

India: Samarthan's Campaign to Make Real the Right to Work

In 2005 the government of India passed the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA). The Act said that every rural household was entitled to 100 days per year of unskilled employment on public works projects.

India's economy has grown at an average annual rate above 7 percent over the last decade. But the country still has more poor people than any other country. Rural households are the worst off. The NREGA was a bold step to address the widespread poverty.

The NREGA says that each of India's local councils, the gram panchayats, must make a list of needed public works projects such as digging wells, contouring land, horticulture, toilet construction, and road construction. Village officials must also work with officials at higher levels to prepare a labor budget for the year. Any rural resident adult who submits a simple application form to the local official must then be given work within 15 days. If no work is given, the person must instead be given an unemployment allowance.

One problem with the scheme is that many eligible people are not aware of it. Also, many poor families do not have the "job card" that they need to participate. For those who apply, there can be bureaucratic problems. The panchayat secretaries do not always give a written receipt for the job application. The panchayat officials also sometimes choose to use machinery rather than human labor. The village secretaries sometimes delay giving approval for labor and materials. Local officials sometimes work with bank and higher-level officials to allocate money to "ghost" workers, so that they get the money instead.

There are also delays in payment. Payments are made into bank accounts, and sometimes there are no branches of the bank nearby. When poor people travel to the bank to get their money, bank officials sometimes say that they are too busy to help them. All these problems encourage poor people to migrate in search of work rather than to participate in the program near their rural homes.

Samarthan is a non-governmental organization that was established in 1994 to support the development of civil society groups in the state of Madhya Pradesh. It focuses on the poor and disadvantaged sections of the society. The government of India chose Madhya Pradesh to launch NREGA in 2006. Samarthan has therefore been involved in monitoring the program since its earliest days.

Samarthan began by organizing social audits of the program in several districts. The social audits involved village gatherings where government records from the program were read out for everyone to hear, including the names of those who were recorded as working on the program.

Samarthan also developed a system for tracking the paperwork and payments made. For example, it looked at the certificates issued by officials who verify the completion of public works projects. It looked at the village-level records of the number of persons given work, wages paid, delays in payment, and unemployment allowance. Together with the social audits, this analysis revealed the pattern of abuses.

To address lack of awareness of the program, Samarthan organized village youth to distribute the application forms for NREGA. The application forms were also made available in the village grocery shops. Samarthan told people that they must ensure that they get a dated receipt for their application so that they could get the unemployment allowance if they were not given work. Unfortunately, some of the secretaries threatened the

workers who asked for a dated receipt, saying that those who insisted on a receipt would only get work after 15 days, whilst those who did not would be called to work within two to three days. However, other officials appreciated Samarthan's work. One district-level official had a copy of Samarthan's pamphlet sent to all residents in the district living below the poverty line.

Samarthan discovered in its work that village-level leaders did not have the capacity to plan the necessary works projects or to budget for the work because they had not been properly trained by the government. Samarthan therefore assisted in building the skills of these officials. This assistance increased the effectiveness of the program and also helped to reduce the officials' opposition to Samarthan's activities.

In addition to the other activities, Samarthan provided the local press with evidence-based news stories. It organized a workshop of civil society organizations and the press to raise journalists' awareness of development issues, including NREGA. This press coverage angered some government officials. When this anger was worst, Samarthan staff feared to work in some villages where the worst problems had been reported.