

## NREGA: Need for Further Reinvention

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGA) has been in operation for than a decade and it is increasingly being suggested that the scheme be further revised and reinvented to suit the changing times and need. In fact, at this stage of scheme implementation, it is advisable that we should get more daring and remove the ceiling of 100 days and make it a completely demand-driven employment guarantee scheme to be available throughout the year for as many person-days as might be demanded. At least, the individual cap of 100 days per household should be removed. This would allow the individual district to go on providing work to individual household beyond 100 days' ceiling. It would also enable them to utilise their own projected quota of man-days calculated against the number of existing household for that particular district.

With states unable to realise even 100 days of employment, the drain on government resources is not going to be something beyond its reach. This is more so when more work at higher wages are likely to be available in the private sector in times to come, given the way our economy seems to be performing. With India being one of the demographically young countries, more people are likely to be in the productive age groups meaning thereby they shall all be need to be provided with work. Hence, the need to modify the minimum number of man-days' stipulations as envisaged in the Act at the moment.

Several suggestions are being made to modify and improve NREGA further. It is felt by many that the material-wage ratio of 40-60 should be hiked to be 50-50 and this ceiling should be flexible enough to be applicable only at the state level so as to make allowance for taking up bigger and better schemes. The use of machineries should be made more flexible than it is admissible now though the same should be explicitly linked to facilitating the works and without compromising the generation of more man-days under NREGA.

Again, individual benefit schemes (IBS) have been allowed for weaker sections/marginal/small farmers for the permissible schemes under NREGA. Such schemes include conversion of wasteland/uncultivable/undulating land into cultivable land, roof-top water harvesting structures, construction of dug-wells, soil conservation, excavation of pond/water harvesting

structures, social forestry schemes, watershed development schemes, construction of irrigation channels and some other schemes.

Many states have done exceedingly well while many other states have a long way to go on this count. One feels that there is a need to move methodically with regard to the implementation of IBS under NREGA as the same shall not only result in creation of more man-days in the under/undeveloped areas, but shall also create productive assets in the countryside. The same is likely to have immense multiplier effects. Timely identification of beneficiaries and creation of model scheme banks shall go a long way.

Again, there is a lot of scope for convergence or dove-tailing of NREGA with other schemes/programmes implemented by the line departments. If converged with other cognate schemes, the same shall help in more employment generation. It shall also result in improvement in the quality of schemes executed as the pool of resources available shall increase manifold through such convergence.

Convergence with Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (SBA) has been another area requiring attention of the policy makers. As is known, SBA is one of the flagship schemes of the Government. However, the same has not been in a very good shape in many parts of the country. Even at the places where sanitary toilets have been constructed, they are not being used by the beneficiaries for different reasons including the one relating to the quality of the toilet constructed if feedback from the beneficiaries are to be relied upon. The main problem against the extant model is need of lot of water for flushing the night-soil which becomes more acute in the water-deficient areas. As the new model envisages use of ceramic pan instead of a concrete one, water requirement could be greatly reduced.

As NREGA allowed undertaking several individual benefit schemes (IBS), it was only advisable that the convergence between the two (i.e., NREGA and SBA) be allowed to help both the development programmes, particularly SBA. Since now we allow expenditure upto a maximum of Rs 150,000 for an IBS under NREGA for the small/marginal farmers, the dove-tailing of the schemes can do wonders to SBA, a scheme critical to the basic health and hygiene in the countryside.

Under the proposed convergence programme, people could be encouraged to contribute their share and then the rest could be contributed out of NREGA, thereby greatly encouraging people to opt for construction of sanitary toilets in their premises. Such models are not only more durable, they shall also need less water for flushing the night-soil. The total cost of a sanitary toilet under the proposed convergence may be around Rs. 6500. It is hoped that with proper IEC (Information, Education and Communication) campaign, the said convergence can do a world of good to our sanitation programme.

It is believed that this model of sanitary toilets when integrated with the IBS under NREGA has the possibility of becoming quite popular and could realise the objectives of the total sanitation campaign. This small piece of change to be effected through NREGA funds (if allowed) could go a long way in ensuring better health and hygiene in our countryside, not to speak of the possibility of unleashing immense opportunities for employment generation.

The administration of NREGA can improve further with a dedicated Programme Management Unit (envisaged, but still not done at many places) at all the levels including districts, blocks

and Gram Panchayats. There is also a need for proper utilisation of the six per cent contingency provided for provisioning of the requisite infrastructures and manpower required for better programme implementation. Fund flow to various programme implementing agencies (PIAs) has to improve with proper coordination among the District Programme Management Unit, banks, post offices and all other concerned.

Newer NREGA schemes have been allowed over the years including solid and liquid waste management, more IBSSs, drainage system, construction of model houses (of specific value a la IAY), sanitary toilets, kitchen gardens, rural hats, repair and maintenance of government building including construction of boundary walls. Many more could be added depending on the local demands to make the created assets more valuable to the local communities. Self-help groups (SHGs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) need to be involved in a huge way in various ways in implementations of the schemes including monitoring, work measurement and social auditing of the scheme.

Approved and vetted shelf of schemes should be ready for better and faster implementation of the NREGA schemes. Also, there is a need for the proper planning for all the seasons of the year. Still, the focus seems to be on expenditure of maximum money under NREGA but as it is a demand-driven scheme, the focus should be to generate employment for the unemployed to prevent them from migrating to the urban areas while also creating valuable assets in the countryside.

If NREGA has to be successful in realising its programme objectives, then these concerns and problems, as mentioned above, need to be addressed sooner rather than later. One just hopes that with regular monitoring, social auditing and proper accounting coupled with some positive changes required in the light of experience gained during its operation over the years, NREGA can really become an effective answer to many of the problems for India's poor masses.

### Salient Points

- We should remove the ceiling of 100 days in NREGA and make it a completely demand driven employment guarantee scheme to be available throughout year.
- Material-wage ratio of 40–60 should be hiked to be 50–50 and this ceiling should be flexible. The use of machineries should be made more flexible.
- Moving methodically for implementation of IBS under NREGA will result in creation of more man-days and productive assets in the countryside.
- Convergence of NREGA with other schemes like SBA implemented by the line departments should be allowed to help both the development programmes, particularly SBA.
- With IEC campaign, this small change through NREGA funds could ensure better health and hygiene and immense employment opportunities in villages.
- Administration of NREGA can improve further with a dedicated Programme Management Unit at all the levels
- SHGs and NGOs need to be involved in a huge way in implementations of the schemes including monitoring, work measurement and social auditing.
- With above mentioned improvements, NREGA can really become an effective answer to many of the problems for India's poor masses.

### Glossary

**Dove-tailing:** to join harmoniously.