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Samarthan's Campaign to Improve Access to the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme in India

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When it passed the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) in 2005, the government of India guaranteed the country's rural poor the "right to work" and the right to livelihood security.² Through this Act the government accepted the responsibility for providing a minimum of 100 days of unskilled work per year to every poor rural family that needs employment. However, the implementation of NREGA has been ridden with bureaucratic glitches and widespread corruption.

The first phase of NREGA was launched in February 2006 in 18 districts of Madhya Pradesh, and by the 2008-09 financial year all of the state's districts were covered by NREGA. Samarthan, a civil society organization (CSO) in India that works in the states of Madhya Pradesh (MP) and Chhattisgarh, has been monitoring the implementation of NREGA since it was enacted. Samarthan facilitated social audits of NREGA implementation in many districts and conducted two studies on the status of NREGA implementation. Through these audits and studies, Samarthan found that the people were not aware of what they were entitled to under NREGA. For instance, they did not know that they could demand work under the law, how to demand this work, or what recourse they had if they were not given work or did not receive payment for their work within the time period stipulated by NREGA.

Box 1: How is NREGA implemented?

The Act stipulates that the *panchayati raj* institutions should be the key agencies for implementing the program. The three-tier structure of the *panchayati raj* system of governance consists of elected executive bodies of people's representatives at the village, the block (20 to 100 villages), and district levels. These elected councils, which traditionally comprised five respected elders chosen by the village, are called *panchayats*. The village council (*gram panchayat*) is accountable to the general body of the village, known as the *gram-sabha*. The block council (*janpad panchayat*) is the intermediary in the three-tier system and is at the center of development work. The *zilla parishad* (district council) is at the apex of three-tier system.

In terms of NREGA, the *gram panchayat* should prepare and approve a list of public works projects, which should be undertaken whenever there is a demand for work under the law. The village secretary gets administrative and technical approval for the list of works from the *janpad panchayat*. The *gram panchayat*, the Additional Program Officer (APO) at the block level, and the Program Officer (PO) at the district level prepare a labor budget for the year, which accounts for the number of job-card holders who might need work during the year. Funds are allocated accordingly.

The village secretary maintains a muster roll of the people working on projects under NREGA and the work done and submits a weekly muster (project inventories of labor and materials used) to the *janpad panchayat* for technical evaluation. A payment order or check is subsequently issued to the bank account of the *gram panchayat* based on the muster, and the *gram panchayat* makes the payment order for the bank to transfer wages into the individual bank accounts of the workers.

If a member of a registered household has not been allocated work within 15 days of applying for work through NREGA, an unemployment allowance must be paid to that individual.

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² It was later renamed the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA).

Based on insights gleaned from the social audits, Samarthan planned systematic interventions in five villages in the Sehore block of the Sehore district and five villages in the Panna block of the Panna district, both in Madhya Pradesh. As a result of Samarthan's campaign, more of the poor became aware of their rights under NREGA and demanded and received work, and the local implementation structures of NREGA were strengthened.

1. Issues highlighted by the Samarthan campaign

(i) *The poor were not demanding work under NREGA*

The essence of NREGA lies in the guarantee that if there is a legitimate demand for work, it will be met within 15 days. The demand, which needs to be made on a simple application form by all adults seeking work, is submitted to the secretary or the *sarpanch* (leader) of the gram panchayat. Not only can a person receive paid employment under NREGA but, once they have demanded work, they also become eligible for compensation if paid employment is not provided within the 15-day period.

While studying the implementation of NREGA in Madhya Pradesh in 2007, Samarthan observed that people were not actually applying for — or “demanding” — work, despite being given the right to do so. Public works being undertaken by the *panchayats* (or other agencies) were still approached in the same manner as any other development work, rather than in response to demand for work under NREGA. Thus people were being absorbed into the workforce because there was work in the village, not because they had demanded work. The upshot of this was that people were not exercising their right to obtain compensation provided for by NREGA when there was no work available. This problem can be disaggregated as follows:

- Many poor families were without job cards either because they did not apply for them or the *gram panchayat* secretary did not attend to their request.
- People were not aware that: a) they could demand work under NREGA, b) the *panchayat* could be held answerable for not providing work within 15 days, and c) they were entitled to an unemployment allowance for the days when employment was not provided.
- Even when the poor did demand work, the *panchayat* secretary did not acknowledge their demand in writing (by giving a receipt) in order to avoid being held accountable for any delays in providing work.
- The *panchayat* secretaries in many of the villages kept people's job cards in the *panchayat* office on the pretext of making entries on the cards. By doing this, the secretaries not only had ample opportunity to fudge entries and indulge in manipulations but could also block the poor from legitimately demanding work.
- The *gram panchayat* secretaries were filling out the attendance muster only after the work was completed, making manipulation of the information possible.

As a result of all these practices, *panchayat* officials could use their discretion and indulge in favoritism when calling people for work. Many poor people had no option but to go to neighboring towns in search of wage employment.

(ii) *Payment of wages was delayed*

The Act provides that paid work be provided within 15 days of a demand for work, failing which the workers are to be compensated. However, in practice the payments for wages or unemployment compensation are sometimes delayed by over a month. This is due, in part, to delays in the release of money from the *janpad panchayats*, as well as from the *zilla parishad*, because of bureaucratic hurdles and a lack of planning at every stage from the village to the district level.

In addition, workers found it hard to access their wages, even after the money had been deposited into their bank accounts. Workers' wages are paid directly into their bank accounts.³ However, bank branches are located only in towns or in big villages, which means that sometimes workers are forced to travel between 20 and 50 kilometers from

³ The workers have an option to receive wage payment through their bank accounts or through a village post office. However, the village post offices have a small cash limit beyond which they have to requisition additional cash from their head office if they have to make larger payments. This condition has limited the role of village post offices in handling NREGA payments.

their village in order to withdraw the money from their bank. Compounding this problem, the banks are not particularly interested in providing prompt service to the poor, which means that workers are often sent home on the grounds that the bank staff (sometimes the village branches have only one employee) are too busy to handle the workers' requests.

(iii) Corruption and lack of transparency

In India the implementation of government programs is often marred by corruption, so some important provisions were included in NREGA to thwart dishonesty and to ensure transparency.⁴ However, the *panchayat* officials have found ways to circumvent the provisions and conditions stipulated by the Act. One method of doing so is to use machinery, rather than human labor, to do part of the work on projects at night so that bogus names can be added to the attendance muster. The officials then withdraw the resulting extra payment by colluding with the bank staff. Besides using these funds to enrich the officials directly involved, they are also used to bribe everyone who has anything to do with the implementation of NREGA, from the *janpad panchayat* to the *zilla parishad*.⁵

In order to escape accountability or to conceal corrupt practices, officials rarely put musters or other records up for scrutiny or approval by the *gram sabha* (general body of the village) as is required by the Act.

2. Strategy to address these issues

Samarthan established two objectives for its interventions related to NREGA implementation: 1) to increase access to NREGA, and 2) to improve the implementation of NREGA so that workers get paid in a timely manner. The Samarthan strategy for pursuing these goals consisted of five elements:

(i) Raising awareness and mobilizing the people

Unlike other states, such as Maharashtra and Karnataka, which had state-level employment guarantee programs prior to the introduction of NREGA, these types of programs were new to Madhya Pradesh. Therefore, it was necessary to make people aware of the concept of demand-based provision of employment. It was also necessary to mobilize the people to make sure that they made use of the provision for social audits.

(ii) Budget tracking

Budget expenditure tracking tools helped Samarthan to understand the flow of documents from the village upwards and the flow of funds from the district level to the workers' hands. Through such analyses, Samarthan was able to pinpoint gaps and bottlenecks at various levels in the system. The analyses also provided a strong basis from which to engage with government officials.⁶

Samarthan carried out detailed analyses of NREGA records accessed during the social audit process that it facilitated with the *panchayats*. The data revealed realities in the field, which helped Samarthan plan its interventions. Samarthan's expenditure tracking analyses investigated the following key issues:

- Utilization certificates of the works completed: within three days of receiving from the village secretary information on work completed, the sub-engineer does a physical verification of the work and issues a

⁴ NREGA has a number of provisions, such as the payment of wages directly into workers' bank/postal accounts, compulsory social audits, and open access to detailed NREGA Management Information System (MIS) data. There are also severe restrictions on getting the work done through contractors or with labour-saving machinery. Expenditure on material is also restricted to a maximum of 40 percent of the total cost of the work undertaken since the primary objective of this scheme is to generate wage employment.

⁵ These practices have been extensively recorded in the NREGA complaints register (<http://www.nrega.nic.in/complaints.pdf>) and NREGA social audits, such as that held at the Rola Panchayat on 7 July 2010 (Report of Social Audit, prepared by Samarthan, "Panchayat ke karya ki Gram Vikas Dal dwara nigrani"). Participants in focus groups conducted for this case study also confirmed such practices.

⁶ For example "Palayan MNREGA se hee" (Running away from MNREGA) a report prepared by Samarthan.

utilization certificate. Samarthan tracked the dates on which information was received and the dates on which certificates were issued.

- Analysis of online MIS data for different blocks: MIS data presented online includes village-level records of the number of persons given work, wages paid, delays in payment and unemployment allowance or (if relevant) compensation for delays in payment. This data enables groups like Samarthan to monitor the state of NREGA implementation.
- Verification of muster rolls and entry on job cards: The village secretary is responsible for completing the muster rolls and regular entry on the individual job cards. If these reporting tasks are not done regularly there is room for manipulation and corruption.
- Reporting from village to block and from block to district: the flow of documents from village *panchayat* to *janpad panchayat* and then to *zilla parishad* and flow of funds in the reverse direction was monitored to track bottlenecks.

Rigorous analysis and the depth of information and knowledge it produced helped Samarthan to earn respect in the eyes of government officials (from village to state level), as well as with the people in the village. This respect played an important role in bringing about change in budget processes and allocations. Dr. Vinod Yadav, CEO of the Sehore block, appreciated the close and systematic work done by Samarthan to monitor NREGA implementation and identify bottlenecks: “Samarthan has done good work. They are monitoring the implementation very closely and systematically. We too are worried about delays in payment. There is shortage of staff; we have nine Sub-Engineers (against 14 posts) and only one Executive Engineer (two posts) for 144 village *panchayats*. There is no delay in payments on administration’s behalf.”

(iii) Advocacy with government officers

Although the *gram panchayat* is officially the primary agency for the implementation of NREGA, in reality village secretaries still work under the instructions of the block and the district level administrations. The village-level planning process has therefore remained weak, despite the official powers granted to the *gram panchayat* by NREGA.

For this reason Samarthan had to focus much of its advocacy efforts on the chief executive officers (CEOs) at the block and district *panchayats*. They found A. K. Gangwar, then CEO of the district *panchayat*, and Nagendra Mishra, CEO of Panna district, to be particularly responsive. The latter explained his interest in cooperating with Samarthan as follows, “Samarthan should work on all government schemes in those five villages so that we can make those five villages as ‘models of success’ to show to visiting higher government officials”.

In addition to such individual relationships, Samarthan kept all concerned officials informed about what it was doing in the field and shared its findings with them. Samarthan staff often visited block and district offices to collect data or to follow up on matters related to NREGA implementation in the project villages. These opportunities were used to share the work being done with the APO, PO, and CEOs.

(iv) Media advocacy

Occasional use of the press was also part of Samarthan’s campaign strategy. Samarthan staff developed good relations with the media by keeping them briefed on the organization’s work on NREGA and by intermittently feeding them with data. Press releases, press briefings, and site visits were used to highlight certain problematic issues and to pressure government officials to deal with issues more seriously and take action to resolve problems.

3. How the campaign unfolded

Samarthan conducted the following interventions in the 10 villages from the Sehore and Panna blocks.

(i) Raising awareness

Samarthan undertook to raise awareness on a large scale by holding meetings with people who needed work in the villages. Training sessions for youth groups were held, and pamphlets were distributed in villages to explain the various features of NREGA. It became clear that people were not aware that activities to develop assets in the village

— such as digging wells, contouring land, horticulture, toilet construction, and road construction — could also be taken up under NREGA.

The CEO of the *zilla parishad* in Sehore appreciated the efforts of Samarthan to disseminate information about NREGA through a house-to-house campaign and wanted to replicate the approach in the entire district. He had a pamphlet on NREGA printed and sent a copy along with a cover letter to all Below Poverty Line (BPL) families in the district.

Moving from house to house, village youth groups mobilized by Samarthan distributed the application forms necessary for demanding work under NREGA. In addition, these forms were also made available in the village grocery shops. Samarthan emphasized the importance of people filing demand applications in order to establish the practice of demanding work. It also emphasized that the applicants should get a dated receipt for their application from the *panchayat* secretary, which would enable them to ask for an unemployment allowance if they did not get work within the stipulated period of 15 days.

It became apparent that the village *sarpanches* and the secretaries did not like people putting their demand for work in writing. The village secretaries also resisted giving dated acknowledgement (a receipt) for the demand received. 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, while those who did not would be called to work within two to three days. Such pressure often had the desired effect on many poor families that were in urgent need of work.

NREGA also provides for filing demand applications online. As a test case, Samarthan filed online applications on behalf of local persons from each block (Sehore and Panna). Online demands put more pressure on district CEOs because these demands are monitored and followed up on by the federal government. The CEOs at both block and district level, when interviewed by the author of this study, objected strongly to the online job demands made by Samarthan.

(ii) Putting pressure on the gram panchayat to respond to the demands for work

The next step in the process was to put pressure on the *gram panchayat* to respond to demands for work by reminding them that they would be answerable if the people did not get work within 15 days. The individuals who had filed demand applications started making repeated enquiries with the *sarpanch* and village secretary about the date on which the work would commence. The *sarpanch* and the village secretary did not know how to respond to this pressure and consequently began to criticize Samarthan. This criticism showed up in the interaction of village functionaries with Samarthan staff, as well as in their oral reporting to the officials at block and district level as evident from the following from Mr. Nagendra Mishra, CEO of Panna district: “Pressure of Samarthan’s vigilance and monitoring on lower staff creates some conflict with them. Some conflict should be there and is bound to be there unless the CSO is hand in hand with government staff.”

(ii) Helping gram panchayats to respond

Samarthan discovered that village-level *sarpanches* and secretaries did not have the capacity to plan the necessary works projects or to budget for the demands for work. The government had not taken any steps to build this capacity, and, as a result, labor budgets were prepared at the district level by the APO and the PO.

Samarthan decided to help the village-level functionaries with proper planning in order to improve the execution of NREGA. In *gram sabha* meetings, Samarthan helped the village *sarpanch* and the secretary to plan an array of works that could be taken up in the village. The village secretary could then get the necessary technical and administrative approvals from the *janpad panchayat*. This process equipped the village-level functionaries with a ready list of public works projects, which could generate employment when demands for work were filed.

Samarthan then trained the secretary to prepare labor budgets for the village by estimating the demand for work based on the number of people holding job cards and the average number of people reporting for work during the previous year.

(iv) Tracking the flow of funds

Samarthan also found that although *gram panchayats* applied to the *janpad panchayat* for funds to start work, the funds were not transferred into the *gram panchayat* accounts in a timely manner. Because they did not receive the funds in time from the *janpad panchayat*, the *gram panchayat* could not pay the workers on time.

Therefore, as a first step, Samarthan started tracking the date on which the *gram panchayat* demanded funds and the date on which the funds were received. It also kept track of the amounts requested and received. To facilitate the process, Samarthan developed a format for tracking the flow of funds and identifying the points of delay.

S. No	Name of <i>gram panchayat</i>	Name of the work	Date on which muster roll was given	Serial numbers on the muster roll (from-to)	Signature of the <i>panchayat</i> secretary	The date on which completed muster roll submitted	The date on which muster roll given to the sub-engineer
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8

Signature of sub-engineer	Post-eval submission by sub-engineer			Date on which muster returned to village secretary for payment	Payment made by village secretary			Date on which muster submitted to block office for MIS entry After payment to workers	Date of MIS entry
	date	amount	No of days sanctioned		Check number	date	amount		
9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18

When Samarthan took this up with the government officials at the district level, the Program Officer of the Sehore *zilla parishad* ended up adopting the format for use in the administration. This format was being used in two blocks at the time of this study.⁷

Using this form, Samarthan found that the delay was at the block level and that the payments were often delayed by 20 days and, at times, by over two months. The tracking also revealed that when the village secretary submitted the attendance muster, the date of submission was not being recorded. The sub-engineer, who was supposed to complete the technical evaluation of the work done within three days of receiving the muster, did not do so and back-dated the evaluation sheet.

(v) Briefing the media

Samarthan regularly provided the local press with news stories supported by photographs and data. Social audits of NREGA implementation facilitated by Samarthan at the *gram panchayat* level brought to light many irregularities, cases of corruption, and stories about people who suffered as result of these transgressions. These stories were given to the press. Sometimes the analysis of the MIS data (e.g., delays in payment and nonpayment of compensation for delays) also made the news.

A joint workshop of CSOs and the press was held in Panna in March 2011 to raise journalists' awareness of and encourage them to pay attention to development issues in the district, including issues related to NREGA implementation. Journalists representing local newspapers and CSOs working in Panna participated in the workshop.

Negative coverage in the press about corruption or lapses in implementation caused government officials to be upset with Samarthan. These officials accused Samarthan staff of acting as troublemakers and unnecessarily seeking

⁷ Samarthan staff tried to get a letter from the PO/CEO acknowledging or mentioning that the format was prepared by Samarthan, but they did not succeed.

publicity. The CEOs, when interviewed by the author of this study, expressed their displeasure and argued that Samarthan should not go to the press without discussing the issues with them. However, these negative sentiments were balanced out by the quality of Samarthan's work and the fact that it engaged with government continuously and only used the media when government officials were reluctant to take corrective action.

Media pressure generally made government officials more receptive to suggestions made by Samarthan for improving the situation. As a result of media attention, higher officials often exerted pressure on the village secretaries to look into grievances and improve implementation. Detailed below are a few examples of how news reports picked up by the local press influenced government officials.

- During a social audit of NREGA implementation in Rola village, the village secretary literally fled from the village meeting when the people insisted that names on the muster roll be read out publically to verify that the muster was not manipulated by the secretary. This news was published by local papers with photographs of the village meeting. As a result of this publicity, the secretary was suspended. (However, the community members and Samarthan staff working in these villages reported that the secretary eventually got himself reinstated.)⁸
- The media reported on a project to dig a well in Jankpur village that was stopped before reaching water level, thus providing no benefit to the farmers. As a result of the coverage, the CEO asked the village secretary to complete the well.⁹
- The local press reported that the village secretaries were keeping job cards locked up in *panchayat* offices, which led the administration to order the secretaries to distribute the job cards to the workers.¹⁰
- Samarthan shared the date of delayed payment of wages (available on MIS) with the local press. They raised this issue, supported by the MIS data, through a news item that highlighted how such delays in payment discouraged workers from participating in NREGA. This problem has not, as yet, been fully resolved.¹¹

4. Assessing the impact of the campaign

This campaign contributed to change on a wide range of issues.

(i) Raising awareness

Samarthan's campaign tried to create awareness of NREGA as a demand-based scheme among the people and government officials of 10 villages in the Sehore and Panna districts. However, the evidence about whether or not the campaign had the desired impact is mixed.

Because of a low level of literacy, the village poor have very few sources of information. People in the villages and youth group members — 10 to 15 were present at group meetings in Devli and Chhapri in Sehore and in Kunjwan and Jardhova in Panna — confirmed that they got to know of the NREGA rules because of Samarthan's campaign.

Many work demand applications were filed during the campaign undertaken by Samarthan. Once the campaign had ended, though, the status quo reasserted itself and few workers dared to claim their right to work when left to do so of their own volition. However, in Jardhova village the *sarpanch*, the village secretary, and an educated young person working as an assistant worked together to implement NREGA, and the people from that village reported that they made written work demands, were given receipts, and were getting work without delay.

The MIS records on the government website show nearly identical figures for the number of people who demanded work and the number of people who were given work. This could be evidence of efficient absorption of work seekers into village works projects. However, it could also be evidence of officials tampering with the numbers to avoid being

⁸ "Sabha Chhod bhagaa Sachiv" (tr. Secretary ran away from the meeting), *Sehore Patrika*, 11 July 2010.

⁹ "Bhrashtachar ki dhundh mein kho gaye kuen"tr. (Wells got lost in the fog of corruption) Star Network, Panna, 4 January 2011.

¹⁰ "Sarpancho ki kaid mein job-card" (tr. Job-cards in the custody of village-council heads) *Nai Dunia*, Gwalior, 9 March 2011.

¹¹ "MNREGA- Samay par nahi mil rahi mazdoori" (tr. MNREGA-wages not being paid on time) *Dainik Bhaskar*, Bhopal, 23 March 2011.

held accountable by district or federal officials. It is not unheard of for officials to fill these two columns with identical numbers.

The evidence of the campaign's impact on increased work days is a little clearer.

(ii) Increased number of work days

The MIS data on the government website shows that 510 households in five villages of the Sehore block got work in 2008-09, whereas in 2009-10 this number had increased to 611 and more than 10,000 additional person-days were generated, bringing in an additional wage income of Rs.1,350,000. In percentage terms, 27.5 percent of total job-card holders in the five villages got work during 2008-09, compared to 17 percent for the entire block. This percentage increased to 32.9 percent in 2009-10, compared to 19.4 percent for the Sehore block.

In five villages of the Panna block, the number of households getting work increased from 934 to 1207 and the wage income went up by Rs.2,346,000 (almost doubled) from 2009-10 to 2010-11. In percentage terms, 41.2 percent of total job-card holders in the five villages got work during 2009-10, compared to 33 percent for the entire block. This percentage increased to 53.1 percent during 2010-11, compared to 39.6 percent for the Panna block.

The number of households completing 100 days of work changed marginally in the Sehore villages (from 9 to 11 to 8 over the three-year period) but showed marked upward movement in the Panna villages (48 to 54 to 138).

Physical performance of NREGA in Samarthan villages:

(Source: MIS data from government website)

	Village	Person-days of work generated			Households completing 100 days of work		
		2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11
	Sehore Block						
1	Chhaprikala	619	3,993	93	0	2	0
2	Devli	3,665	4,196	3,960	2	2	5
3	Kapuri	5,489	4,735	4,321	7	3	2
4	Rola	1,308	4,158	1,508	0	0	0
5	Sevniya	924	5,062	1,379	0	4	1
	Total five villages	12,005	22,144	11,261	9	11	8
	Total for Sehore block	263,695	450,494	527,250	205	666	762

	Village	Number of Job-card holders			Number of house holds provided work		
		2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11
	Sehore block						
1	Chhaprikala	278	278	278	53	93	11
2	Devli	464	464	464	100	141	100
3	Kapuri	262	268	268	157	138	135
4	Rola	339	339	339	117	134	65
5	Sevania	510	510	510	83	105	55
	Total five villages	1853	1859	1859	510	611	366
	Total for Sehore Block	60,746	61,186	61,256	10,302	11,863	12,329

	Village	Person-days of work generated			Households completing 100 days of work		
		2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11
	Panna Block						
1	Jardhoba	8,550	4,889	15,194	0	2	36
2	Janakpur	3,195	4,750	11,202	0	2	30
3	Krishna-kalyanpur	19,458	6,638	9,811	27	2	11
4	Kunjvan	6,510	5,297	5,586	1	0	7
5	Sunahra	12,093	16,967	18,929	20	48	54
	Total five villages	49,806	38,541	60,722	48	54	138
	Total for Panna block	618,465	674,693	810,544	303	729	1562

	Village	Number of Job-card holders			Number of house holds provided work		
		2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11
	Panna block						
1	Jardhoba	564	565	565	262	164	299
2	Janakpur	387	411	411	115	136	202
3	Krishna-kalyanpur	484	485	485	420	203	254
4	Kunjvan	307	313	317	147	110	124
5	Sunahra	481	493	493	283	321	328
	Total five villages	2,223	2,267	2,271	1,227	934	1,207
	Total for Panna Block	44,534	45,815	45,845	17,917	15,351	18,151

Financial Performance of NREGA in Samarthan villages

(Source: MIS data from government website)

Village	Wages (Rs in lakhs)			Total Expenses (RS in lakhs)			
	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	
Sehore Block							
1	Chhaprikala	0	4.19692	0.093	0	10.41072	0.157
2	Devli	3.23577	3.83427	3.97938	4.21871	9.48351	8.32745
3	Kapuri	3.7822	4.60136	4.09425	5.80699	10.56689	7.14565
4	Rola	0.7057	3.9051	1.508	0.89783	7.99387	2.0639
5	Sevniya	0.35319	5.07325	1.34122	0.49407	8.12922	2.39207
	Total	8.07686	21.6109	11.01585	11.41760	46.58421	20.65702

Village	Wages (Rs in lakhs)			Total Expenses (RS in lakhs)			
	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	
Panna Block							
1	Janakpur	0.82576	3.7117	11.94517	2.44026	12.6502	21.0884
2	Jardhova	5.16941	4.72405	14.4051	10.54902	15.12872	24.87901
3	Krishna Kalyanpur	3.70705	5.33522	7.14153	7.83831	12.01316	12.90383
4	Kunjvan	5.10795	4.88706	5.48008	12.27102	13.04765	6.93348
5	Sunahra	7.82768	8.17406	11.31905	11.29446	23.71426	24.05681
	Total	22.63785	26.83209	50.29093	44.39307	76.55399	89.86153

The increases in the Sehore block clearly show the impact of the district CEO's initiative of sending letters and information leaflets to all district families that were on the BPL list. Copies of the letter and the leaflet, along with the application form that was also sent to all BPL families, are available in the Samarthan archives. The CEO's positive response was at least partly the result of the appreciation he had for the work being done by Samarthan.

The chief minister of Madhya Pradesh belongs to the Sehore district and, therefore, had an interest in NREGA implementation in the district, which overall was very poor. Mr. Gangwar, the CEO of Sehore district, saw an opportunity to showcase good work in the district by supporting and replicating what Samarthan was doing in its villages. As a result, Samarthan staff interacted regularly with Mr. Gangwar during their campaign. Mr. Baljeet Rathore, bureau chief of the local paper *Dainik Bhasker*, remarked during an interview with the author of this case study that, "Sehore being the home district of our chief minister, the senior officers are very sensitive to media reporting. They get upset if there is an adverse report since they want to project only good work being done by them."

Unlike in Maharashtra and Karnataka, there were no employment-guarantee schemes in Madhya Pradesh prior to NREGA. Because 2008-2009 was the first year in which NREGA was implemented in the Sehore district, the people

had no information about the rules of the scheme. The impact of Samarthan's campaign, which informed and motivated the people, can be seen in the fact that the number of person-days of work generated almost doubled.

However, the MIS data show that in 2010-11 the performance figures for the five villages in the Sehore block reverted almost to the 2008-09 level, while the work done in the Panna villages was much higher in 2010-11. One of the factors that may have played a role in this backslide is that the five Samarthan villages in the Sehore block are very close (within 25 to 30 kilometers) to Sehore Town where the wages for unskilled labor are Rs.150 per day and the payments are made at the end of the day or, at the latest, at the end of the week. On the other hand, the NREGA wage rate during 2010-11 was Rs.100 per day. Moreover, the payment of NREGA wages is usually only received a month after finishing work.

Initially the intensive campaign by Samarthan brought a large number of people to NREGA, but the delay in the payment of wages encouraged workers to opt for wage employment in Sehore Town. The CEO of the Sehore block opined during a discussion with the author of this study that the five villages selected by Samarthan have very limited scope for expanding NREGA work due to their proximity to Sehore Town where a daily wage of Rs.150 is available to workers.

In contrast, the Panna district is one of the least developed districts of Madhya Pradesh. Panna Town is also surrounded by forest and is without a railway connection, making it harder for workers to travel elsewhere for employment. As a result of this, workers are more dependent on NREGA and, therefore, despite all the problems with NREGA, there hasn't been a decline in the figures from the Panna villages.

(iii) Payment of arrears for enhanced wage rates

From time to time wage rates for NREGA are revised by the government, depending upon the changes in the consumer price index. The latest revision was effective from 1 January 2011. Through its monitoring of financial flows and payments, Samarthan discovered that the payment of revised rates only started from 1 April 2011, therefore, the workers were entitled to receive the difference in remuneration for the work done from 1 January to 31 March 2011. The relevant claims were filed and the payment of arrears was made. This intervention set a precedent as it was the first instance when arrears were claimed and paid. The village secretary of Jardhova mentioned to the author that, "All officers — CEOs, POs — acknowledge in private that the arrears were paid this time only because of Samarthan's efforts. Arrears of earlier revisions were never paid."

(iv) Preparing labor budgets at the village level

As mentioned earlier, the staff of Samarthan helped village secretaries to prepare labor budgets and annual plans of NREGA works for the *gram panchayats* by identifying the works that could be taken up under NREGA during the year. These proactive steps ensured that projects were already planned by the time people demanded work and that the workers could be paid in a timely manner because labor budgets had been prepared and approved.

Analysis of MIS data doesn't always reflect this impact because the MIS records often still show identical dates for "date of application" and "date of work" for the villages. The officials do not want to put on record any delay in giving work since doing so makes them answerable for the delays.

(v) Release of funds from the janpad panchayat

Under NREGA, funds from the *janpad panchayat* cannot be released unless the sub-engineer carries out a technical evaluation of the work completed. The *janpad panchayat* cannot release the funds unless the engineer certifies that at least 60 percent of the work on a project has been done satisfactorily and entered on the MIS.

As discussed earlier in this report, Samarthan developed a format for monitoring the progress of the implementation of NREGA. This included recording dates on which the village secretary submitted the completed muster roll, the sub-engineer completed the evaluation, the entry was made in the MIS, funds were transferred to the *gram panchayat*, and pay-orders/checks were transferred to the bank for payment into the workers' accounts.

Supported by the relevant data, Samarthan discussed these issues with the CEOs and APO/PO at the block and district levels. The analysis identifying the points and processes that were causing delays impressed the officials and, as a result, the following changes were made:

- The district level PO and the CEO of Sehore adopted the monitoring format developed by Samarthan. This format is currently being used in two blocks of the Sehore district.
- The district CEO discussed various issues with the staff responsible for entering MIS data and realized that more staff members were required. He arranged to appoint additional staff to help with entering MIS data.
- The practice of releasing funds from the *zilla parishad* to *janpad panchayat* and from there to the *gram panchayats* has been changed. The funds from the district are now released directly to any village that completes an MIS entry, thus making the process more efficient. This decision was taken at the NREGA state council meeting where the issues raised by district CEOs are discussed in the presence of the secretary to the Ministry of Rural Development which oversees the implementation of NREGA at the state level. It is difficult to determine whether this change came about as a direct result of Samarthan raising this issue; however, during a discussion with the author of this study, the CEO and the APO of Sehore acknowledged that Samarthan had raised the issue.

(vi) Overall impact

It is difficult to generalize about the impact of Samarthan's work. On the one hand, it assisted government in identifying a number of blockages in the process of managing and budgeting for NREGA. It also played a significant role in mobilizing the population to demand work in terms of NREGA.

On the other hand, some of the hard won gains do appear to have been eroded by persistent challenges. For example, many of the poor were once again intimidated into not demanding work or discouraged from participating in NREGA by delays in wage payments.

5. Why did the campaign have an impact?

This case study on NREGA highlights the role that a civil society organization can play in influencing governance issues when it works in partnership with the government system. The rest of this section will be dedicated to a discussion about the factors that played a role in each of the impact pathways used and how these impact pathways made the overall impact possible.

(i) Community mobilization

Through its intensive work in 10 villages in the Sehore and Panna blocks, Samarthan had a feel for the field realities in these communities. It trained youth groups and women from self-help groups, who in turn created wider awareness about the rules of NREGA among the people who needed work. Such mobilization was essential to any campaign around NREGA, which depends heavily on an active response by work seekers.

This mobilization put pressure on government officials to take to Samarthan more seriously because it worked closely with the people. Mobilizing and educating the people also increases the demand for changes from the ground and that puts pressure on the government to take remedial action.

(ii) Presenting evidence to the executive

Samarthan analyzed the budget data from the village level to block and district levels and conducted an in-depth study of the budget process and the flow of funds at every level before taking up the issues with the government officials. Very diligent and close monitoring of the flow of funds and a good understanding of the budget process impressed the government officers and convinced them of Samarthan's sincerity of purpose. Consequently, the observations and suggestions made by Samarthan were taken seriously by the officials. These views were expressed by all the government officials (CEOs, POs, and APOs) interviewed during this study.

A number of factors enabled Samarthan to generate these analyses:

- Having its head office in Bhopal, the beautiful and very livable capital city of Madhya Pradesh that is easily accessed by train and air, helped Samarthan to attract technically trained and experienced staff. Thus Samarthan, which has adequate research and technical capacities, has emerged as a serious partner that is capable of working with the government to provide assistance in the planning and implementation of the government's development programs. This has strengthened Samarthan's advocacy efforts at block, district, and state level.
- Over the years, Samarthan has engaged with the government executive from district to state level. It has worked with various government departments by providing help in building the capacity of their staff and by providing technical assistance for the preparation of district development plans. (See Box 2.) Samarthan has earned the respect of and access to the executive through this cross-sector — health, sanitation, area planning, NREGA, RTI — and multi-level (from block to district to state) relationship.
- Samarthan staff actively sought out responsive officers on whom they could make an impression, but at the same time they also regularly shared data and analyses across the executive.

Box 2: Examples of Samarthan's engagement with the government at multiple levels

Samarthan supported the Madhya Pradesh Rural Livelihood Program spread across 2,080 *gram sabhas* in nine districts in the state and 2,000 village-level plans were prepared.

Samarthan gave orientation on the Right to Information to 900 *panchayats* and helped 200 *panchayats* in Madhya Pradesh to prepare their self-disclosure documents.

About 500 *panchayats* of the Sehore district were trained in issues of community health and Samarthan facilitated the preparation of *panchayat* health plans.

On behalf of the Madhya Pradesh State Planning Commission, Samarthan prepared a manual on decentralised integrated district planning and facilitated the preparation of plans in five pilot districts.

Samarthan worked with youths to prepare microplans on water and sanitation in 25 *panchayats*.

- Analytical work is heavily dependent on access to information, therefore, the right to information that Indian citizens have is important. Most NREGA data are available on the NREGA website, which is regularly updated. The government officers also know that if they deny the CSO access to data, citizens can get the data under the Right to Information Act. Therefore, the executive could not deny the CSO access to data (for budget tracking purposes) in spite of their displeasure over issues raised in the media.

Easy access to data was possible because: 1) online MIS and the reporting system of NREGA from village to state level is built on the principle of transparency and accountability, and 2) Samarthan is involved with the government system at the state level through numerous committees and studies. This has lent the CSO respectability and credibility, helping it to obtain greater access to block and district offices — access which very few other CSOs would have been granted.

(iii) Strategic use of media

Samarthan succeeded in using the media at appropriate occasions to put pressure on government officials to bring about change. Samarthan has generally followed the working principle of approaching the press only when the executive is not responding to the grievances or the problems the organization has raised. If a CSO runs to the media simply to criticize the government system or to score a point over the government officers, governments stop cooperating and label them troublemakers.

Samarthan staff had the research and analytical capacity to feed the press with relevant analyses of the data, highlighting the problems in the implementation of NREGA. Apart from providing information about specific news events, Samarthan also supported the media more systemically. For example, it organized a day-long workshop with local reporters and CSOs in the Panna district to discuss problems in NREGA implementation.

Broadly speaking, the media freedom of India also facilitates the whole process of holding government officers answerable. Without this freedom, Samarthan's strategy would, of course, have been far less effective.

6. Alternative explanations for the impact

While Samarthan sought to leverage the above opportunities, it is also true that it was not the only one pushing for fuller implementation of NREGA in Madhya Pradesh or in the Sehore district in particular.

Improving the supply of "water, electricity, and roads" was the main platform on which the present ruling party in the state won the democratic elections. The state government, therefore, was keen to maximize the utilization of NREGA funds. As a result of this, the government also worked actively for the full implementation of NREGA at the same time that Samarthan ran its campaign.

As already mentioned, the chief minister of the state comes from the Sehore district, which motivated him to put direct pressure on CEOs and others involved in NREGA in that district to improve implementation.

In the end it is hard to disentangle the relative weight of these factors *vis-à-vis* that of Samarthan. There is however evidence that these actors fed off each others' efforts instead of working in parallel to one another.

7. Conclusion

Despite Samarthan's track record of working with the government, engaging with the development bureaucracy and the village leadership over issues of corruption has not been free of hazards and trepidations. Samarthan staff members were threatened to the point that they dared not enter a village where they had exposed corruption by the village leadership.

The village secretaries and the *sarpanches* in some villages initially thought that Samarthan's campaign around educating people to demand work in writing caused trouble for the gram panchayat. This negative attitude toward the group turned positive when Samarthan helped them with microplanning and labor budgeting.

The CEOs were upset by adverse publicity in the press and by online filing of demand applications. This temporary annoyance on the part of government officials resulted in some trouble and delays in getting access to the data under their control. Samarthan overcame this hurdle through persistent constructive engagement on the issues. The government officers also knew of Samarthan's access to the press and of its involvement with state-level government departments on different issues.

In the end it was Samarthan's ability to engage with multiple levels (village, district, state, and federal) of government using multiple strategies (research, community mobilization, and media) that played a vital role in its success. It also managed to work with sympathetic and unsympathetic officials alike, adjusting its strategies accordingly. In addition to its own strategy, Samarthan was also assisted by a number of external factors such as sympathetic state and federal governments and India's laws around the right to information and a free press.

Finally, this case also demonstrated the importance of sustained CSO intervention. Many of Samarthan's early gains came under threat later on and further intervention will be necessary for these gains to become institutionalized.

People interviewed

1. Dr. Vinod Yadav, CEO Sehore block
2. APO, Sehore block
3. Ashok Chaturvedi, CEO, Panna block
4. Sanjay Parihar, APO, Panna block
5. Nagendre Mishra, CEO, Panna District
6. Anees Ahmed, Sarpanch of Devli village, Sehore
7. Village Secretary of Jardhova village, Panna
8. Baljeet Rathore, Chief of Bureau, *Dainik Bhaskar* newspaper, Sehore
9. Sunil Sharma, Senior Reporter, *Dainik Jagaran* newspaper, Sehore
10. Samarthan staff, Yogesh Kumar , Avinash
11. Samarthan Sehore, Manoj Tiwari and Nikita
12. Samarthan Panna, Neeraj, Lakhan and Tiwari

Focus Group Discussions

Five focus group discussions were held for this case study. Samarthan sent a message to the villages that the case study author would like to meet youth group members and job-card holders who had worked on NREGA. After the author arrived at the villages, a messenger called on some youth group members. Further detail follows:

1. Chhapri village (Sehore): 15 persons attended, including youth group members and job-card holders.
2. Rola village (Sehore): 8 persons attended, including youth group members. We could not have very detailed discussion here because of the threats that Samarthan staff had received from the village council head.
3. Devli village (Sehore): 8 persons attended, including Kapildhara beneficiaries and the village council head.
4. Jardhova (Panna): 25 persons attended, including youth group members, job-card holders, village council head, and the secretary.
5. Kota Gunjapur (Panna): 20 persons attended including job-card holders.