.

The main complaint posed against the MNREGS is that it has made agricultural practices very difficult by engaging the entire local labour force in the MNREGS works and by increasing labour cost. The agricultural labourers do not go to farm work, unless they are paid Rs.80 as wages. As a result, there is a setback in the farm works and there is an antagonism between the landowning farmers and landless labourers in the rural areas. Anyway, it is a good sign that the MNREGS has enhanced the bargaining capacity of the downtrodden masses.

The major thrust of the MNREGS is on strengthening the natural resources in order to make the agricultural sector, which generates employment opportunities for millions of people in the rural India, sustainable. However, farming has become very expensive with the increase in the price of fertilizers, pesticides, seeds and the like and it makes the agricultural practices dwindling. Destruction of surface water bodies, catchments and irrigation canals - in the name of development - cause water scarcity and make farming very difficult. Consequently, the entire

Tamil Nadu state remains drought prone for the much part of a year. This situation forces the farmers to sell their lands and transforms the cultivable lands into breeding grounds for concrete buildings and industries. Making use of this opportunity, the multinational companies and the corporate sectors procure productive lands and establish their industries on them.

The irony here is that on the one hand the natural resources have been fortified for sustaining the agricultural practices with the implementation of MNREGS and on the other, the agricultural practices are increasingly dwindling. It sounds like much ado about nothing. Therefore, an integrated policy is needed to bridge the outcome of the MNREGS works and the rural economic development. Any scheme must reflect the objectives of the democratic governance and the integrated policy of the government. So, the government should see to it that the implementation of the MNREGS ensures effective response to the articulated demands of the small and marginalized farmers and, the agricultural labourers across the country.

Drought does not only create shortage of food grains but also nullify the purchasing power of the poor people. So, suitable mechanism must be created to help the people manage drought and its adverse impact. Expanding the MNREGS coverage by implementing the programme in private farmers' lands is also such a mechanism and if it is done, the drought created by the failure of monsoon can be easily managed by the drought-hit people.

Study of the Forum for Livelihood Rights (FLR):

Eleven NGOs, Association of Rural Education and Development Service (AREDS), AINA Trust, Anbu Trust, Dr. Ambedkhar Cultural Academy (DACA), Development Education for Workers DEW, Janodayam, Jeevajothe, MIDS, Udayam, Village Education for Liberation Society (VELS) and Women Integrated Development Agency (WIDA) have come together and formed a network called **Forum for Livelihood Rights (FLR)** and have been collectively functioning and lobbying on the issues affecting the grassroots people since 2000. This network undertook a research on the socio-economic impact of MNREGS in fifteen districts of Tamil Nadu through field visits, interview with the elected representatives of panchayats and interaction with the NREGS beneficiaries.

The main findings of the study:

- Poor or inadequate awareness about the MNREGA – about the scheme, Act, technicalities and the benefits - prevails among the rural people
- Against 55% of the overall rural population in Tamil Nadu, less than 30% has been registered under the scheme.
- According to the data available with the www.nregs.nic.in, less than 1% of the below poverty line families have been registered for employment under the scheme.
- Presently, the legal minimum wages of the MNREGA is Rs.100. However, Rs.100 is not paid almost in all the panchayats.
- Family migration in search of livelihood is partially reduced due to the implementation of the MNREGS. Despite, interstate and intra state migration of men still continues.
- Compared with men, women's participation is notably high in Tamil Nadu. Even house wives and the educated unemployed women also sought employment under the scheme.
- Participation of Physically challenged persons is very low in the state. Only 15% of the physically challenged persons, who have obtained job cards, were given employment opportunity.
- Delay in the payment of wages is reported from all districts and no penalty or compensatory wages was given for the delayed payments in any of the districts.
- Working equipments to the workers:
- Work instruments are not provided to the workers by the government. In most of the places, the workers are forced to bring the tools for digging and dredging. People continue demanding work equipments.

- The worksite facilities like drinking water, sheds, child care facility and first aid kits are seldom provided almost at the worksites almost in all the study districts.
- There is a felt need for forming workers' union among the MNREGS workers.
- Social Auditing on the planning, the implementation and the impacts of the MNREGS is must.
- The small and marginal farmers, the dalit famers in particular, demand that their lands must also be developed under the MNREGS.
- There must be coordination between the implementing agency of the MNREGS and the Forest Department for conserving the environment and the livelihood resources.

With these findings, the organizing team of the RTC called on different stakeholders of the MNREGA and invited their critical comments on them, in order to make the lobby document a complementary one. The discussions were held with the following members:

- Secretary of State Rural Development and Panchayat Raj Institution
- State Planning Commission
- Senior Manager for Rural Development, Indian Institute of Technology and Management, Chennai
- Members of State and National Political parties
- Leaders of Trade Unions
- Leaders of Agricultural associations
- Members of the State and the National Employment Guarantee Council

Further, the printed study document on the MNREGS made by the FLR was circulated to all the Members of Legislative Assembly (MLAs) on the 30th of April 2010 in the State Guest House.

The Round Table Conference (RTC) on the MNREGS:

Despite certain anomalies, setbacks, lapses and flaws in the implementation of the MNREGS, it is instrumental in alleviating poverty. Besides guaranteeing employment, it has established gender equality by assuring equal wages for men and women. Above all, it has created and reinforced the natural assets at the grassroots level. It is a milestone in the history of poverty alleviating measures undertaken by the government and it must sustain. Therefore, the FLR organized a state level round table conference on the Impacts of the MNREGS on the life of people, at the state capital of Tamil Nadu on the 30th of April 2010.



Participants:

There was representation of the panchayat presidents, ward members, the MNREGS beneficiaries and social activists from almost all the districts of the state in the RTC. The forum included 32 Panchayat presidents, 37 MNREGA workers, 27 FLR partners organization staff, 12 members from fraternal NGOs in Tamil Nadu, 4 political party representatives, 5 independent social activists, 2 employment guarantee council members, 2 research institutions, one Chennai based funding agency, 2 representatives from thee state government departments, 2 leaders from the state level agricultural associations and 4 university students.



The conference had four sessions on four different topics of the scheme and four panels discussed them.

Mr. Solomon Chelladurai, a member of FLR, briefed on the efforts of FLR in organizing the RTC: “We eleven members play different roles in FLR but with same objective and collective ownership. This RTC is one of such collective efforts of the FLR. The FLR partner organizations made a study on the implementation and the impacts of the MNREGS in their operational areas and collected many information. Then they – negating to be contented with the scholastic speculation - decided to make their findings fruitful to the society and hence, this RTC. The objective of this conference is to make the government perpetuate the scheme as a catalyst to the rural development. The FLR has been involved in different developmental activities in different districts. However, public support is very much essential for its successful functioning.”

Mr. L. A. Samy explained the objective of the RTC: “This is a confluence of the beneficiaries and the benefactors; to say in other words, it is the meeting of the scheme-affected people and the implementers of the scheme. We have gathered here to discuss the pros and cons of the MNREGS for we feel it is our duty to protest the misdeeds on the part of government. Valluvar says that unless the ministers protest the misdemeanors of a king, the kingdom will go astray. Following Valluvar’s path, we have gathered here. We have organized this conference on the 30th of April 2010 because, the assembly is on session and its members are keen on knowing the recommendations of the RTC. Therefore, we must discuss the findings of the study made by the FLR and arrive at recommendations and, circulate them among the members of legislative assembly. We should make this RTC successful so that it would be helpful for the effective implementation of the MNREGS in other states also.”



the recommendations of the RTC.



Ms. Lilly, the Research Coordinator for the FLR, explained the manner the research was undertaken.

Mr. Sagayam, a researcher who compiled the findings into a lobby document, explicated the relevance between the findings of the research and the recommendations made by the elected representatives and the beneficiaries of the MNREGS.

The session on the public awareness on the MNREGS and registering under the scheme:

Ms. Selvin, the director of Udhayam – an NGO – coordinated the session. The panel consisted of Mr. Sadagopan, the state president of Tamil Nadu farmers’ Forum, Ms. Meera Devi, central committee member of Women’s Front and Ms. Aruna, the president of Thokkupatti panchayat, Karur district.

As per the discussion of the panel, it was evident that awareness of the public on the MNREGS is very limited. Mr. Sadagopan regretfully narrated the lackadaisical attitude of the people who work under the scheme. He also regretfully pointed out the non-disbursal of the legal minimum wages but vehemently condemned the work culture of the MNREGS beneficiaries.



The session on the roles and contribution of the government agencies in implementing the scheme:

Mr. K. Chandrasekar, the director of DEW, coordinated the session. The panel consisted of Mr. Lakshmikanth Barathi, retired officer from Indian Administrative Service, Mr. Maniraj, a High Court lawyer and Ms. Gnanasoundari, the president of Mangodu panchayat, Kanniyakumari district.



It was evident from the discussion of the panel that there are no persons appointed to allocate works, monitor the works executed and supervise the worksite occurrences at the government's end. As a result, after finishing the allocated works, the workers had to sit idle at the worksites. Mr. Lakshmikanth Barathi recalled the old Gandhian days and emphasized on the importance of practicing the Gandhian principles.

The session on the legal minimum wages and equal wages:

Mr. Mariyanathan of DACA coordinated the session. The panel consisted of Mr. A. Periyanyagam, the director of Jeevajothi, Ms. R. Geetha of the National Movement of Unorganised Workers, Ms. Christina, the general secretary of Women's Front, Mr. V. santhanakrishnan, the president of Thalavaipattinam panchayat, Thirupur district and Mr. K. Kalaipandi, the president of Perungottur panchayat, Trinelveili district.



The panel unanimously condemned the conservative manner of considering the white collar job is higher than the physical work and paying out a higher salary to the people doing white collar jobs and a meager wages to the people doing physical work. They also welcomed the MNREGA that paved way for equal wages to men and women that too at the grassroots level.

The session on the impact of the MNREGS on poverty, purchasing power, migration and agriculture:

Mr. S. Perumal, the director of VELS, coordinated this session. The panel consisted of Mr. K. Nammalvar of Indian Organic Scientists' Association, Mr. T. Gurusamy, Mr. Sureshkanna from LIES Network and Mr. A. V. Nagaraj, the president of Varanavasi panchayat, Kanjeeपुरam district.



Generally, the agricultural practices last for six months in a year. Naturally, the agricultural labourers will be engaged in farming works during the prime time of agriculture. The outstanding six months remain an ordeal for them. Only during this period, they have to migrate in search of jobs. Therefore, the panel recommended that the MNREGS works must be implemented during non-agricultural period.

Recommendations/Demands:

At the end of four sessions, the recommendations and the demands arrived at by the panels were read out and they were unanimously passed and accepted by the participants:

1. Disseminating awareness about a scheme is very much essential for its success. So, the government should create awareness about the MNREGS among the rural masses. For this, it may utilize the service of the local Non Governmental Organisations and the Self

- Help Groups. The government should undertake a campaign on the MNREGS and a registration drive with the support of the government agency concerned and voluntary organizations.
2. The definition of 'household' is not clear-cut in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA) and so the government should clearly define it. It should see to it that the every single family in a joint family is also benefited.
 3. The government should revoke the three-month dead line for issuing family cards and issue them immediately to the applicant families.
 4. The government should issue some other form of identification to the families that have applied for family cards and enroll them under the MNREGS.
 5. The government should give up measurement based work allocation and ensure the legal minimum wages to the workers. We would like to refer here the same practice adapted by the government of West Bengal.
 6. The government should inform about the work plan to the workers before one month.
 7. Though the works executed under the MNREGS reinforce the natural assets required for agriculture, they are construction works indeed. Therefore, the legal minimum wages Rs.180 prescribed by the Tamil Nadu Legal Minimum Wage Act (item 16, construction or maintenance of road and building operation) must be disbursed to the MNREGS workers.
 8. The delay in the payment of wages for no reason is equal to the denial of wages. Therefore, the wages should be disbursed at once the work is over. Government should take legal action against those officials who unnecessarily cause delay in the payment.
 9. Family migration is reduced due to the implementation of the MNREGS but the migration of men till continues. If the MNREGS wages is raised to Rs.180, as we demand, individual migration also can be stopped.
 10. Women's participation in the MNREGS work is remarkable (80%) in Tamil Nadu compared to other states. Even the educated unemployed women also seek employment under this scheme.
 11. The state government should identify the works apt for the physically challenged people, who have registered their names for job under this scheme, train them and provide them job, ensuring the legal minimum wages.
 12. From the state government's share for the MNREGS, work equipments must be procured. Each panchayat should create an asset of work equipments so that it could make use of them during emergencies like flood, drought etc. besides the MNREGS work.
 13. The 4% of fund earmarked by the Act must be utilized for providing the basic worksite facilities.
 14. Panchayats and Gram Sabhas must be empowered to design the work plan – kind of work, time frame and the like - and execute them.
 15. Any intrusion of the government officials that negates the power of the panchayat and gram sabha must be checked.
 16. As a means of creating village assets and preserving the environment, tree sapling plantation must be promoted. For this, the implementing agency the MNREGS must act in jointly with the Forest Department.
 17. The main complaint posed against the MNREGS is that it has made agricultural practices very difficult by engaging the entire local labour force in the MNREGS works and by increasing labour cost. Indeed, the very objective of the MNREGS is to strengthen the local natural resources in order to help national agriculture flourish. Scarcity of labour is not the outcome of the scheme but the irrelevant and incongruous planning.
 18. Promoting of individual lands under the MNREGS is in practice in Tamil Nadu. So, priority must be given in promoting the lands of individual dalits and women and this activity must be extended to all the districts in Tamil Nadu.
 19. A genuine, free and fair social audit must be carried out with the participation of the entire members of gram sabha in a panchayat.
 20. The role of the local NGOs in preparing the MNREGS annual plan and training the villagers in preparing the annual plan must be ensured.

21. Gram sabha is the right arena for planning the MNREGS works. Therefore, when social audit or gram sabha meeting or special gram sabha meeting is organised, the MNREGS beneficiary participants must be granted one-day wages.
22. Forming trade union is one of the constitutional rights and so this right must be ensured to the MNREGS workers.
23. Besides creating awareness on the MNREGS among the public, the NGOs are supportive in implementing the scheme. Therefore, due recognition must be given to their roles.
24. 66% of the works executed by the local bodies are central and state governments' works. So, the panchayat presidents and the ward members must be paid monthly salary as the Members of Parliament and the Members of Legislative Assembly are being paid.

Demands arose from the participants:

1. The MNREGA defines the MNREGS work as unskilled work. Generally, mental work is valued higher than the physical work. However, physical work also is accomplished with human rationale and experience. So, Ms. Meera Devi condemned defining of the MNREGS work as 'unskilled labour' and she demanded revocation of that term.
2. Ms. Aruna, the President of Thokkupatty Panchayat, Karur District, said that the overseers are supposed to visit the work site, observe the work allocation and inspect the works executed at the end of a man-day. But they fail to do it. So they must be properly instructed to do what they ought to do.
3. Ms. Geetha pointed out that paying out the wages meant for agricultural work to the construction work done under the MNREGS is illegal and she demanded amendment in the MNREGA for paying out the legal minimum wages for construction to the construction works done under the MNREGS. She also said that panchami lands shall be included for work under this scheme.
4. Mr. Nammazhvar suggested that the government should open savings account to the MNREGS job card holders at the local post office.
5. A few panchayat presidents participated in the RTC had a kind of remorse when the findings disclosed the fact of delay in wage payment. However, there was concern over the minimum wage fixed by the state government.

Mr. D. Ravikumar, a Member of Legislative Assembly of Tamil Nadu, participated in the RTC as a chief guest and appreciated the following three specific recommendations mentioned in the lobby document:

- The state government should identify the works apt for the physically challenged people, who have registered their names for job under this scheme, train them and provide them job, ensuring the legal minimum wages.
- Though the works executed under the MNREGS reinforce the natural assets required for agriculture, they are construction works indeed. Therefore, the legal minimum wages Rs.180 prescribed by the Tamil Nadu Legal Minimum Wage Act (item 16, construction or maintenance of road and building operation) must be disbursed to the MNREGS workers.
- The fisher folk constitute 24% of the Tamil Nadu population. They do not know any work other than fishing. As a result, registration of fisher folk under this scheme is very negligible. So the government should undertake a registration drive among the fisher man communities and help them get employment opportunities during non-fishing seasons.



Mr. Ravikumar assured of discussing these focal points in the state assembly before the session ends (the assembly was on session then). The participants thanked him with giving a big clap to his assurance.

The entire RTC proceedings was conducted by **Ms. Jothi Amala**, the director of WIDA and **Mr. Padmanaban**, the director of MIDS, recapitulated the whole day process and gave the vote of thanks. In the evening, press meet was held between the panel members and the press persons.



Follow-up:

The FLR partners will conduct similar Round Table Conference at each of their operational districts, wherein the district level officials concerned with the implementation of the MNREGS will be invited to discuss the issues related to the implementation of the scheme and implement the legal components prescribed by the MNREG Act. For this, the FLR partners will closely watch the Government Order passed in connection with the MNREGS.

