



Climate Resilience and Socio-Economic Empowerment: The Transformative Impact of MGNREGA on Rural India

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Abstract:

We are living in a world of changes. May it be change in the socio-economic conditions or the climate? Both these changes have a severe impact on people residing in villages of India who mostly rely on their agricultural way of living. In this context of Indian rural development, MGNREGA is a key program that tackles the various issues that rural populations encounter. This article examines how important MGNREGA is to reducing the negative consequences of this climate change on rural livelihoods, especially for women and small-scale farmers. MGNREGA improves income stability, lessens distress migration, and gives women more social and economic power by guaranteeing employment. The program's effects on environmental sustainability, natural resource management, and the development of rural infrastructure are also evaluated. This study demonstrates the important effects of MGNREGA on skill development, nutrition, health, and poverty alleviation through case studies and success stories. It also explores implementation difficulties and provides policy suggestions to make the program stronger.

Keywords: Poverty, Uncertainty, Climate, Employment, Rural,

Introduction:

Human societies have evolved through several stages, starting from the hunting-gathering societies where survival depended on foraging and hunting. With the advent of settled agriculture, communities transitioned to an agricultural society, allowing for the cultivation of crops and domestication of animals. This transformation laid the foundation for the development of more complex societies. The Industrial Revolution marked the next significant shift, propelling humanity into the industrial or modern society characterised by rapid technological advancements and urbanisation. Despite these global shifts, a significant portion of India's population remains deeply rooted in agriculture. Rural India, in particular, continues to rely heavily on agricultural practices for sustenance and livelihood. Within this agricultural framework, there exists a diversity of farming methods ranging from subsistence farming to commercial agriculture. However, the poorest segments of the rural population often engage in small-scale subsistence farming, which is marked by low productivity and minimal economic returns. This form of farming in rural India is fraught with uncertainty, driven by factors such as erratic climate patterns and volatile market rates. Unpredictable weather conditions, including droughts and floods, severely impact agricultural output, making it difficult for small farmers to maintain a stable income. Several studies have found that cyclonic storms forming in the Bay of Bengal have become fiercer and more frequent, particularly over the last decade, due to rising sea

surface temperatures. Additionally, fluctuations in market prices for agricultural products further exacerbate the economic vulnerabilities faced by these communities.

To address these pressing issues, the Government of India introduced the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). This landmark legislation aims to enhance livelihood security in rural areas by providing at least 100 days of wage employment in a financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work. MGNREGA not only offers a safety net for the rural poor by ensuring a steady source of income but also contributes to the creation of durable assets that improve agricultural productivity and resilience. The MGNREGA scheme, credited with alleviating poverty, empowering women, and providing jobs to those affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, is now also enhancing climate resilience in communities frequently hit by floods, droughts, and erosion (Nagaraj, 2022).

Salient features of MGNREGA

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is designed to enhance livelihood security and promote sustainable development in rural India through several key features:

1. **Legal Guarantee of Employment:** MGNREGA provides a legal assurance of wage employment to adult members of rural households willing to perform unskilled manual labor, with each household entitled to a maximum of 100 days of employment per year.
2. **Universal Applicability:** The scheme is applicable to all villages within a district, ensuring broad coverage and impact across rural India.
3. **Right to Register:** Every rural household has the right to register under MGNREGA. Registration is straightforward and accessible, promoting widespread participation.
4. **Issuance of Job Cards:** Each registered household receives a job card within 15 days of application submission, which is essential for accessing employment under MGNREGA.
5. **Employment Application:** Registered job card holders can apply for work either individually or in groups, with a minimum of 10 job seekers required to initiate a new project under the scheme.
6. **Sanctioning Works:** Employment is provided by approving one of the projects listed under the “Shelf of Works,” which are identified and prioritized by the village community. This ensures that work begins within 15 days of receiving an application.
7. **Community-Selected Projects:** The village community has the authority to choose projects under eight permissible categories, ensuring local relevance and need. These projects are planned for a five-year period based on job demand and entitled person-days.
8. **Adherence to Guidelines:** Proposed works by the village community cannot be altered unless they fail to conform to MGNREGA guidelines, safeguarding community interests.
9. **Proximity of Work:** Employment is provided within a 5 km radius of the village. If work is beyond this range, job seekers receive an additional 10% of the minimum wage to cover travel costs.
10. **Unemployment Allowance:** If the state government fails to provide employment to eligible families within 15 days of their application, they must pay a compensatory daily unemployment allowance. This is 25% of the minimum wage for the first 30 days and 50% for the remainder of the year.
11. **Wage Rates and Payment:** Wages under MGNREGA are aligned with the State Minimum Wage rate as per the Minimum Wages Act, 1948. Currently, the wage rates are Rs. 117/- for unskilled work and Rs. 120/-

for skilled labour. Importantly, men and women receive equal pay, and wages are disbursed within a fortnight.

12. Women Participation: The scheme mandates that at least one-third of the beneficiaries should be women, promoting gender inclusivity and economic empowerment.

13. Worksite Facilities: MGNREGA ensures that worksites provide basic amenities such as creches, drinking water, and shade, enhancing the working conditions for labourers.

14. Resource Allocation: A 60:40 wage-to-material ratio is maintained for all projects to ensure a balance between labour costs and material expenses.

15. No Contractors or Machinery: The scheme prohibits the use of contractors and machinery, emphasising manual labour and maximising employment opportunities.

16. Grievance Redressal Mechanism: A robust grievance redressal system is established to address and resolve any issues or complaints, ensuring a responsive implementation process.

17. Mandatory Social Audit: All MGNREGA projects undergo a social audit to maintain transparency and accountability. This process involves the community in auditing the works done, ensuring that funds are used effectively and as intended.

18. RTI Compliance: Provisions of the Right to Information (RTI) Act are fully applicable to MGNREGA, ensuring that all processes and data are transparent and accessible to the public.

19. Regular Monitoring and Evaluation: The scheme includes regular monitoring and evaluation by local, state, and central authorities to ensure effective implementation and to address any emerging issues promptly.

20. Emphasis on Sustainable Development: Projects undertaken under MGNREGA often focus on sustainable development goals, including water conservation, afforestation, and soil conservation, which contribute to long-term rural development.

21. Capacity Building and Training: The scheme includes provisions for capacity building and training for workers, local officials, and community members to ensure efficient implementation and to enhance the skill sets of rural laborers.

22. Financial Inclusion: Payments to workers are made through bank accounts or post office accounts, promoting financial inclusion and ensuring that wages are received directly by the beneficiaries without any intermediaries.

These features collectively make MGNREGA a comprehensive and impactful scheme for rural development, addressing economic vulnerabilities, promoting gender equality, and fostering sustainable growth. India's sustainable development goals are being achieved directly or indirectly through the federal MGNREGA program, which employs a decentralized approach. This strategy enhances resource efficiency to meet current needs while preserving resources for future generations. Rooted in economic, social, and ecological principles, MGNREGA promotes sustainable human development (Yadav, 2024).

Impact of Climate Change and Migration on Rural Communities

Climate change has severely impacted rural communities in India, particularly those reliant on agriculture. Erratic rainfall, prolonged droughts, and unexpected floods disrupt crop cycles, leading to reduced agricultural productivity and financial instability. These adverse climatic conditions result in crop failures,

loss of livestock, and increased costs for adaptive measures, which strain already limited resources. Consequently, many rural inhabitants, especially men, migrate to urban areas seeking better economic opportunities, leading to family fragmentation, overburdened urban infrastructure, and the erosion of traditional agricultural knowledge.

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) plays a crucial role in mitigating these impacts by providing a legal guarantee of up to 100 days of wage employment per household, thus ensuring economic stability and reducing the need for distress migration. By offering a steady source of income, MGNREGA helps rural families manage economic shocks and maintain their livelihoods despite agricultural uncertainties. The scheme's emphasis on equal pay for men and women and prompt wage payments further enhances its effectiveness in supporting rural households.

In addition to economic support, MGNREGA promotes community-driven projects that address local needs and enhance resilience to climate change. Projects such as water harvesting, soil and water conservation, and afforestation improve agricultural productivity and environmental sustainability. During natural disasters, MGNREGA provides immediate employment opportunities, facilitating rapid recovery and rebuilding efforts. The provision of worksite facilities like creches, drinking water, and shade ensures better working conditions, particularly benefiting women with young children. MGNREGA is designed to be climate-smart, aiding both mitigation and adaptation efforts. It implements strategies to reduce climate crisis risks while offering legally mandated, demand-driven employment to economically disadvantaged households (Sharma, 2021).

MGNREGA also focuses on capacity building and financial inclusion, promoting sustainable development and long-term resilience. Direct wage payments through bank or post office accounts reduce leakages and ensure transparency. Training programs for workers and local officials build local capacity for effective project implementation. By addressing the economic vulnerabilities and promoting sustainable practices, MGNREGA significantly enhances the resilience and stability of rural communities, reducing the need for migration and ensuring a more secure and prosperous future for rural India. MGNREGA has not only provided a safety net but has also led to the creation of numerous individual and community soak pits, contributing to cleaner villages and enhancing rural ecosystem functions. The promotion of vermicomposting pits has improved soil fertility and supported organic farming practices. Solid waste management projects, in alignment with the Swachh Bharat Mission, have significantly transformed village environments. Additionally, bio-gas plants implemented through MGNREGA convergence have helped mitigate greenhouse gas emissions. Authors should consider the adaptation and mitigation strategies employed in promoting climate-smart villages, including flood and landslide management strategies undertaken through MGNREGA.

Conclusion:

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) has proven to be a transformative initiative in the context of rural development in India, especially amidst the challenges posed by climate change. By offering a legal guarantee of wage employment, MGNREGA provides a crucial economic safety net that enhances income stability for rural households, thus reducing the need for distress migration. This is particularly vital for women and small-scale farmers who are most vulnerable to the uncertainties of climate and market fluctuations. MGNREGA's community-driven projects not only support immediate employment needs but also contribute to long-term environmental sustainability. Initiatives such as water harvesting, soil conservation, and afforestation improve agricultural productivity and resilience. Furthermore, the scheme's alignment with national missions like Swachh Bharat and its promotion of vermicomposting and biogas plants underscore its role in enhancing rural ecosystem functions and mitigating greenhouse gas emissions. MGNREGA also has a profound social impact by empowering women through guaranteed employment and equal pay, and by improving living conditions through the provision of

essential worksite facilities. The program also promotes financial inclusion and skill development, further strengthening the resilience and capacity of rural communities.

The evidence from various case studies and success stories demonstrates that MGNREGA is instrumental in poverty alleviation, infrastructure development, and social empowerment in rural India. However, ongoing challenges in implementation require continuous policy refinement and robust grievance redressal mechanisms to ensure the program's efficacy and reach. By addressing these challenges, MGNREGA can further solidify its role in fostering sustainable and inclusive rural development, ultimately contributing to a more secure and prosperous future for rural India.

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