

Strengthening Natural Resource Management Components under Mahatma Gandhi NREGA

Recommendations by National Advisory Council (NAC)

1. Natural resources are the pre-eminent source of rural livelihoods in India. Agriculture provides livelihoods to a majority of people through subsistence and employment. Apart from agriculture, rural people depend on land and water and forest resources to rear livestock and collect fuel and a wide range of products for consumption and trade. Natural resources are also the primary buffers for rural people. Above all, the food and water security of the entire nation depends on natural resources. Thus, an improved, more equitable and sustainable management of natural resources not only makes for a sound strategy to remove rural poverty and enhance rural livelihoods but is also an imperative for national security.

2. Natural resource management (NRM) encompasses multiple arenas in policy and action, including widely contested themes like ownership and management of forests, regulation of groundwater and husbandry of our rivers. However, in the instant case we are concerned with issues most directly affecting agriculture and farm-based livelihoods in rain-fed regions, namely, the management of land and rainwater. About 60 percent of our agriculture is rain-fed and much of it is in the undulating, hilly and mountainous regions. There has been little public investment in rain-fed regions, leading to widespread resource degradation, low productivity and mass poverty. Developing rain-fed regions calls for husbandry of rainwater and land as the terrain inhibits widespread irrigation. Being labour intensive, such activities would create large scale employment for unskilled workers in the short run and enhance productivity, food security and livelihoods perpetually. It is for this reason that these activities have been accorded the highest priority under MGNREGA and placed in the Act itself, with clear focus on several works that can be taken up on the farms of SC and ST, communities, IAY beneficiaries, BPL, marginal and small farmers such as land development, water-harvesting and water conserving structures, horticulture, farm forestry etc.

3. The proportion of such works is reportedly increasing under MGNREGA. However, even where such activities are taken, the focus tends to be on discrete works, such as large ponds, canals, open wells, etc. in the manner of typical 'relief works'. Planned and systematic development of land and husbandry of rainwater following watershed principles to sustainably enhance farm productivity and incomes of poor people is yet to become the central focus of MGNREGA works across the country.

4. *Constraints identified*

4.1 **Weak Implementation Structure:** The programme is being implemented in a manner of a routine Centrally Sponsored (relief) Scheme in spite of the complex processes envisaged for planning, implementation, targeting, selection of works, payment, audit, etc. In the event, planning and implementation has varied greatly across States depending on their initiative.

- 4.2 Weak Planning Capability at the Village and Gram Panchayat Levels:** The Act requires that at least 50 percent of MGNREGA works be planned and executed by Gram Panchayats as recommended by Gram Sabhas and Ward Sabhas. With the possible exception of Kerala, PRIs have had no experience whatsoever of planning and executing village development works and do not have any technical staff.
- 4.3 Top-down Selection of Works:** Though the Act calls for creation of a ‘shelf of works’ approved by the Gram Sabha, works are usually chosen by the Programme Officer in the manner of erstwhile relief works and Gram Sabha approval is taken *post facto* in a perfunctory manner.
- 4.4 Absence of Participatory Planning:** The PRI structure varies across States and in most cases Gram Sabhas are too large to carry out participatory planning. Widespread participation is therefore missing which partly explains the absence of suitable NRM works.
- 4.5 No Insistence on NRM Focus:** Though the Act clearly spells out the sequence of priority in selecting works and the first six out of eight categories of works indicated pertain to NRM, there is no built-in mechanism to ensure that the prescribed sequence is maintained.
- 4.6 Poor convergence with productivity enhancing schemes.**

5. Fundamental Principles

Recommendations include a set of fundamental principles to guide the implementation of MGNREGA by State Governments:

The fundamental principles which need to be notified are:

- 5.1 At least two-thirds of all works in financial terms at the Block/Mandal level under MGNREGA shall focus on development of land and water resources to result in sustainable increase in productivity of such resources and incomes to the poor.
- 5.2 No other works will be taken up in a Gram Panchayat under MGNREGA until the NRM works proposed by the Gram Panchayat, based on hamlet level plans, are implemented.
- 5.3 There shall be overriding priority on developing assets of the poor, especially of BPL, SC and ST households and land allotted under FRA after saturation of these categories lands of small and marginal farmers will be taken up.
- 5.4 Works shall be taken up on the basis of multi-year plans drawn at the level of a natural village or hamlet through a participative process. The plans shall be based on scientific principles (watershed principles) to develop the natural resource base in a village. Such plans shall have built-in provision for convergence of productivity enhancing and income enhancing schemes for farmers schemes, such as Rashtriya

Krishi Vikas Yojana (RKVY) /Rainfed Areas Development Program (RADP), National Horticulture Mission (NHM), National Rural Livelihoods Mission, etc. to enhance productivity and incomes.

- 5.5 Section 1 of Schedule I of MGNREGA refers to the permitted works under MGNREGS. Works such as water conservation and water harvesting, drought proofing (including afforestation and tree plantation), renovation of traditional water bodies including desilting of tanks, land development and flood control are confined to Common Lands, whereas item (iv) of Section 1 of the Schedule refers to works to be taken up on individual lands belonging to the SC/STs or BPL families or IAY beneficiaries or small and marginal farmers. It is recommended that measures to reduce rainwater run-off, such as field bunds, trenches, etc. shall be taken up on all lands in the village in line with watershed principles, provided land belonging to SC, ST, BPL and small and marginal farmers are saturated first. Under category of (iv), works such as provision of irrigation facilities including irrigation wells, horticulture, planting of trees, herbs, grasses, land leveling, boulder removal and measures to enhance soil fertility such as tank silt application shall be taken only on land belonging to SC, ST, BPL, IAY beneficiaries, small and marginal farmers, provided works on lands of small and marginal farmers will be taken up only after saturating lands of SC, ST, BPL farmers and IAY beneficiaries.
- 5.6 Preference will be for community wells where irrigation wells are taken up.
- 5.7 MGNREGA plans shall override all other plans made for watershed development by any other agency, including government departments.
- 5.8 The systems of implementation shall ensure greater say of key stakeholders, e.g. wage seekers, in deciding the type of works and the timing for their opening.
- 5.9 Mechanisms for capacity building to plan and implement natural resource development schemes shall be institutionalized with greater participation of civil society organizations working in the field.

6. Recommendations

The specific recommendations are grouped into the following themes:

- A. Planning, and Institutional Arrangements
- B. Support Systems for Capacity Building
- C. Financial Arrangements
- D. Execution of NRM Works under MGNREGA
- E. Convergence with productivity enhancing schemes

A. Planning and Institutional Arrangements

A clearly defined planning and execution process and the necessary institutional arrangements may be put in place for strengthening the NRM component under MGNREGA. The following arrangements are recommended on the basis of the deliberations.

Habitation Level

- 6.1 A natural habitation shall be the unit for planning and execution of MGNREGA.
- 6.2 A “Habitation Level Committee” (HLC) shall be constituted by the “Habitation Assembly” consisting of all adult inhabitants of the habitation. The Ward member will be the chairperson of the HLC and it would have representation from different groups such as MGNREGA Fixed Labour Groups, Habitation level watershed committees, SHGs and other such organisations of the poor, small and marginal farmer households, landless/asset-less agricultural workers, women, and SC/ST persons. Half the members of HLC should be women. The HLC will be the agency for planning and execution of NRM works under MGNREGA with fully delegated powers of the Gram Panchayat for the purposes of MGNREGA. This is a change from the current system in which the Gram Panchayat is the sole agency. The plans prepared by the HLC shall be placed before the Habitation Assembly for its approval. Where the statutory Gram Sabha or Ward Sabha is co-terminus with the natural habitation, it will discharge the functions of the Habitation Assembly.
- 6.3 The HLC shall make a five-year perspective plan, for every five years, for the development of natural resources within the boundaries of the habitation.
- 6.4 The planning process shall cover measures which enhance the quality of management of natural resources with specific focus on in-situ rainwater harvesting to minimize rainwater run-off, bringing fallow lands into cultivation, putting common lands to productive use, developing the lands of SC/ST and small and marginal farmers so as to enhance their productivity and strengthen livelihoods.
- 6.5 Rainwater harvesting measures, such as field bunds, trenches, farm ponds and check dams shall be taken up on all the lands in the village including private lands belonging to all categories of ownership and common and public land. It will be ensured, however, that lands belonging to SC, ST and BPL families are covered first on priority basis, followed by land belonging to small and marginal farmers. After completing these lands, village common and grazing lands would be covered on second priority. After saturating these categories of lands, other categories of land would be taken up for these activities.
- 6.6 Land development, which includes land leveling, horticulture, irrigation (including open wells and deepening of wells), planting of trees, herbs, grasses, fodder trees, boulder removal, soil fertility measures such as tank silt application including transportation, composting, green manuring, etc. shall be limited to SC, ST, small and marginal farmers’ lands. Works on lands of small and marginal farmers will be taken up only after saturating lands of SC and ST and BPL.
- 6.7 In each of the works specified in Schedule I of the Act, the resources of the poor, especially BPL, SCs and STs, shall be given overriding priority.
- 6.8 Sectoral plans covering fisheries, horticulture, trees/fodder development, soil fertility improvement, irrigation, etc. shall also be prepared.
- 6.9 Perspective plans will include maintenance of works earlier completed.
- 6.10 HLC shall file the perspective plan in the Gram Panchayat and get it incorporated in the Gram Panchayat records.
- 6.11 The HLC shall draw annual action plan from the perspective plan, based on the

- annual labour budget indicated to it by the Gram Panchayat and shall get the plan approved by the Gram Panchayat.
- 6.12 HLC shall ensure execution of the annual action plan after its approval by the Gram Panchayat by opening works based on the demand for work.
 - 6.13 HLC shall constitute labour groups of about 10 to 20 workers in consultation with the wage seekers and assign works to each labour group for the whole year such that all the wage seekers shall receive 100 days' work assured under the Act.
 - 6.14 Muster roll shall be maintained by the 'mate' of the respective labour group so as to actively involve the labour groups in implementation.
 - 6.15 Investments on forest lands could be made as per the action plans developed jointly by the Joint Forest Management Committees and HLC. These action plans would also be jointly executed by these institutions.
 - 6.16 Since Natural Resource Management related works are also taken up on community lands, rights over community lands should be clearly recorded in the revenue records and inventory of SC and ST lands is made available for each habitation.
 - 6.17 **Barefoot Professionals:** HLC would be assisted by local youth, called "para worker/ barefoot professional/ volunteer". They will be selected by the Habitation Assembly based on a set of selection criteria (literate person, who is also an active wage seeker and would have worked at least 25 days under MGNREGA/ a senior mate). Their main function is to assist the HLC in planning, institution development and monitoring of works. They would be paid from MGNREGA under skilled workers' component for services.
 - 6.18 **Planning Support Team:** A Planning Support Team will be constituted to support HLC with appropriate technical advice on the choice of technology, etc. The Planning Support Team will consist of representatives of HLC, barefoot professionals and resource persons from Cluster Level Technical Support Team and Block Level Resource Team (described later).
 - 6.19 The State Government shall assess the time required for taking up planning in each habitation and earmark /declare that period as planning period. It is advisable that peak monsoon period (July-September) during which demand for wage labour is low is treated as planning period.

Gram Panchayat Level

- 6.20 Each Gram Panchayat will have a MGNREGA sub-committee (GPSC), constituted with two representatives from each HLC. GPSC will be chaired by the Sarpanch/ Gram Pradhan.
- 6.21 GPSC will discharge the following functions:
 - a. Consolidate all habitation level action plans, duly verifying if the plans are in accordance with the prioritization of the Act and within the budget allotted.
 - b. Incorporate inter-hamlet works in the perspective plans.
 - c. Maintain a record of the perspective plans for each habitation under its jurisdiction.
 - d. Allocate budget to each habitation based on the number of active job cards in

- e. the habitation.
 - e. Recommend approval of the habitation/consolidated plans to the Gram Sabha every year in November.
 - f. Plan for execution of works depending on the seasons.
 - g. Open up works, as per the plan at the habitation level.
- 6.22 The Technical Assistant of Gram Panchayat will assist each HLC to ensure proper planning as well as execution of plans, measurements and payments to wage seekers.
- 6.23 Plans would be executed by members of user groups/ labour groups/ SHGs/ farmers groups based on the approval of Habitation Assembly.
- 6.24 District Programme Coordinator and District Collector shall make updated land records available to the HLC and GPSC for planning.

Block/Cluster Level

- 6.25 **Cluster Level Technical Support Team:** For every cluster of Gram Panchayats (covering about 5,000 hectare or 500 families and constituting a milli-watershed), a three to four member multi-disciplinary (engineering/ social work /agriculture/ other relevant disciplines) Technical Support Team (TST) should be constituted. The TST will provide training and technical guidance to the barefoot professionals and would support the process of planning and institution development, including formation and training of HLC and GPSC and Gram Panchayat members. The TST would also conduct random checks of the measurements taken by the Technical Assistants.
- 6.26 **Block Resource Centre (BRC):** A BRC will be appointed as a resource and facilitation centre for knowledge inputs, capacity building and facilitation of convergence. The BRC will be outside the MGNREGA structure. Existing resource organizations from voluntary sector could be identified as BRC. The MGNREGA Mission shall provide financial assistance to these BRCs for performing the expected functions under MGNREGA.
- 6.27 The BRC will perform the following functions:
- a. Provide technical inputs for planning, including those sourced from a wider network of resource persons/ institutions.
 - b. Maintain data bases on local natural resource endowment (such as groundwater, rainfall, soils, etc.) needed for planning. The BRC will also access maps of each habitation and supply the same to the HLC.
 - c. Identify bottlenecks in the execution of MGNREGA and bring those to the notice of district/ State level officers for necessary action.
 - d. Ensure convergence between MGNREGA and other production-oriented schemes of government so that assets created under MGNREGA are productively used by poor people to enhance their incomes.

District Level

- 6.28 **District Level Mission Directorate:** There shall be a Mission Directorate at the district level with a team of professionals. The directorate will be responsible for overall

coordination and supervision of MGNREGA in the district. It will also coordinate with other departments to bring about convergence and with Resource Support Organizations that are engaged with MGNREGA. It will supervise the Cluster Level Technical Support Teams.

Central and State Level

- 6.29** There shall be a **National Mahatma Gandhi Rozgar Mission** in the Government of India, Ministry of Rural Development and counterpart Missions at the State level with the mandate of implementing MGNREGA and taking up NRM under MGNREGA. This Mission structure would have dedicated teams of professionals at the Central and State level. The Mission will provide leadership to the NRM agenda under MGNREGA by issuing guidelines for planning and execution of works, defining roles of different departments/ agencies in MGNREGA, facilitating the process of developing partnerships with civil society organizations, developing capacity building strategies and manuals for technology application. It will also facilitate convergence of different schemes/ programmes with MGNREGA such as IWMP, RKVY, RADP, NRLM, BRGF, NRHM, etc. The Mission will ensure that policies, procedures, guidelines of different projects/ departments do not conflict with the larger purpose of MGNREGA.
- 6.30** States shall issue specific guidelines that describe the process of planning and also an illustrative list of specific measures/ activities which could be included under NRM component of MGNREGA, such as activities that reduce rainwater run-off, enhance soil health, promote production of biomass and harvest rainwater run-off. These guidelines would help the project teams and village community to develop greater clarity on the possible initiatives under NRM components.
- 6.31** There is a need to develop greater clarity on the priorities and allowable activities under MGNREGA. Each State should develop State-specific guidelines/ technology manuals for ensuring that appropriate technical interventions are included in the NRM action plans under MGNREGA. Each State should publish an illustrative Directory of Works that can be taken up in each of the categories of permitted works under MGNREGA.
- 6.32 Consortium of Resource Organizations:** The State Mission will identify reputed Resource Organizations from voluntary sector and research institutions and facilitate the process of constituting a Consortium of Resource Organizations. The Consortium shall function as an advisory group to the State/ district level Mission on technology applications. The facilitation costs of Resource Support Organizations would be met from MGNREGA. The members of the Consortium of Resource Organizations will perform the following roles in strengthening NRM component under MGNREGA:
- a. Function as Cluster Level Technical Support Team for a cluster of Gram Panchayats.
 - b. Anchor Block Level Resource Centres and provide capacity building services to various stakeholders in the process.
 - c. Take up pilots on a large scale to develop and demonstrate innovative NRM interventions under MGNREGA.
 - d. Facilitate convergence of other projects/ schemes with MGNREGA.

- e. Ensure that investments under MGNREGA are translated into productive assets and enhance livelihoods for the rural poor.
- f. Identify new activities for inclusion as NRM works under MGNREGA along with appropriate cost norms.

B. Capacity Building Support System

- 6.33 Capacity building should lead to enhancement of capacities to conceptualise and design and not just the capacity to execute specific tasks. It must have a larger goal of developing human resource capability to support the local self-governing institutions.
- 6.34 Capacity building effort should go beyond one-time training and should be sustained over a long term. Multiple tools (audio visuals, exposure visits; communication campaigns, etc.) should be used. Practitioners should become resource persons and facilitate learning processes.
- 6.35 Each State shall develop a capacity building strategy for the MGNREGA functionaries on NRM components, with the support of Consortium of Resource Organizations. The broad contours of this capacity building strategy should be the following:
- 6.36 Technical Support Consortia should be established at the national and State levels with the help of existing technical institutions and reputed NGOs and facilitated to work with Gram Sabhas.
- 6.37 “Environment Saviour Award” may be instituted for villages/Panchayats that have done exemplary watershed development work to develop their village resources by using MGNREGS to acknowledge the contribution of the workforce.
- 6.38 Rajiv Gandhi Kendras should be developed as facilitation centres for training, planning and education, focusing on Natural Resource Management. Each such Kendras could be provided with a computer. As regards the 6 per cent administrative cost provided under Mahatma Gandhi NREGA, a proportion of the same should be earmarked for capacity building and planning purposes:
 - a. **Capacity Building Needs Assessment:** A systematic analysis of learning needs (in the context of NRM and MGNREGA) of different categories of project partners (wage seekers to State level mission director) and outcomes at each level (knowledge, skills and attitude related changes).
 - b. **Providing Capacity Building Inputs:** Capacity building effort should be continuous and sustained over long term, with use of multiple tools viz. audio visuals, exposure visits, communication campaigns, etc. The best practitioners from villages can also be used as Community Resource persons to provide training at the village level itself.
 - c. **Capacity Building Themes:** Capacity building needs assessment themes would include general awareness on entitlements under MGNREGA, process of planning, social audits, and technical issues such as sustainable agriculture including animal husbandry and fisheries, regeneration of soils, soil and moisture conservation, agro-forestry, natural resources (including water) conservation technologies, quality control and measurements, etc.

- 6.39** Each State shall identify a Consortium of Resource Organizations, which is the backbone of the capacity building delivery system for MGNREGA. These Resource Support Organizations would collaborate/ network with other local NGOs/ resource organizations and support the NRM component under MGNREGA. NIRD could coordinate with the above Resource Support Organizations and facilitate the process of developing State or agro-climatic zone specific capacity building strategies for MGNREGA.
- 6.40** Cost norms for capacity building would be as per State specific strategy/ guidelines. However, these norms should be broadly within the norms prescribed by Government of India.
- 6.41** The budget for capacity building should be an integral part of the overall action plan and budget at the habitation/Gram Panchayat level, approved by the Gram Sabha.

C. Financial Arrangements

- 6.42** In order to bring sustained focus on NRM in MGNREGA works, funds shall be earmarked as follows:
- a.** An amount not exceeding 1% of the total outlay shall be allocated for planning in addition to current allocation of 6% administrative costs. The planning costs should include the services of the Planning Support Teams.
 - b.** An amount not exceeding 2% of the total outlay shall be used for Planning and capacity building and facilitation in addition to current allocation of 6% for administrative costs.

D. Execution of NRM Works under MGNREGA

- 6.43** Each State shall develop a “Project Cycle” of different steps in execution of works under NRM components of MGNREGA. This project cycle would help not only in monitoring the works, but also in smooth execution of works. More importantly, this project cycle would ensure that wage payments are made within 15 days after the work is performed.
- 6.44** Annual plans of Gram Panchayats must be given technical and administrative sanctions in one go, in place of the current practice of sanctioning of individual works.
- 6.45** Once the annual plans of a Gram Panchayat are given technical and administrative sanction, the Gram Panchayat/HLC must be authorized to start work by issuing work orders ‘on demand’.
- 6.46** Since NRM works are often scattered across the landscape of the village, States must develop State specific systems for maintenance of Muster Rolls in decentralized manner. Innovative methods need to be evolved for measurement of work done, including assigning certain quantities for each milestone reached.
- 6.47** Technical Assistants must be empowered to record measurements. Positioning of

technical assistants and Junior Engineers should be based on financial outlay in a given habitation/ Gram Panchayat for NRM works.

- 6.48** All MGNREGA job card holders from a habitation, desirous of working in MGNREGA works during the year should be organised into MGNREGA fixed labour groups (FLGs), consisting of 10 to 20 wage seekers. Each FLG should be formally notified and given a unique ID by the District Programme Coordinator.
- 6.49** Schemes that promote sustainable natural resource management and can cater to the full demand for labour for the year for a FLG should be granted technical sanction and administrative approval in the beginning of the financial year itself and the work order along with blank muster rolls should be handed over to the mate in charge of each FLG in the beginning of each financial year by the HLC.
- 6.50** Each State shall notify a Detailed Payment Process Cycle covering muster roll maintenance, recording measurements, transfer of funds to payment agencies and actual date of payments to wage seekers at the village level. The States shall also institute a monitoring system so that wage seekers receive payments within a maximum of 15 days after completion of the works.

E. Convergence with productivity- enhancing schemes

- 6.51** Each State shall undertake convergence of NRM related assets created under MGNREGS, with productivity enhancing schemes. Central Government or State Government schemes in the agriculture and allied sector, particularly schemes such as Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana, National Horticulture Mission, National Rural Livelihood Mission, programmes related to fisheries, fodder and forage, agro and farm forestry, water conservation and minor irrigation programmes need to be meaningfully converged with the NRM assets created under MGNREGS. This will result in expansion of the livelihood asset base of the rural households, leading to enhanced agricultural productivity and production, and sustainable livelihood security. The Ministry of Rural Development may issue detailed guidelines in this regard.