

MGNREGA- A Humanitarian Policy Response during Covid-19

Prof. (Dr.) Ashwani Kumar*
Mr. Ravindra Chowdhary**

Abstract

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) with its rights-based framework for 100 days of guaranteed unskilled work in rural India has emerged as the most unlikely yet perhaps the most powerful welfare program to ‘avert humanitarian disaster’ in the wake of corona pandemic. No wonder, when hundreds of thousands of jobless migrant labourers started walking back home with their pots and pans in tattered rucksacks in the national lockdown, MGNREGA returned to the center of public policy universe as a radical humanitarian welfare instrument to mitigate the plight of millions of migrants and rejuvenate rural economy battered by national lockdown. Extending the idea of welfare policy, this article endeavors to study the nature and scope of MGNREGA and its response to improve aspects of the human condition by focusing on saving lives in times of crisis or emergency, and providing livelihoods support during disasters or immediately after disasters like corona pandemic.

Introduction

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) with its rights-based framework for 100 days of guaranteed unskilled work in rural India’ has emerged as the most

* Dean, School of Development Studies, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai.

** Doctoral Scholar & Research Associate at School of Development Studies, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai

unlikely yet perhaps the most powerful welfare program to ‘avert humanitarian disaster’ in the wake of corona pandemic. No wonder, when hundreds of thousands of jobless migrant labourers started walking back home with their pots, pans, blankets in tattered rucksacks in the national lockdown, MGNREGA returned with a sublime policy reimagination to mitigate the plight of millions of migrants and rejuvenate rural economy battered by national lockdown. Blurring the conventional distinctions between humanitarianism and egalitarianism in the world of public policy, MGNREGA has suddenly acquired a radical welfare imaginary consisting of (a) a positive evaluation of human beings, (b) concern about their welfare and (c) moral responsibility for people's welfare in the times of health disaster like global corona pandemic. It is in this sense, MGNREGA has extended its original design of conventional welfarism to improve aspects of the human condition by focusing on suffering and saving lives in times of crisis or emergency, and providing temporary shelter, food, and medical care during disasters or immediately after disasters. There is no doubt that once considered the so-called symbol of ‘living monument of failure of the Congress government, MGNREGA appears to have galvanized the BJP led Central government to reconsider its political and ideological hostility to the UPA era’s rights based developmental model. Recognizing the transformatory power of MGNREGA to ameliorate the hardship of rural poor, the Central government has rebooted what scholars call a rights-based ‘welfare architecture’ with a distinct pro-poor “social contract’ in India.¹ With unprecedented financial allocation since its inception in 2005, the BJP led Central Government has not only provided livelihoods security to millions of jobless but it has also become a viable and reliable instrument of direct humanitarian assistance in times of crisis like Covid-19.

¹J. Harris *Audacious Reforms? India's New Rights Agenda: An Introduction*, 86(3) Pacific Affairs, 561-568 (2013); see also S. Ruparelia, *India's new rights agenda: Genesis, promises, risks*. 86(3) Pacific Affairs, 569-590(2013).

Facing the continuing onslaught of the corona pandemic, there is also a growing recognition that the conditional cash transfer welfare programs have been inadequate in mitigating the humanitarian crisis. Countries around the world have reverted to rights-based universal welfare policies, and direct action in mitigating humanitarian disaster, and countries have increasingly recognized that welfare policies could also be ethico-political projects for sustained livelihoods in the times of disasters. Predictably, India has also responded with expanding the scale and reach of public-works programs like MGNREGA during the corona pandemic. Voters of Hindutva politics might be a bit surprised but the Modi government has lately become more active secular providers of welfare services. Though the Central Government has often been criticized for lukewarm support to MGNREGA, putting more money into the hands of the rural poor confirms a rising trend of programmatic commitment to welfare programs. With the announcement of additional ₹40,000 crore for year 2020-21 Union finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman' has increased the total budgetary support for Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MG-NREGA) to more than one lakh thousand crore, *making it highest budgetary support since the launch of the historic right to work act in 2006*. Claiming that the government's new announcement will help generate nearly 300 crore person-days in total, this record allocation for NREGA (henceforth) acknowledges that budgetary support apart, a proactive political commitment is the key to unleash the transformative potential of the NREGA in rural India, and also avert the humanitarian crisis. This renewed policy commitment to the welfare architecture appears to have galvanized the Central government to recast it as the lynchpin of ambitious Atam Nirbhar Bharat Abhiyan (Self-Reliant India Campaign). In other words, NREGA has wittingly or unwittingly become the most powerful policy instrument of realizing the fundamental aims of humanitarian action—saving lives, alleviating human suffering, and mitigating the catastrophic economic and social impact of disasters.

A quick glance at the performance data of NREGA confirms that in the peak of the corona pandemic between April to October 2020, NREGA had provided more than *253 crore persondays of work, a stunning achievement of registering 58 % of increase over the same period in the previous year.* But by the end of the FY 2020-21 up to March 25, 2021 the persondays generated reached 372.2 crore, a 40 % increase against FY 2019-20. This clearly validates the role NREGA has played in mitigating the social and economic effects of the Corona pandemic in India.

Table 1-Comparison of Household provided employment and persondays generated with previous year from April to October FY 2020-21 with previous year

	April to October FY 2019-20	April to October FY 2020-21	% of increase
HH worked	21633171	38954832	80.07
Person days	1597724969	2530667811	58.39

Source: nrega.nic.in. Accessed on 28th November 2020

Table 2-Comparison of Household provided employment and persondays generated till March 25 FY 2020-21 with FY 2019-20

	FY 2019-2020	FY 2020-2021 Upto March	% of increase
HH worked	54826655	74542971	35.96
Person days	2653749300	3722676190	40.28

Source: nrega.nic.in. Accessed on April, 10, 2021

Though NREGA is a centralized pan-India Act, it is driven by decentralized mechanisms of program implementation at the grassroots of governance in India. Given the massive push from the Central government, state governments have also upscaled the implementation during and after national lockdown. The performance data shows that states like Mizoram, Tripura, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh have done better than others in providing employment to wage seekers in the peak period of the corona pandemic April -Nov 2020. Clearly, a state with high capacity – in terms of its bureaucratic, organizational and human resources, and preparedness as well as its ability to reach out to civil society and potential beneficiaries – is better positioned for success than a state with low bureaucratic and implementation capacity in times of humanitarian disaster.

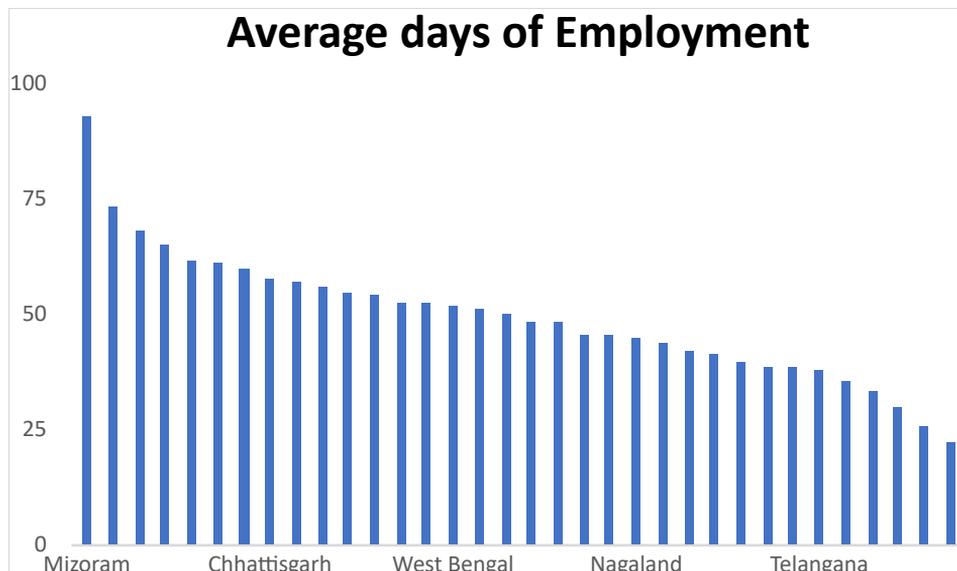
Table 3-Average days of employment provided per HHs in FY 2020-2021 up to (March 25, 2021)

State	Average days of Employment
Mizoram	92.84
Tripura	73.11
Meghalaya	67.93
Ladakh	65.00
Kerala	61.88
Madhya Pradesh	61.14
Rajasthan	59.72
Chhattisgarh	57.65
Manipur	57.05
Sikkim	55.76
Odisha	54.64

Arunachal Pradesh	53.98
Jammu And Kashmir	52.48
Himachal Pradesh	52.27
West Bengal	51.62
Andhra Pradesh	51.08
India	49.94
Tamil Nadu	48.55
Karnataka	48.33
Jharkhand	45.68
Uttarakhand	45.40
Nagaland	45.14
Bihar	43.65
Gujarat	42.10
Uttar Pradesh	41.28
Maharashtra	39.66
Haryana	38.77
Punjab	38.55
Telangana	37.63
Assam	35.58
Andaman And Nicobar	33.14
Lakshadweep	29.53
Goa	25.81
Puducherry	22.06

Source: nrega.nic.in.

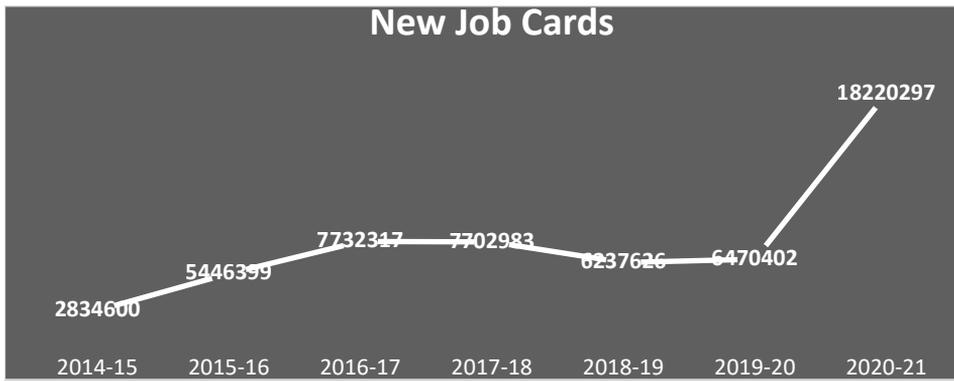
Figure 1-Average days of employment provided per HHs in FY 2020-2021 up to (March 25 2021)



Source: nrega.nic.in.

Indicating a trend of reverse migration following lockdowns in several states, the demand for work by households under NREGA has shot up by 89 per cent to 2.54 crore households in April 2021. The official record reveals that more than 182.2 lakh new households have been issued job cards under the scheme during the current financial year (2020-21). Significantly, this number — from April 1 to September 3— is higher than the annual surge for the last seven years for which data is available on the NREGA portal. This is a jump of 28.32 per cent from the 64.70 lakh new job cards issued in the entire 2019-20 year. It is important to note here that demand for new job cards comes at a time when a large number of migrants have returned to their villages in the wake of national lockdown during the first wave of Covid-19. Of the 182.2 lakh new job cards, the highest number of wage seekers have been added in Uttar Pradesh (38.8 lakh), followed by Bihar (21.3 lakh),

Madhya Pradesh (18.2 lakh), West Bengal (15.3 lakh), Jharkhand (14.2 lakh) and Rajasthan (9.9 lakh) — states which received a large number of returning migrants. This success of MGNRERGA can be further attested by the fact that the cumulative number of job cards stands at 14.36 crore as per the performance data. (Indian Express September 4, 2020, NREGA official portal).

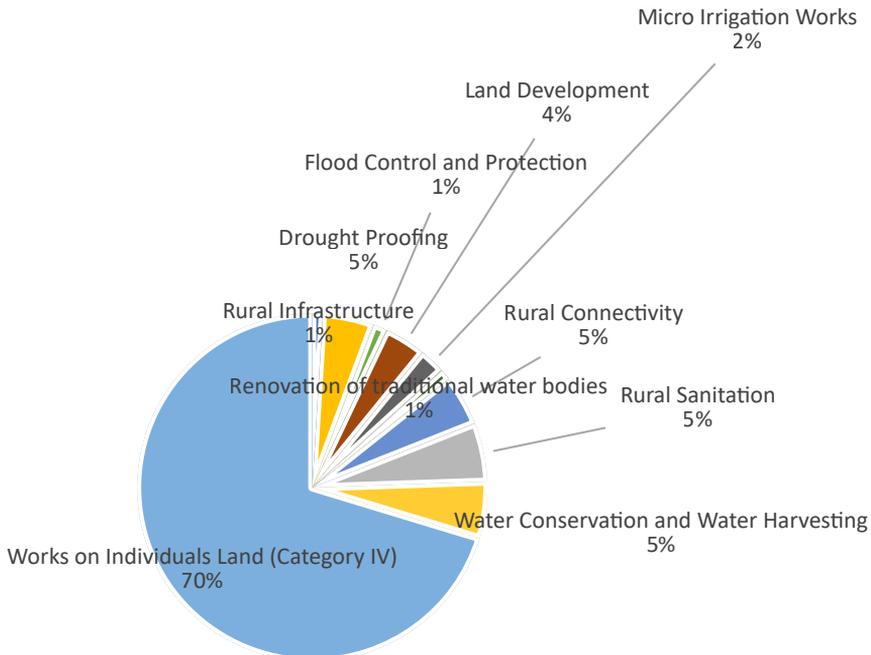


Source: nrega.nic.in as per financial year 2020-21

No wonder, employment opportunities and livelihoods of poor households have been given priority in the implementation during the corona pandemic. Work completion data also indicates that most of the works in the pandemic have been carried out in providing irrigation facility, dug out farm pond, horticulture, plantation, farm bunding and land development on land owned by households belonging to SCs, STs, nomadic tribes, denotified tribes, BPL, women-headed, physically handicapped headed, land reform beneficiaries, IAY beneficiaries, scheduled tribes and other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, and small or marginal farmers. This has not only led to mitigation of humanitarian disaster but it has also helped

strengthen durable assets of poor and vulnerable sections of the society in rural India.

Figure 2- Percentage of work completion in the FY 2020-21 up to March 25, 2021



Source: nrega.nic.in.as per the data available on 25th March 2021

MGNREGA in the humanitarian crisis

Though hailed as the largest welfare program in the world, let us not forget that NREGA has suffered a bitterly fractious ideological battle since its inception in 2006. While progressives and left-leaning social activists described NREGA as a harbinger of ‘silent revolution’ in rural India, neo-liberal economists and affluent city dwellers derided it as

‘expensive gravy train’, ‘money guzzler’, and ‘poverty reduction by helicopter’. And righteous corporate India blamed NREGA for wrecking the national labour market impeding the growth story of India. But data analyzed by development economists like Sudha Narayan refute these unfounded criticisms arguing that NREGA has never exceeded an annual 0.4 of the GDP and it has generated almost 3000 crore person days of work for a total cost of Rs 563300 crore at the average rate of Rs 189.5-person day since its launch until as late as January 2020. Independent studies by Niehaus and Sukhtankar² in 2013 and Imbert Clement and John Papp³ in 2014 have recently found the scheme plagued by corruption. Clearly the efforts of the Ministry of Rural Development under the present government to clean up MGNREGS through use of technology have been effective. With such modest budgetary cost and accompanying high electoral returns, NREGA has actually become a focal point for regional politicians cutting across party lines for leveraging political and electoral dividends in the states and districts of India.

It is important to note here that the Ministry of Rural Development, the nodal agency for implementing NREGA, reflects a new focus on expanding the Individual Beneficiary Schemes for poor and marginalized communities in rural India. For instance, works under the category of Individual Beneficiary which accounted for 21.4% of the total works in 2014-15 now account for 67.29% in the post-national lockdown phase. Over 18.17 lakh individual farm ponds, 10.56 lakh Vermi/Nadep pits, 4.85 lakh soak pits, 5.16 lakh wells, support for 1.54 crore rural housing beneficiaries, 1.3 lakh goat sheds, 5.56 lakh cattle sheds have been constructed over the last five years on account of the thrust on livelihood security. From 36.18 lakh works completed in

²P. Niehaus, & S. Sukhtankar, *Corruption dynamics: The golden goose effect* 5(4) American Economic Journal: Economic Policy, 230-269 (2013).

³C. Imbert & J. Papp, *Estimating Leakages in India's Employment Guarantee: An Update*. Rice Institute.(2015)

2015-16, the total completed works rose to 89.86 lakh in 2018-19 on account of better monitoring of outcomes. Over 15 million hectares benefited from the water conservation thrust and 40–50,000 villages could improve their water security.⁴ Also, the Rural Development Ministry’s decision of making 60:40 wages to material ratio applicable at the district level instead of at gram panchayat level has resulted in taking up priority public infrastructure like anganwadi buildings under NREGA. And this growing secularization of social welfare programs can be observed in a quick trend analysis of the performance of NREGA since 2016. For instance, the budgetary allocation for NREGA has increased to Rs 61,084 crore in 2018-19 from Rs 34,000 crore in 2014-15. Except for 2014-15, in all years since then, experts have noted that actual expenditure has been more than the approved budgetary allocation. Similarly, the persondays generated has increased from 235.6458 crores in the FY 2016-17 to 372.2 Crores in the FY 2020-21 up to March 25 2021.

Table 4- Total Expenditure against release and available of fund in Crores from FY 2016-2021

	FY 2020-20 21	FY 2019-2 019	FY 2018- 2019	FY 2017-20 18	FY 2016-201 7
Total center release	1,00,045.	71,020.	62,125.0	55,659.9	47,411.7
Total Availability of funds (In Cr.)	1,07,197. 67	75,510. 61	69,228.6 8	64,985.8 9	57,386.6 7
Total Expenditure [In	1,04,221.	68,300.	69,618.5	63,649.4	58,062.9

Source: nrega.nic.in.

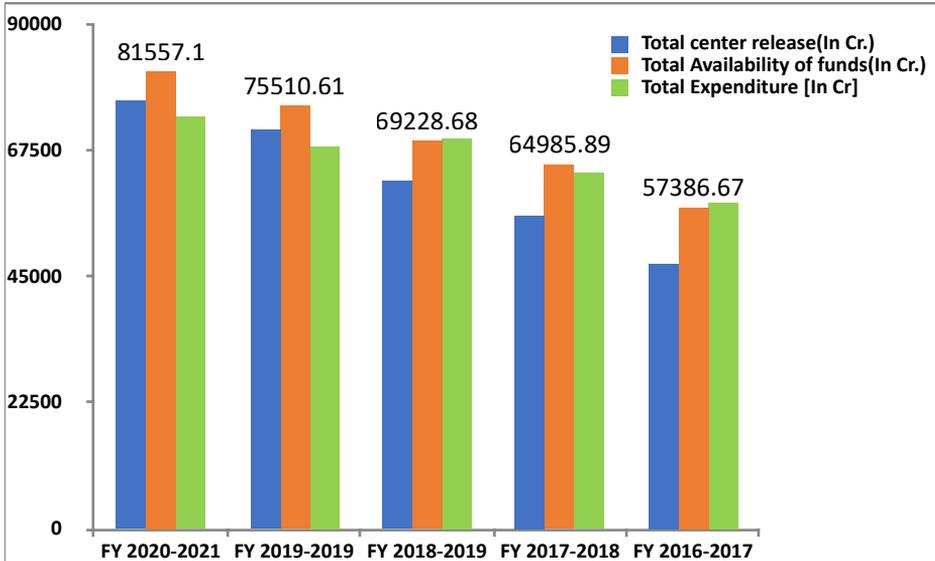
⁴ A. Sinha, *Making MGNREGS more useful: The programme has been overhauled in the last five years to deliver better results*, The Times of India (Nov. 22, 2019) <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/toi-edit-page/making-mgnregs-more-useful-the-programme-has-been-overhauled-in-the-last-five-years-to-deliver-better-results/>

The official performance data of MGNREGA in the recent past show that more gram panchayats have logged work under the rural job guarantee scheme during the corona pandemic so far than over the last seven. An analysis of data available up to March 25, 2021 on the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) portal shows the number of gram panchayats generating nil persondays of work during the current financial year at an eight-year low of 5737 — only 2.13 per cent of the 2.68 lakh gram panchayats across the country (NREGA MIS, March 25, 2021). This is quite a remarkable success for MGNREGA as over 97.87 per cent of gram panchayats across the country have registered demand for work under NREGA. In contrast, during the last financial year, the number of gram panchayats generating nil persondays during the entire period was 10,548 or 3.91 per cent of the total 2.64 lakh gram panchayats. When contacted by the Indian Express, an official of the Rural Development Ministry, which manages the scheme, said the data show that “the Government has been able to provide employment in a record number of panchayats" (Indian Express December 1, 2020).



Source: Indian Express December 1, 2020.

Figure 3- Total Expenditure against release and available of fund with persondays generated in Crores from FY 2016-2021



Source: nrega.nic.in as per data on 25th March 2021

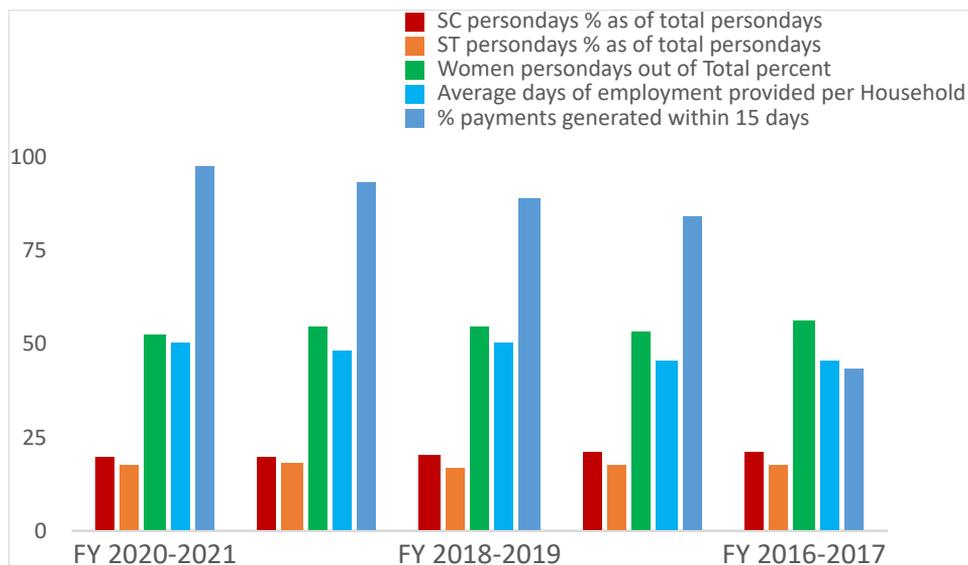
And there is enough evidence to show that more effective targeting of NREGA with women, dalits and tribals has yielded positive results. Women today constitute more than 50% of the workforce in NREGA, a crucial reason for the Central and state governments to augment the scale and reach of NREGA during the national lockdown. Given the consistent performance data of SC, ST, women and average day of employment performance as indicated in the performance date below, one can infer that NREGA has improved its delivery capacity in various districts of India.

Table 5– Employment generation and its distribution from FY 2016-2021

	FY 2020-2 021	FY 2019- 2020	FY 2018-20 19	FY 2017- 2018	FY 2016-20 17
SC persondays % as of total	19.74	20.28	20.77	21.56	21.32
ST persondays % as of total	17.87	18.46	17.42	17.49	17.62
Women persondays out of Total	53.09	54.78	54.6	53.5	56.2
Average days of employment provided per Household	50.46	48.4	50.9	45.7	46
% payments generated within 15	97.77	93.77	89.61	84.5	43.43

Source: nrega.nic.in.

Figure 4- Employment generation and its distribution from FY 2016-2021



Source: nrega.nic.in.

The performance data also points out that the number of delayed payment transactions made beyond 90 days have come down from 54267907 in the FY 2016-2017 to 2978909 in the FY 2019-2020. And the payment generation through electronic Funds Transfer Orders (FTO) at the block level has become faster yet actual transfer of wages to workers continues to suffer from delays especially at the end of central government. Leveraging Jam trinity- (Jan Dhan-Aadhar-Mobile) based -direct cash transfer infrastructure in rural India, the Ministry of Rural Development must resolve a new generation of wage payment problems like rejected payments, diverted payments, and blocked payments. For instance, Rs 1,600 crore of wage payments were rejected in 2019-20.

True, implementation of NREGA continues to remain uneven and patchy across states and districts due to variable bureaucratic capacity of last-mile officials and informational asymmetry at the level of PRIs, and it is also true that MGNREGA is still plagued with various types of leakages and scams. However, recent evaluation studies also suggest that concerns about misappropriation of funds and resources, and leakages in MGNREGA have been addressed with the help of innovative citizen-centric social audits, and ICT-enabled increased use of transparency processes to a great extent in most districts of the country. Though the rural development bureaucracy in the district continues to practice culture of ‘work-rationing’ to suppress the large unmet demand for NREGA, converging NREGA with other development programs has resulted into reputational pay offs for district and sub-district bureaucratic and political elites in delivering welfare programs at the grassroots. The field studies in the pre-corona years and also performance data during the national lockdown clearly show that NREGA has not only survived, it has gradually laid the administrative and civic foundation for a more secular and universal post-clientelistic welfare program in the states and districts of India.

Policy Recommendations for Innovating MGNREGA

According to various reports, it is estimated that more than one crore migrant workers have been reported to have returned to their homes in states like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Odisha, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and Madhya Pradesh.⁵ Recognizing the impact of the humanitarian crisis, the Home Ministry of India has empowered the states and union territories to use the funds under the National Disaster Response Fund (NDRF) for providing food and shelter to migrant workers and their families including children during the corona pandemic. Though food for work programs in the pre-NREGA days suffered from leakages and pilferages, it is well known that families especially children suffer silently in humanitarian crises or economic emergencies. Thus, the NREGA act needs to be amended to make provision for food at the work site so that the food insecurity crisis can be addressed in the wake of exceptional disasters like the corona pandemic. The mass exodus of migrant workers during the national lockdown has also led to state governments registering migrants for employment and skill mapping opportunities. Therefore, the Artificial Intelligence (AI) based Atmanirbhar Skilled Employee Employer Mapping (ASEEM) portal can be utilized for mapping reverse flow of migrant workers for ensuring registration of workers for public works opportunities in villages. In a pandemic-battered economy, states and district administrations have to proactively allow labour mobility across public work sites. In such a situation, what is important is to create an imaginative social protection and security system for migrant labourers and rural poor in the times of global pandemic.

Aimed at generating employment opportunities for migrant workers in rural India amid the corona pandemic, the Central government

⁵R. Jadhav, *Five States Account of 67% Migrant Worker Who Returned Home During the Lockdown*, The Hindu Business Line (Feb. 11, 2021) <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/data-stories/data-focus/five-states-account-for-67-migrant-workers-who-returned-home-during-the-lockdown/article33813158.ece>

also launched an ingenious program “Garib Kalyan Rojgar Abhiyan” scheme worth Rs. 50,000 crores in 116 districts across six states- Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, Odisha, and Rajasthan. Converging with welfare programs like NREGA, this program was implemented in a mission mode for 125 days beginning 20th June, 2020 focusing on implementing 25 different types of works for generating employment and upgrading rural infrastructure. By getting migrant workers to work under schemes such as Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana, Swachh Bharat and Construction of Anganwadi Centers, the government has re-leveraged the development and welfare potential of NREGA during the pandemic. These measures are quite encouraging as they are signs of the increasing visibility of migrants in the policy circuits of the central and state governments. Though front-line public officials routinely perform badly in delivering public services like primary education, health, water, sanitation, and environmental quality, but in the time of Corona pandemic, different stakeholders—ministries/ departments, and district administrations have effectively coordinated on things such as opening up millions of work sites and timely payments to the workers. Also, they have upgraded existing monitoring mechanisms for program implementation at the sub-district level. Therefore, linking of *NREGA job cards with the national rollout of the ‘One Nation, One Ration Card’* system in all states and union territories by March, 2021 will be potentially a game changer as it allows migrant workers and their families to access the Public Distribution System (PDS) for procuring subsidized ration wherever they live and work. Currently, 20 states have come on board to implement portable PDS systems. Taking a cue from this, the Ministry of Rural Development must allow migrant labourers to use their MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) job card in any part of the country. Such will be a great relief for migrants as they can take up MGNREGA work at the destination site rather than returning home for mitigating urgent livelihood needs. Thus, *One Nation-One NREGA job card linked with*

One Nation One Ration Card will be a great innovation for developing a pan-India welfare and humanitarian action.

Also, it is noteworthy to recall here that the success of NREGA in averting humanitarian disaster during the corona pandemic in rural India has led to renewal of demands for URBAN NREGA. Undoubtedly, the Covid-19 crisis has drawn attention to the insecurities that haunt the lives of the urban poor. Generally, they are less insecure than the rural poor, partly because fallback work is easier to find in urban areas – if only pulling a rickshaw or selling tea or bread pakoras. Still, the urban poor are exposed to serious contingencies, both individual (like illness and unemployment) and collective (lockdowns, floods, cyclones, financial crises, and so on). Social networks, civil society organizations and mutual support can help, but they have obvious limits, especially in times of collective crisis like corona pandemic. There is, thus, a need for better social protection in urban areas including big and small cities. Given this urgency of mitigating the economic hardship of urban poor and also rejuvenating urban economy, Jean Dreze, of the major architects of original NREGA has floated a radical proposal—a Decentralized Urban Employment and Training scheme, or DUET, involving government-issued job stamps that can be used to hire workers⁶. Though the major focus of DUET is on maintenance work, the list of permissible works could also include other types of productive, labor-intensive, short-term jobs that may be required from time to time by the approved public institutions – for instance extra help for a public function, temporary security services, assistance with periodic cleanliness drives, environmental improvements, public health campaigns, or debris removal after a storm. In his demand-driven urban employment programme, the state and/or central government in conjunction with local urban bodies

⁶J. Dreze, *The Jean Dreze Interview: Keeping migrant workers from returning home will deepen COVID-19 financial crisis*, The New Indian Express. (Apr. 28, 2020) <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2020/apr/28/the-jean-dreze-interview-keeping-igrant-workers-from-returning-home-will-deepen-covid-19-financial>

will issue job stamps and give them to public institutions like government-run schools and municipal bodies. They will then use these job stamps as and when they need for maintenance or construction work. In Drèze's urban employment scheme, the labour contractor would be replaced by a state-run placement agency, and the system will be more transparent for the workers and urban local bodies. Like Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA), this proposal avoids the targeting conundrum. Under DUET, workers have to present themselves to a placement agency, get registered and show up to work when called. The State does not play a role in determining eligibility criteria. As we have seen from the discussion on MGNREGA, self-targeting has proved far more efficient than targeted transfers, when it comes to inclusion. Another possible advantage of DUET is whether, like MNREGA, it could provide a wage floor, thus shifting the general equilibrium of market wages in favor of casual workers.

Further, given the plight of migrant labour and the long -term effects of the corona pandemic on the rural economy, time has also come to reimagine NREGA as a universal basic income guarantee scheme. This linking of workfare welfare and direct-cash transfer has the potential to mitigate economic hardship of landless labour, small-marginal farmers, and seasonal migrants in India. And it won't cost much. A modest amount of Rs 16000 per year to a household of five has been suggested by leading development economist Pranab Bardhan.⁷ There is sufficient evidence that even a small level of universal basic income helps in securing the livelihoods and health of the poor, especially women and children in rural India. With a monthly basic income support combined with 100 days of legally guaranteed rural works, NREGA would obviate the need for multiple conflicting income support schemes for farmers in rural India. This combo of NREGA and universal basic income would

⁷ P. Bardhan, *Basic Income in Poor Country*, Ideas for India (Sept. 26, 2016) <https://www.ideasforindia.in/topics/poverty-inequality/basic-income-in-a-poor-country.html>

specially help ameliorate the plight of elderly, widowed, and disabled in rural India. As the demand for NREGA is stronger than ever, it is urgent that the Central government must urgently expand the list of permissible works including extending NREGA to the agricultural fields. In other words, without diluting existing entitlements of rural workers, a minor tweaking of the definition of the works under category IV in the Schedule One of NREGA will allow SC/ ST communities, land reforms beneficiaries and small and marginal farmers to reap the benefits of contract farming or tenant farming on their lands (pooled together or individual land). This can be done through *self-help groups or village cooperatives of NREGA wage seekers* with strong institutional social audits by the village councils. This will not only boost agriculture but also support millions of tenant farmers including women farmers who work on daily wages under adverse social circumstances. Last but not least, the central government and state governments need to shed their bureaucratic prejudices against the involvement of civil society organizations in facilitating the implementation of NREGA. The bureaucratic and managerial focus on a depoliticized notion of “implementation” without any attempt of social mobilization of rural poor has resulted into what philosopher Roberto Unger calls “institutional fetishism”- the belief that the abstract institutional conceptions like citizens can work without their active participation. This has led to practices of suppressing the demands of work and the bureaucratic culture of rationing of public works in rural India on the pretext of low state capacity. But it is quite well known that MGNREGA has emerged from social movements of poor people. Also, there is sufficient evidence that civil society organizations have played a significant role in creating awareness in rural communities and building the capacity of frontline functionaries on natural resource management, or NRM, under MGNREGA. Therefore, in the pandemic it is important that experienced and capable CSOs should be engaged to create mass awareness and build the capabilities of frontline functionaries especially

in those districts and states where the performance of MGNREGA is below par or average.

It sounds radical and challenging but once this happens, a more secular and universal-ONE NATION ONE NREGA- could also unshackle the untapped entrepreneurial energies of the rural poor, institutionalize associational forms of community bargaining power, and induce more equity in the emerging market structures in our villages leading to new forms of multiplier-accelerator effects of income support welfare programmes. As the coronavirus' second wave has turned into a Tsunami killing people relentlessly in various parts of the country, social scrutiny programs like MGNREGA have become vital to sustain the faith of people in life and livelihoods. In other words, we must acknowledge the fact that linking MGNREGA with innovative governance reforms is urgently required for mitigating the unprecedented humanitarian crisis. In the end we all agree with Samuel Johnson that “a decent provision for the poor is the true test of civilization”.