

Ensuring inclusive social audits

Introduction:

Under Section 17 of MGNREGS, independent social audits of all the projects under the scheme taken up within the Gram Panchayats are required to happen every 6 months, carried out by a third party. These audits are required to be participatory, including all village members to ensure that MGNREGS works are being carried out inclusively, fairly and in line with annual plans. This is a key method to ensure accountability and transparency- and is particularly important in a context wherein socially excluded groups are often not included in the MGNREGS planning process and so the resulting projects in the annual plans do not benefit them. For example, a village Gram Panchayat may decide to carry out a “land improvement” project under MGNREGS, but this improvement will not extend to land that is owned or farmed by socially excluded villagers.

In addition, social audits may also bring to light many of the challenges faced by socially excluded groups in accessing or using the assets that are built, such as water pumps, irrigation systems or village services, due to discrimination against them.

Background:

The conventional practice of conducting social audits is often restricted to discussions on finance. Thus, the financial performance of the projects becomes a de-facto indicator of the overall performance of MGNREGS. Against this backdrop, the Poorest Areas Civil Society (PACS) Programme, an initiative of the UK Government’s Department for International Development (DFID) developed a new way of auditing in 2014 which went a step further - not only looking at the financial aspects of MGNREGS works but also assessing issues such as the provision of worksite facilities, timely payments and how much socially excluded communities benefit from and are included in MGNREGS plans.

Details of the Intervention:

PACS first launched its social audit trial in 200 Gram Panchayats in 20 districts of Bihar and Jharkhand. Due to its success, the campaign was up-scaled to all 7 PACS states covering 60 districts.

PACS trained 80 master trainers and 425 community facilitators to lead the social audit process – the master trainers are responsible for training community-based individuals to carry out social audits in the field. In total, 593 inclusive social audits were carried out in Gram Panchayats and villages to ensure that MGNREGS works is benefit all community members.

The key questions that these social audits aim to answer include:

- What is the status of the timely delivery of the entitlements and provisions under MGNREGS including job cards, works, worksite facilities and wage payments?
- Are these entitlements and provisions being delivered without any discrimination to various social groups?
- Is the process of planning for works being carried out in a participatory and non-discriminatory manner?

- What are the assets that have been created by MGNREGS works and how many of these assets are functional?
- How many of the assets were created directly to benefit socially excluded communities and help them to improve or enhance their livelihood opportunities?
- Do socially excluded communities have non-discriminatory access to the use and benefits of the community assets created under MGNREGS?
- What is the status of formation and functioning of the MGNREGS Vigilance and Monitoring Committee and how inclusive is it?

Impact:

In many States including Jharkhand, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, the State Government has now accepted the approach and model of PACS, carrying out social audits that include the participation of excluded communities. This has also opened up the possibility of many Civil Society Organisation (CSO) becoming resource groups and partnering with the government-led social audit process. PACS has also been recognised by the Government of India's Ministry of Rural Development and is a named member on its Master Trainers list.

Source: Poorest Areas Civil Society (PACS). (2020). Inclusive Social Audits. Retrieved from <http://www.pacsindia.org/projects/mgnrega-employment-rights/social-audits-and-asset-maps>. Accessed on 11 August 2020