

## **Ensuring Rural Livelihood Security through MGNREGA: A Study in District Mewat, Haryana**

**Bindiya Narang**

*Department of Social Work, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, India.*

*Corresponding author :bindiyababbar@yahoo.com*

### **ABSTRACT**

The present development mandate in India is to ensure livelihood security as a legitimate policy commitment. This perspective is well rooted and reflected in the design of MGNREGA. The foregoing paper based on a field study conducted in Mewat, a backward district of Haryana, analyses the livelihoods context in selected villages and determines the effectiveness of this Act within wider livelihood strategies of rural poor. A concurrent mixed method research design has been used and perspectives from different stakeholders have been taken into account. The livelihoods analysis has yielded information on a plethora of constraints in terms of inadequacy of physical infrastructure, amenities, human and natural capital in the study area. The potential of this Act though found incipient, but the findings are also suggestive of the change it can bring to the rural edifice of this district, provided livelihoods oriented interventions are carried out in a participatory and sustainable manner.

**Keywords:** MGNREGA, Mewat, livelihood security, livelihood assets

The concept of livelihoods has become increasingly important and central to the issues of poverty reduction, environmental management and human development. Livelihoods may be defined as means by which households obtain and maintain access to the resources necessary to ensure their immediate and long term survival (Scoones, 1998). A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (stores, resources, claims, and access) and activities required for a means of living; a livelihood is sustainable which can cope with and recover from stress and shocks, maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets, and provide sustainable livelihood opportunities for the next generation (Chambers and Conway, 1992). Article 39A of the Directive Principles of the Indian Constitution, enjoins the State to ensure that every citizen has adequate means of livelihood. UNDP (2000) in its Millennium Development Goals also consider livelihoods as an important factor responsible for eradicating extreme hunger and poverty and thereby attaining a better human development index.

The livelihoods perspective can assist in the formulation of appropriate policies, cognizant of the various risks and opportunities faced by communities and

individuals. Consequent to signing the Millennium Declaration in 2000, India recognized and sought to strengthen the livelihoods of poor as a legitimate policy commitment. The present development mandate is to reach out to poor households, providing livelihoods opportunities as a legitimate right and subsequently sustaining the livelihood outcomes, which is an attempt beyond the conventional dealing with human subsistence and poverty.

## **Rural Livelihoods and Wage Employment**

Rural livelihoods constitute the economic, social and cultural universe wherein rural families are bound to make their living. Although farming is still an important activity in rural areas, it is increasingly unable to provide sufficient means of survival. Employment growth in the farm sector being stagnant, there is an increasing trend towards casualization of labour. Wage employment, both as agriculture labour and labour in allied services, constitutes a significant means of livelihood in rural India.

Rural labour, which constitutes a large section of unorganized workforce in India, includes landless and poor households which typically rely on the sale of their labour in farm and non farm activities. The rural workforce suffers due to excessive seasonality of employment, lack of wage employment opportunities and low wage rates. These poor rural households practice multiple livelihoods and even resort to temporary or permanent migration to increase their employment days and cope with the risks. Ellis (2000) gives particular emphasis to the widespread strategy of rural livelihood diversification, which rural households pursue in order to survive and to improve their standard of living. The diversification of livelihood strategies is a rapid process and shows no signs of abating (Gupta, 2009).

Since independence, the Government has initiated several public works programmes and social security measures to mitigate the plight of rural labour and ameliorate their conditions. There is a growing theoretical and empirical literature on the impact of public works programs on poverty alleviation (Dreze and Sen 1989; Ravallion 1991; Besley and Coate 1992; Sen 1995). Wage employment programs in independent India started with the Rural Works Program, which was introduced in 1961 in selected districts in the country to generate employment for the poor in the lean season. A series of wage employment programs have followed this program, each trying to improve upon the earlier program. The major programs have been the Crash Scheme for Rural Employment (CSRE) and Food For Work Program (FFWP) in the 1970s, followed by the first all-India wage employment programs, the National Rural Employment Program (NREP) and the Rural Labor Employment Guarantee Program (REGP) in the 1980s, and the Jawahar Rojgar Yojana (JRY), the Employment Assurance Scheme (EAS), and the Sampurna Grammen Rojgar Yojana (SGRY) in the 1990s.

The two major objectives of these programs have been generation of employment for the poor and creation of durable community assets. The importance of employment in the context of poverty stems from the fact that the poor people rely mainly on the use of their labour power to earn their livelihood. However, after more than three decades of the all-India wage employment programs and spending thousands of crores of rupees on them, one does not observe significant decline in the need for these programs. In fact, the need seems to have increased in the economy due to the low rate of growth of agriculture, increased environmental depletion and degradation, and the overall rural economy lagging in development. Despite concerted efforts, rural poverty in India has grown in an unprecedented manner. In order to reverse this trend and to provide livelihood security to the rural unemployed, and after a long struggle by NGOs, academics and some policymakers; Government of India (GOI) enacted the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), 2005 (renamed as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, MGNREGA in October 2009).

Having been designed as a novel and radical response to the challenge of combating rural poverty, MGNREGA is probably the largest rights-based social protection initiative in the world (Farrington, 2007). It aims to provide a steady source of income and livelihood security for the poor, vulnerable and marginalized. The main objective of the Act is: “To provide for the enhancement of livelihood security of the households in rural areas by providing at least 100 days of guaranteed wage employment in every financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work”. Its other objectives are reduction in distressed migration, creation of durable assets in villages, enlivening of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), empowerment of rural women, promotion of inclusive growth and facilitation of multiplier effects on the rural economy. The Act provides an opportunity to build rural infrastructure through watershed development, restoration of water bodies such as tanks and canals, activities aimed at forestry, land development, soil erosion and flood control, and construction of roads and institutional facilities. MGNREGA is different from erstwhile employment generation programmes not only in terms of its origin and objectives, but also in its design. It combines various objectives of rural development, which imparts a unique distinction to it (CSE, 2008).

### **MGNREGA – Status of Implementation in India**

The Act initially notified in 200 most backward districts in Phase I, at present is in its third phase and covers 619 districts (99% of the districts in the country). An overview of the performance of MGNREGA since its inception suggests that it does provide basic income assurance to a large number of beneficiaries. In Financial Year 2011–2012 alone, nearly 5.5 crore households (close to 25% of all rural households in the country) were benefitted. Also, from 2006 to 2012, around

66% of the total expenditure has been spent on workers' wages. The average wage per person-day has gone up by 81% since the Scheme's inception, with state-level variations. Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) have accounted for 51% of the total person-days generated and women for 47%, well above the mandatory 33% as required by the Act. Also, 143 lakh works have been taken up since the beginning of the programme, of which about 60% have been, completed (www.nrega.nic.in, Dec.2012).

### **MGNREGA Implementation in Haryana**

Haryana is one of the most progressive states of India, spread over 44, 212 sq. km. comprising 21 districts, 119 blocks and 6, 955 villages. As per Census 2011, the total population of Haryana is around 25 million and 65.21% of it lives in the rural areas. The literacy rate in the state is about 76%, a figure that has improved tremendously in the last few years; however, the sex ratio leaves a lot to be desired as it lags behind the national average by 70 points. Also, the state has a growth rate of about 19% which slightly exceeds the national growth rate and ranks first in terms of per capita income (Census, 2011). Despite significant industrial development during the recent past, the economy of Haryana continues to be primarily based on agriculture and allied activities.

The Haryana Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (HREGS) under NREG Act, 2005 came into force in January 2007. MGNREGA in this state was initially implemented in the two identified backward districts, Mahendragarh and Sirsa, in the first phase i.e, from Feb, 2006. The scheme was extended to Ambala and Mewat in the second phase in 2007-08. From April 2008 it has been extended to all the remaining 17 districts. Since the inception of this scheme, about 142 lakhs person days of work has been generated and out of this, the share of Mewat is 16.45 lakhs person days. The share of women in total employment generated under MGNREGA in the State has been around 23% as against the national average of 49.3%. Also, 2.2 lakhs households were provided employment in 2010-11 and 2779 works were completed (www.nrega.nic.in, May 2011). Initially, the minimum wage was ₹ 95.13 per manday under REGS during 2006-07. The State Government revised the wage rate for unskilled workers to ₹ 191 per manday with effect from July 2011. The current wage rate in Haryana is highest in the country but there are not enough seekers for the employment programme. This calls for rigorous monitoring and necessary interventions by the authorities concerned. Moreover, out of 1.5 million farmers in Haryana, 998, 000 are small and marginal farmers and still the state fell short of the target in utilizing funds as the number of applicants was insufficient (Gera, 2009). Thus, the expansion of the scheme is likely to trigger better reach out and results.

## **MGNREGA - A strategy for ensuring rural livelihood security**

It needs to be noted that wage employment programs are no more a pure welfare activity; rather, they have come a long way from their historical origin as relief works organized for the poor in emergency situations or as an instrument of consumption smoothening during lean season of the year. In fact, these programs are now recognized in the literature as modern instruments of general development policy, as they have shown tremendous potential to alleviate poverty as part of mainstream economic strategy. On the same lines, MGNREGA can emerge as a tool that promotes strategic use of surplus manpower for promoting pro-poor growth leading to sustainable development. The Act has a lot of potential to transform rural economic and social conditions at many levels. (Dreze, *The Hindu*, 19th July 2008). The most remarkable change is that a process for the empowerment of the poor is emerging with NGOs and activists discovering in it a vehicle for meaningful interventions.

In terms of visible impact of MGNREGA, the PACS study (PACS, 2007) notes that more than half of the 600 villages covered in Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh have reported reduced migration. Several other studies also report the same (Jha, Gaiha, Shankar, 2008; Ambasta, Shankar, Shah, 2008). The positive impact of MGNREGA is also confirmed by Naren (2008) who states that there also has been some improvement in consumption by the poor and slight increase in lean season wage rates (especially for women) in areas where the programme has been successful. However, Bhatia and Dreze (2006) find that the rural employment status in districts of Jharkhand shows that much of the potential has been wasted and raises doubts regarding commitment of this Act towards livelihood security. It has also been argued that instead of a short-term distress programme, MGNREGA should rather be seen as a programme for facilitating a long-term impact by using the labour of people to build ecological assets and regenerate the local environment (CSE, 2008). It has been clearly demonstrated at several places that the environmental services like groundwater recharge, water percolation, more water storage in tanks, increased soil fertility, reclamation of degraded lands and carbon sequestration have positive implications for increased crop and livestock production (Ravindranath et al, 2009). However, there is a need to look beyond, into the sustainability aspect by emphasizing on quality of assets and capacity building of users. The implementing agencies should receive technical guidance and must upscale successful models (Kareemulla et al, 2010).

Another important aspect is the coordination and integration of the scheme with the local/regional economic development process. Under wage guarantee act, large sums of public investments are made. Leveraging these investments towards sustainable livelihood requires inter-sectoral convergence. Since, under the Act, planning is decentralized and funds transferred are untied, works can be

planned, structured and executed as per local specific requirements. MGNREGA thus becomes a significant entry point for convergence with other development programmes related to irrigation, roads, water supply, housing, electrification, land and water development, drought proofing, etc. Mathur (2007) suggests that while the ministry of Rural Development is the nodal ministry at the centre, every relevant department and agency must be involved. The machinery of the entire government must act in concert, and conscious and systematic efforts be made to marshal its combined energy, expertise and resource – as has been done only once before, for the green revolution. Hence there is need for proper orientation of functionaries involved, to understand the comprehensiveness of the scheme and design suitable interventions securing people's livelihoods.

### **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The impact of macro level policies on people's livelihoods is well recognized. Most often, the policies designed at Government level are not conducive to local livelihood strategies. This gap between micro level action and macro level policy decisions disables the access of rural poor to assets for livelihood improvement. The present study is predicated on the fact that an incomplete understanding of local livelihoods and their context can result in incompatible directives and failed policies. The study attempts to probe the effectiveness of MGNREGA for livelihood enhancement of rural poor in Mewat in relation to their social economic realities. The context specific factors will be analyzed to offer useful cues for further strengthening of the programme.

The specific objectives addressed in the study are as under.

1. To determine the livelihoods context and constraints in the selected villages.
2. To analyze the implementation, impact and role of MGNREGA within wider livelihood strategies of population under study.

To serve these objectives, a concurrent mixed method research design was used involving a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches (White, 2009). The qualitative tools enabled a comprehensive collection of descriptive and detailed community level information from respondents on contextual issues and problems. The quantitative tools facilitated the collection of household level data. The data and methodological triangulation yielded both descriptive and analytical evidence with respect to the objectives of the study.

### **STUDY AND SAMPLING**

The study was carried out in Mewat, one of the most backward districts of Haryana. The total area of the region is 1, 860 sq km comprising 491 inhabited villages and

6 small towns, thereby having predominantly rural population. The Meo Muslims, account for 70.9% of the total population and are listed under the OBC category being recognized as part of the backward class communities (MDA, 2009). The literacy rate recorded in district was 44.07%, which is 24% below the national average. It also has a low sex ratio of 894 as against the national average of 927. The district is also deficient in educational infrastructure and in terms of health facilities; the Primary Health Centres cover just 10% of the population (Census, 2011). The vulnerability in terms of unavailability of physical and social infrastructure looms large in Mewat. Various factors such as high incidence of overall and rural poverty, low work participation rate, lower agricultural productivity, and low level of non-farm employment opportunities etc. make this district an outstanding case for the implementation of MGNREGA. A research study conducted by IRRAD “An assessment of development indicators in rural Mewat” suggests that the implementation of poverty alleviation programmes remains a challenge for this District and it continues to be ignored by policy makers and development agencies due to its remote location.

**Table 1:** Sampling Plan

State	District	Block	Selected Villages	No. of Households	
				Beneficiaries	Non Beneficiaries
Haryana	Mewat	Firozpur Jhirka	Hamzapur	15	15
		Nagina	Kherli Khurd	15	15
		Nuh	Rithora	15	15
		Punhana	Lafuri	15	15
		Taoru	Beri Taoru	15	15
Total		5	5	75	75

The present study was carried out in five villages, selected from each of the five blocks of Mewat District (see Table 1) to get a holistic and comprehensive picture of the implementation of the programme.

Central and State Government data (the official records given in the MGNREGA website) served as baseline for the purpose of selection of villages, where the dominant activities were implemented in a large number in 2010-11. A total of 30 households, including 15 beneficiary and 15 non-beneficiary ones, were chosen from each village. Thus, 150 households were covered in all and the Sarpanch in each village was also interviewed. The socio-economic profiles of the non-beneficiary households helped in ascertaining if they were indirect beneficiaries of

the scheme in terms of utilizing the community assets created under the scheme. The generalities related to livelihoods were drawn at community level using participatory exercises and group discussions, and the insights were confirmed at the household level. Finally, conclusions were drawn about the direction, scale and significance of impact of MGNREGA and emerging issues in different villages.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This section presents an analysis of the important livelihood components and patterns found in the selected villages. The factors influencing vulnerability of households, their livelihood strategies and the portfolios of assets have been elucidated. It also focuses on the implementation issues and impact of MGNREGA in selected villages.

**Table 2:** Demographic and Occupational Details of Selected Villages

Villages	Beri Taoru	Rithora	Kherli Khurd	Hamzapur	Lafuri
Block	Taoru	Nuh	Nagina	FP Jhirka	Punhana
Total Households	280	400	300	170	468
Muslim Households	260 (93%)	380 (95%)	288 (96%)	145 (85%)	452 (97%)
BPL Households	22 (8%)	68 (17%)	63 (21%)	62 (36%)	153 (33%)
Farm Households	125 (44.6%)	300 (75%)	270 (90%)	120 (70.5%)	450 (96.1%)
Livestock owners	250 (89.2%)	375 (93.7%)	250 (83.3%)	150 (88.2%)	350 (74.8%)
Casual labourers	180 (64%)	250 (79%)	200 (67%)	75 (44%)	400 (85%)

*(Source: Primary Data)*

**Demographic Profile of the Selected Villages and Sampled Households**

The primary data for this study was gathered from the five villages, one from each block of Mewat. As indicated in Table 2, all the selected villages have predominantly Muslim population. The high concentration of Meo muslims, minorities classified as OBCs, also indicates a higher level of denied opportunities for socio-economic development. The caste distribution of sampled households is broadly similar to the caste distribution reported from Census 2011 for the corresponding blocks. Also, most of the head of households were males (94%). Regarding poverty status, the type of ration card held by the family, was taken note

of. As per the guidelines, both APL and BPL houses are entitled to employment under the scheme. It is however, no surprise that BPL households are proportionately more under beneficiaries (62.9%), which indicates the scheme, is benefitting the marginalized poor. The primary data showed that the average family size for both beneficiary and non beneficiary households was around seven, with more number of dependents and on an average; two earning members per household. There was also a predominance of joint family system and a relatively higher number of children in all the selected villages.

### **Livelihood Activities and Occupational Distribution of Sampled Households**

The livelihoods of people across villages were profiled, the key income generation activities were identified and problems encountered in practicing different vocations were probed. Most rural households increasingly relied on a diverse portfolio of both on- and off-farm activities (see Table 2) and employment sources in order to survive and gain income. It was found that the landless comprising agricultural and non-agricultural labour formed the largest section of the beneficiary households (60%). The number of casual labour (85%) and migrant households came to be significantly higher in case of village Lafuri, which also had a greater number of BPL families. About 40% of the households had agriculture as the main occupation and livestock rearing was found in almost 75% of the families. It can be inferred that small and marginal farmers are also inclined to work in this scheme since it was seen as a viable livelihood option but they were simply out of the reach of the scheme. In other words, the implementing agencies have not been able to provide jobs at the requisite scale.

### **Livelihood Assets of the Sampled Households**

The infrastructure and services are most important in offering direct benefits and support to rural households. However, none of the five villages have a post office branch, bank, primary health centres or even schools beyond middle level. The Aanganwadi Centres and PDS depots are functioning in all the villages but people reported dissatisfaction. With respect to shelter, all selected villages have mostly semi pucca to pucca houses (see Table 3).

The state of sanitation was however grim, with only a handful of households (14.7%) having toilet facilities. This is in line with the fact that in the entire Mewat, barely 12% households have toilets (MDA, 2009). Rithora showed a better picture with convergence between MGNREGA and Total Sanitation Campaign, resulting in mass construction of toilet units across majority (75%) of households, while barely 3% households in Lafuri had toilet facilities.

The average size of the landholding of beneficiary households is 0.5 acre, which indicates majority of them being marginal farmers. Also, all the villages

were electrified, but showed gross discontent with power supply inconsistency, limited to few hours (4-5 on an average) per day. Availability of potable water was also one of the most pressing problems, common to all villages. The people obtained drinking water from personal or community owned hand pumps, often overexploiting the ground water resource and rendering the source defunct. The water situation was extremely alarming in village Beri Taoru where water table receded tremendously (ground water table depth being 200 feet) and in village Lafuri, with excessively saline underground water. In the latter case, people were forced to spend a large part of their earnings on purchasing water from private tankers for daily usage.

**Table 3:** Asset Base of the Respondents

		<b>Beneficiaries (N=75)</b>	<b>Non Beneficiaries (N=75)</b>
Type of house owned	Kutchha	17 (22.7%)	11 (14.7%)
	Semi Pucca	13 (17.3%)	20 (26.7%)
	Pucca	45 (60%)	44 (58.7%)
Fuel used for cooking	Firewood	74 (98.7%)	75 (100%)
	Animal dung	71 (94.7%)	66 (88%)
Source of drinking water	Common hand pump	15 (20%)	16 (21.3%)
	Personal hand pump	23 (30.7%)	23 (30.7%)
	Bore well	6 (8%)	3 (4%)
	Tanker	10 (13.3%)	13 (17.3%)
	Govt. supply	24 (32%)	26 (34.7%)
HHs with Individual Household Latrine		11 (14.7%)	12 (16%)
HHs with electricity connection		31 (41.3%)	21 (28%)
HHs with Ownership of Durables/ Assets	T.V	1	10
	Radio	1	1
	Mobile phones	56	60
	Sewing Machine	15	26
	Cycle	15	14
	Motor cycle	16	14
HHs with Savings		18 (24%)	14 (18.7%)

(Source: Primary Data)

Also, although more beneficiary households owned livestock (74.7%), which provides an alternate livelihood option and acts as a financial stock, but almost 3/4th of them reportedly, found fodder and feed too expensive.

### **Livelihood Constraints and Coping Strategies**

The sampled households cited mixed reasons responsible for their financial crisis and these shocks were common to both beneficiary and non beneficiary

households. The heads of households claimed that their income from farming was inadequate to enable them attain good livelihoods. The reason stated by most of the respondents was expensive farm inputs, particularly expenditure on water for irrigation and small size of land holdings. This was worsened by the absence of adequate viable alternative income generating activities for them.

The coping strategies however, varied across both the groups and strongly associated with a household's wealth and assets. Regardless of the shock, the most common coping strategies were identified. 61% beneficiaries and 56% non beneficiaries relied on credit. Around 65% of those who availed credit took it for consumption purposes such as social occasions, household needs or during illness. Only 20% of all the respondents took loans for work related needs. The rate of interest on these loans varied a great deal ranging from 5% per annum to 42% per annum. The high interest rate charged was mainly by the shopkeepers and moneylenders who charged interest monthly and in case of non-payment also compounded it monthly.

The use of savings seemed to be less common for the non beneficiaries and some of those families (20%) also coped by selling animals / livestock or other assets. A majority of beneficiaries (62.7%) also reported working in MGNREGA as a coping strategy and some relied on migration also. All the respondents availed benefits of some or the other Government development programme as well. The MGNREGA beneficiaries also utilized Indira Awaas Yojana (13.3%) and Public Distribution System (64%) in more numbers. The mid day meal scheme and Anganwadi facilities were also being used by both the groups, though deficiencies in functioning of these programmes were also stated.

### **MGNREGA Implementation Issues in Selected Villages**

**(a) Awareness about the Act** - For people to know their rights under the Act, effective communication of information about the essential provisions of the Scheme by respective State Governments is important. The Sarpanchs were not aware of all the key provisions and procedures of the Act though they had attended Block Orientation Conventions. It was reported by all of them that Gram Sabhas were held to inform and mobilize villagers for registration under the scheme. However, while discussing with the beneficiaries, it was noticed that many were not aware of most of the tenets of NREGA, especially regarding the provision of unemployment allowance, social audit and importance of gram sabha. Neighbours and fellow villagers (75%) and Sarpanch (100%) were the most cited sources for information on the scheme. Social networks, informal discussions and word of mouth were widely used sources of information to the respondents. Mass media however, have not been used due to very little penetration of these sources in selected areas. Lack of awareness is mainly due to weak Information, Education

and Communication (IEC) effort and also not effectively using Gram Sabha for awareness generation. The Sarpanchs obtained information largely from the block level functionaries.

**(b) Provision of Employment** - Only 53.3% beneficiaries themselves approached Sarpanch to ask for work and placed their demand for employment in oral. Some beneficiaries also reported having faced denial on different pretexts. In terms of time gap in and applying and provision of work, 1/4th of the respondents cited that work was not provided when demanded but when it was available. Only 33% respondents claimed to have been provided work within a fortnight. This is against the rights based approach of the Act and defeats its objectives. Also, in 54.7% of the beneficiary households, the women also sought work in the scheme. However, all of them worked within their respective villages and confirmed having received equal task rates as men. Around 15% households also affirmed children's unpaid participation in the work as parents' helping hand. This is also against the mandate of the Act which seeks to provide employment only to adults.

**(c) Job Cards and Wage Issues** - Most of the beneficiaries across all villages did not possess their job cards. Almost 57.3% of households reported that their job cards were in the possession of Sarpanch. Also 14.7% households did not have any job cards and received wages directly from the Sarpanch. Also, only 21.3% of the sampled households received wages in the stipulated time frame. For the rest, wage payments were reportedly delayed by 1-2 months or even more and no compensation was given for the delayed payments. The Sarpanchs also agreed to delayed wage payments and cited bureaucratic hurdles like limited number of Junior Engineers at the block level, delayed work approval and late arrival of funds as major problems. In terms of mode of payment, Sarpanchs also distributed cash and agreed to operate the bank accounts of many workers (46.7%). They justified that since payment from the block level get delayed, they have to shell out their own money to pay wages in time to the needy workers. The workers also spelt out difficulties in accessing banks and thus found it convenient to receive payment in cash from the Sarpanch.

**(d) Works, Shelf of Projects and Worksite Facilities** - As per the MGNREGA guidelines, administrative and technical sanction should be obtained for all works in advance, by December of the previous year. The number of works in the shelf in a village should also be adequately more than the estimated demand. This was not properly followed. Although use of contractors and machines is prohibited under MGNREGA, beneficiaries at Beri Taoru and Lafuri revealed during FGD that JCB was used for digging of earth for pond construction. Moreover, work requiring material was discouraged, thus not utilizing the scheme to the fullest extent.

Worksite facilities (medical aid, drinking water, shade and crèche) were largely absent as reported by 3/4th of the respondents and only at fewer times, the rest affirmed that drinking water was provided. What is glaring is the near total absence

of crèches at the worksite as none of the respondents reported its presence. This is a very significant result as it can severely hamper female participation in NREGA works.

**(e) Transparency and Accountability** - The data on number of gram sabha meetings held and proportion of meetings dedicated specifically to MGNREGA was highly inconsistent and had to be dropped. Judging from the respondents statements, in hardly any of the surveyed villages were Gram Sabha meetings ever dedicated to the scheme. The main reason behind the attendance, participation and frequency of gram sabha meetings standing low was cited as a lack of information sharing about the programme by Sarpanchs. With an abysmal record of gram sabha meetings, involvement of the gram sabha in the planning of works under the Act seems a remote possibility. Absence of social audit also makes it evident that in terms of transparency and devolution of powers to the gram sabha, the villages are not doing too well. The survey points at a heavy presence of the administrative beauracracy in planning and implementation of the works. The decisions concerning works were taken by panchayat members in consultation with block officials and were communicated to all in gram sabha. All the respondents were also completely unaware of the organization of Employment Guarantee Day in the Gram Panchayat. Muster rolls were maintained and were available for public inspection in all surveyed GPs, however, other records like application register, asset register, complaints register etc were not shown.

**(f) Grievance Redressal** - There was no vigilance and monitoring committee in any of the selected villages and in the absence of public vigilance it is no surprise that the official MGNREGS website in the “Social Audit Report” section for Mewat mentions that not a single grievance was submitted and action taken ([www.nrega.nic.in](http://www.nrega.nic.in)), whereas, in the field, complaints about delay in payment or non-payment were ubiquitous. Several grievances were reported by the beneficiaries and the Sarpanchs, but no action had been taken towards redressal. More than half of the beneficiaries (56%) cited delayed payment of wages and inconsistent work as the main problems encountered. In Lafuri, the landless respondents though needed, but were reluctant to work under MGNREGA, for regular wages are imminent to their survival and delay in wage payment further put them at risk. The respondents reported that they had no knowledge about the availability of any setup of helpline for grievance redressal. Moreover, awareness about rights and process to seek information under Right to Information Act was also found to be nil. A fraction of respondents in Hamzapur also admitted to work being done using JCB and lack of motivation on the part of Sarpanch in seeking works for the benefit of the village. They also complained about embezzlements of funds and issue of job cards based on Sarpanch’s discretion.

**Impact of MGNREGA in Selected Villages**

This section addresses the perceived impact of MGNREGA on various livelihood features in the selected villages. An attempt is made to examine the direct and indirect effect of this policy on the livelihood activities, assets and capabilities of selected households and other community members.

**(a) Satisfaction from the scheme** - Around 69.3% of beneficiary households reported satisfaction from the scheme and interestingly, a very great majority (94.7%) opined that the programme should continue in future. Even amongst the non beneficiaries, 84% were in favour of the continuance of this programme and almost 65% wanted to seek work under the scheme. This indicates lapses in provision of adequate work to all who demand it.

**(b) Perceived Benefits** - Shah (2009) suggests that it is important to distinguish between the scheme’s wage and non-wage benefits. The wage-benefits are clear from the data on number of person-days of employment generated across five blocks (see Table 4). The distribution of employment generation reveals that the cumulative persondays generated increased from 2009 till 2011 in all the blocks (except Taoru), after which there was a sharp decline. Maximum cumulative persondays were generated in the year 2010-11. The number of households provided employment in Taoru block are considerably low across all financial years, and this indicates a low demand for scheme in this block while in the case of Nuh, employment generation has remained fairly consistent.

**Table 4:** Block Wise Details of Employment Generated in Mewat

S. No.	Blocks	Cumulative number of households provided employment (Persondays Generated in parantheses)			
		2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13
1	<b>Taoru</b>	1142 (73260)	853 (56238)	694 (48004)	346 (23306)
2	<b>Nuh</b>	2152 (143541)	2934 (190368)	2750 (180305)	2609 (159744)
3	<b>Nagina</b>	1936 (107738)	1884 (131003)	1776 (131302)	1923 (127783)
4	<b>FP Jhirka</b>	2252 (128451)	3359 (163526)	2491 (126769)	1723 (94818)
5	<b>Punhana</b>	2272 (157307)	3413 (238421)	1594 (107030)	1700 (107556)
	<b>Total</b>	9754 (610297)	12443 (779556)	9305 (593410)	8301 (513207)

(Source: Data retrieved from [www.nrega.nic.in](http://www.nrega.nic.in) : Accessed in Feb.2013).

Some of the notable positive contributions and non wage benefits by the scheme as claimed by villagers and Sarpanchs are :

- The incidence of unemployment in all the selected villages was reportedly high, as a result of which, the farm labour migrated to other towns and districts during lean agricultural season. The Sarpanchs remarked that MGNREGA scheme was a better alternative for them who didn't have any other job in hand. The employment generation under the scheme over the last few years has also shown an increasing trend. Thus, the scheme played an important role in supplementing employment and livelihood opportunities within the village.
- Income from MGNREGA, as a fraction of household income, is considered as an indicator of the relevance of the Scheme for the poor. Considering that sampled households practiced diverse livelihood activities, MGNREGA's annual contribution to household income through wages was found to be around 10% in the beneficiary households. The secondary data (2010-11) for selected villages ([www.nrega.nic.in](http://www.nrega.nic.in)) revealed that among the five selected villages, maximum wages were disbursed in Lafuri., while wage payment in Beri Taoru was less owing to lesser number of persons employed in the scheme. This is also indicative of the fact that there were less takers of MGNREGA in this village, as commented by Sarpanch, which could be possible due to numerous reasons. Since it came to light in FGDs that people wanted MGNREGA to continue and desired work in the village, it points to the inability of district administration in providing regular and consistent work and wages.
- Category-wise distribution of persons provided employment i.e 62.9% of sampled beneficiaries belonging to Below Poverty Line and 85.3% to Other Backward Castes reflects on the financial inclusion of the marginalized groups. Moreover, the payments related to NREGS are made through Bank/ Post-Office, thereby providing a base for increased savings and investment activities by the wage earners.
- MGNREGA limited the out migration to some extent from the selected villages. Out of the total sampled beneficiary households, 20% reported migration. The incidence of temporary migration was higher among the beneficiaries as compared to non beneficiaries. This was due to irregular availability of work under MGNREGA and delayed payment of wages. Among non beneficiaries, migration was reported by 16% of households and 58.3% of those who migrated went to another state. Such migrants from the non-beneficiary households belong to different categories of workers, with some of them being semi-skilled like masons, carpenters, painters, artisans and drivers etc. who get higher income at other places.

- Another important occurrence is that the migration of female members from the both beneficiary and non beneficiary households was not taking place. The reason attributed by almost one third of the beneficiaries was availability of work and opportunity to earn wages for women in the home turf by working in MGNREGA. The persondays of work created for women has been greater than the stipulated 33% in all the selected villages except Beri Taoru (see Table 5), where farming dominates and women get employed in agricultural operations. Women’s access to work in the village had several consequences for the households. First and foremost, it did translate into economic and social empowerment of Muslim women, hitherto confined to domestic life owing to existent social norms and patriarchal values. Secondly, it gave menfolk liberty to migrate and work elsewhere while women could continue to work in MGNREGA in the village itself. However, a disturbing aspect came to light through group discussions. Since provision of child care facilities was largely missing at the worksites, small girls had been taken out of school to help with household chores and look after younger siblings while their mothers worked. This aspect need to be rectified immediately in accordance with the provisions of the Act that stipulate crèche facility at worksite.

**Table 5:** Number of women workers registered in selected villages in 2010-11

	Beri Taoru	Rithora	Kherli Khurd	Hamzapur	Lafuri
<b>Households registered</b>	103	106	100	74	225
<b>Persons registered</b>	308	223	291	136	533
<b>Males</b>	218	128	159	79	316
<b>Females</b>	90 (29.2%)	95 (42.6%)	132 (45.3%)	57 (41.9%)	217 (40.7%)

(Source: Data retrieved from [www.mgnrega.nic.in](http://www.mgnrega.nic.in) : Accessed in Dec. 2012)

- MGNREGA, through its wide range of permissible works, has also given ample opportunity for infrastructure development at the community level in all the selected villages. Also, with its inter-sectoral approach, the programme has opened up a number of opportunities for convergence. The consequent addition to and improvement in rural infrastructure has impacted the overall livelihood resource base of people. To look into the sustainability aspect of assets created, the villages selected in the study were the ones with maximum number of completed works in 2010-2011. The highest number of works was in Rithora (11), probably due to its proximity to District headquarters at Nuh. On the other hand, number of works completed in Beri Taoru was less (5), in

cognizance with the fact that out of total works completed (681) in Mewat in 2010-11, share of the works in the whole of Taoru block (6.2%) is also less (see Table 6).

- The study findings suggest that while many productive assets have been created on the ground owing at the micro-level, there is need for more focussed implementation with regard to the creation of durable and sustainable assets under MGNREGA. This is also an area where more rigorous research is required.

**Table 6:** Block Wise Details of Number of Assets created in Mewat

S. No.	Blocks	Assets Created			
		2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13
1	Taoru	42	81	42	11
2	Nuh	7	231	172	74
3	Nagina	87	95	131	120
4	FP Jhirka	112	123	140	24
5	Punhana	118	151	118	104
	<b>Total</b>	423	681	603	333

(Source: Data retrieved from [www.nrega.nic.in](http://www.nrega.nic.in) : Accessed in Feb.2013)

## CONCLUSION

The current parameters of monitoring and evaluation of this programme by the number of jobs created and number of assets created cannot give a holistic picture of sustainability of outcomes. From the point of view of gauging the development effectiveness, the Act needs to be evaluated and monitored on the basis of its impact on livelihood security (CSE, 2008). MGNREGA has to assume the character of a sustainable rural development scheme, out of the shadow of the previous wage employment programmes.

The results of this study indicate that MGNREGA is an important intervention that has the potential to transform rural economy and livelihoods at many levels. However, this potential of the Act is still incipient in Mewat and requires to be substantially supported by a number of stakeholders. The very orientation of MGNREGA about people's involvement in public works as a right is a new concept and one that will take time to permeate. However, once established, it can lead to empowerment and subsequent livelihood security for people concerned. Based on the findings and discussion in the previous section, some of the significant implementation issues that came to forefront and the suggestions to deal with them can be presented as under:

- The idea that MGNREGA is demand-driven and predicated on employment as an entitlement had still not permeated well in any of the selected villages despite six years of implementation. This was primarily due to lack of awareness among beneficiaries on the processes, modalities, and procedures in the scheme. There is an urgent need to enhance their awareness through dissemination of information about the Act through effective communication plans. Since literacy levels and mass media reach are limited in Mewat, the State Government must utilize other forms of local networks, community media, people's organizations, radio advertisements, cultural forums, village conventions etc. for this purpose. The Gram Pradhan, other informed village persons and opinion leaders being the main sources of information for the villagers, the awareness campaign should positively involve all these important stakeholders. Also, NGO groups and federations must be encouraged to participate and take on responsibilities of educating workers on their legal entitlements and processes of MGNREGA alongside other initiatives and strategies. The Policy, Governance and Advocacy Centre of IRRAD is making a headway through its comprehensive awareness campaigns across several villages in Mewat. The local meetings and camps organized by IRRAD provide a platform to discuss about the Policy and address its crucial issues at length in a participatory and conducive manner.
- Availability of human resources and building their capacities are critical factors in ensuring the success of any programme. The devolution of functions, funds and functionaries to Panchayats must be rightfully ensured for proper execution of the scheme. The recurring training and capacity building of the elected Panchayat members must follow this and should be accorded priority. The Professional Institutional Networks and Civil Society Organizations can address these specific training needs effectively. Experience from the field points at government officials dictating Panchayat members on the nature of works, citing vague government orders. This takes away the Panchayats' powers under the Act, and has to be rectified immediately. In addition special meetings and consultations should also be held at district and state government level from time to time.
- The MGNREGA stipulates the possession of job card by the job seeker to have details of work, attendance, wages etc and most importantly to keep tab on possible leakages. However, there was sufficient ground evidence that in most of the cases, the Job Cards were distributed according to the discretion and preference of the Sarpanch. Thus, checks are required to ensure that no caste/community group members are denied registration, job cards are not being misused and to protect the households from possible opportunistic behavior by PRI officials. The District Administration should ask for progress reports on job card application and distribution from the gram panchayat

on regular basis. Application forms should be made easily available. Dated and signed receipts should be provided with all applications. These receipts would ensure the provision of unemployment allowance to workers in case the work demanded is not provided within 15 days.

- The MGNREGA work was identified in all the selected villages in a centralized fashion without convening gram sabhas or entailing people's participation. Top-down approach of earlier schemes was being repeated. There is a need for involvement of common people in the preparation of annual plan so that real needs of the people are addressed. The number of works in the shelf in a village should also be adequately more than the estimated demand. The administrative and technical sanctions should be obtained for all works in advance. Village-level resource planning and designing ought to be strengthened further and the works taken up should improve the total village ecology to accrue benefit to the entire community. Through topographical and other research surveys and after a detailed contextual analysis, the possibility of significant activities may be explored. In this regard, there is also an urgent need to review the wage material ratios of the states and the districts and to initiate corrective actions where required since only earth work cannot be prolonged and action strategies are required to move to the next higher level of skills and materials. Setting up of strong institutional mechanisms to manage and distribute the resources generated must follow the creation of assets. Also, there should be a binding work completion plan for each asset created which must also include the maintenance plan.
- It is important to note that the “implementing agencies” are responsible for provision of worksite facilities and should be held accountable for it. Funds and other information must also be displayed at the worksite. Therefore, new methods are required to be worked out to ensure that all facilities are provided and non-provision is penalized.
- The primary objective of MGNREGA is to provide wage employment to those who demand it. The fair and timely payment of wages is must to ensure people's participation in the programme. It is through these wages only that poor can supplement their income to and achieve livelihood security. Although MGNREGA wage rates in Haryana are highest in the country, but, there were several pointers indicative of lacunae in deliverance of wages. Local authorities should be reminded by circular that muster rolls must be displayed prominently at the worksite, and there should be periodic check and strict penalties for non-compliance. Adequate number of trained human resources are critical and must be employed or designated by the concerned authorities. The banking procedures also need to be made more conducive for all the respondents.

- Social audits or the process of cross-verification of government records with realities on the ground completes the feedback loop in the accountability chain. Contrary to the official website information, the respondents confirmed that no social audit had taken place at any of the selected locales. Hence, vigilance and monitoring committees must be constituted at the earliest and social audit system needs to be put in place to ensure transparency and accountability.
- The provisions for redressal were also found to be very weak and need to be strengthened. More clarity is required on how and which implementing agency is to be held accountable. Though MGNREGA Helpline was initiated in Haryana, the grievance redressal mechanism has not yet become functional. People mainly approach the Sarpanchs and the Secretaries for their problems, though complaints are not made in writing nor are satisfactory responses received against the filed complaints. Due to lack of information and awareness on the part of the Gram Panchayat, the grievances and the problems of the workers are not provided any solution. MGNREGA, being rights based, the workers' grievances must be addressed timely and adequately.
- This field based research suggests ways and means to increase the efficacy of MGNREGA, not only to cater to the needs of the people, but also to take this programme to the next level for achieving a sustained process of rural development, much beyond the limited goal of creating employment for unskilled labors. Convergence of various governmental schemes around MGNREGA, if suitably developed, has the potential to safeguard the interest of unskilled labor and degrading natural resources in Mewat. A number of opportunities exist for selection of works under MGNREGA that can help overcome livelihood vulnerability in the selected villages. For instance, livestock keeping is an important activity and source of income for a quarter of population in all villages. However, all the respondents mentioned the expensive feed and fodder as a major problem. This can be countered through Azolla cultivation. Similarly, other works such as prawn culture in saline ponds, rain water harvesting, vermicomposting, maintenance of public buildings, reclamation of saline lands etc could be taken up in the studied villages. A combined synergy can effectively take care of the short term direct attack on poverty as well as the long term sustained effect through indirect multiplier effect.

Finally, it can be concluded that implementation of MGNREGA was not up to the mark in any of the selected villages as against the officially available data, which conspicuously hides the ground realities. Nevertheless, the potential of this programme to contribute in increasing rural household incomes and development of rural infrastructure is immense. It can certainly change the rural edifice of the district and can act as a model rural development scheme for transforming

livelihoods at many levels. If all the sampled Gram Panchayats in different blocks have failed to initiate the required change and desired impact of MGNREGA, it is time that community participation is strengthened, and sustainable, livelihoods oriented, people centric implementation and evaluation mechanisms at the grassroots level ensured. Without these, even a well designed Policy will fail to leave the desired impact.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research paper is drawn from a larger study funded through a doctoral fellowship by Institute of Rural Research and Development (IRRAD), Gurgaon. The Institute is an initiative of the S.M. Sehgal Foundation, registered as a non profit trust in 1999, and commencing integrated models of rural development across Mewat. The author is grateful to Prof. Zubair Meenai (Head, Department of Social Work, Jamia Millia Islamia) and Dr. Pradeep K. Mehta (Senior Scientist, IRRAD) for their critical inputs and valuable suggestions. Special thanks to field staff and village champions who helped in coordinating and facilitating the field visits. An honest thanks to the numerous locals across various villages in Mewat, who contributed their valuable time and provided relevant information.

## REFERENCES

- Besley, T., and S. Coate. (1992). "Workfare vs. Welfare: Incentive Arguments for Work Requirements in Poverty Alleviation Programmes." *American Economic Review*, **82**(1): 249–261.
- Bhatia, B. and Dreze, J. (2006). Employment guarantee in Jharkhand: Ground realities. *Economic and Political Weekly*.
- Centre for Science and Environment, (2008). The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA): Opportunities and Challenges, New Delhi. [cse.india.org / programme/nrega.asp](http://cse.india.org/programme/nrega.asp) Accessed November, 2011
- Chakraborty, P. (2007). Implementation of NREGA in India: spatial dimensions and fiscal implications. Working Paper 505. The Levy Economics Institute of Bard College. New York.
- Chambers, R., and G.R. Conway. (1992). Sustainable Rural Livelihoods: Practical Concepts for the 21st Century. Institute of Development Studies.
- Drèze, J., and R. Khera. (2008). From accounts to accountability. The Hindu, December 6. <<http://www.sacw.net/article382.html>>. Accessed 22nd November, 2010.
- Dreze, J., and A. Sen. (1989). Hunger and Public Action. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Ellis, F. (2000). Rural Livelihoods and Diversity in Developing Countries. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Farrington, J. (2007). Sustainable Livelihoods, Rights and the New Architecture of Aid. Natural Resource Perspectives
- Gandhi, BVJ and Kumar, Ajeet, (2009). Glimpses of a Forgotten Land: Socioeconomic Distribution of Mewat District, Research Bulletin no 2, IRRAD Publications.

- Gera, Amit. (2009). Haryana falls short of NREGA Targets. Business Standard. New Delhi.
- Government of India, (2011). [www.censusindia.gov.in](http://www.censusindia.gov.in). Accessed January, 2012
- Government of India, (2011). [www.nrega.nic.in](http://www.nrega.nic.in) Accessed December, 2012
- Gupta, M.S. (2009). Labour and Sustainable Development. Serial Publications. New Delhi. India
- Kareemulla, K., Kumar, S., Reddy, K.S., Rao, C.A. and Venkateswarlu, B. (2010). Impact of NREGS on Rural Livelihoods and Agricultural Capital Formation. *Indian Journal of Agricultural Economics*, **65**(3): 524-539
- Karunakaran, Naren. (2006). 'NREGS: A national progress report', PACS Programme, <http://www.empowerpoor.org/background> Accessed December, 2010
- Mathur, L. (2007). Employment Guarantee: Progress So Far. *Economic and Political Weekly*, **29**(52): 17-20
- M. Engler and S. Ravi, Workfare as an Effective Way to Fight Poverty: The Case of India's NREGS, (2012), Retrieved from Social Science Research Network: <http://ssrn.com/paper=1336837>, accessed on 15 May 2012.
- Pankaj, A.; Tankha, R. (2010). "Empowerment effects of the NREGS on Women Workers: A study in four states", in *Economic and Political Weekly*, **45**(30), 45-55
- Ravallion, M. (1991). "Reaching the Rural Poor through Public Employment: Arguments, Evidence, and Lessons from South Asia." *The World Bank Research Observer* **6**(2):153-175.
- Ravindranath, N.H., Tiwari, R., Somashekhar, H.I., Murthy, I. and Mohan Kumar, B.K. (2009). MGNREGA for Environmental Service Enhancement and Vulnerability Reduction: Rapid Appraisal in Chitradurga District, Karnataka. *Economic and Political Weekly*, **46**(20), 39-47
- Scoones, I. (1998). Sustainable Rural Livelihoods: A framework for analysis. Institute of Development Studies Working Paper 72. University of Sussex: Brighton.
- Sen, A. (1995). "The Political Economy of Targeting." in D. van de Walle and K. Nead (eds.) *Public Spending and the Poor: Theory and Evidence*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Shah, Amita and Aasha Kapur Menta (2008). "Experience of Maharashtra Employment Guarantee Scheme: Are there Lessons for NREGS?". *The Indian Journal of Labour Economics*: **51**(2): 197-212
- Tashakkori, A., and Teddlie, C. (Eds.). (2003). *Handbook of mixed methods in social and behavioral research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- UNDP.(2000). Global Programme on Sustainable Livelihoods. UNOPS GLO/96/508/F/11/31. UNDP
- Vaidyanathan, A. (2005). 'Employment Guarantee and Decentralization', *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 16.
- White, Howard (2009): "Theory based Impact Evaluation: Principles and Practice": Working Paper No. 3 [New Delhi: International Initiative for Impact Evaluation].