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Title: Information and Communication Technology (ICT) for effective implementation of MGNREGA in Jammu & Kashmir

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Abstract

The landmark enactment of MGNREGA legislation in the year 2005 was aimed with a new dawn in poverty alleviation and rural self-employment in India, with prerogatives of rural employment and sustainable development. Success of the program is dependent on various parameters like participation, demand, accountability, implementation, fiscal health and usage of ICT as a tool of facilitation. The contemporary trends in development programs demand the extensive usage of ICT tools for the dissemination of information, planning, execution, and monitoring of programs to cultivate transparency and accountability. Knowing that the ICT is an inseparable part of MGNREGA, still, the tools of ICT are either absent or not being used effectively. Thus, it becomes imperative to study the essence of ICT tools about MGNREGA. The present study thus aims to assess ICT through the usage in various aspects of the MGNREGA scheme in district Kupwara and Poonch of J&K.

Keywords: *Information, Communication, Technology, ICT, MGNREGA*

Introduction

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) was launched in August 2005. The program was launched in three phases. In the first phase, it has covered the 200 most backward districts of India. In 2007-08 the second phase acceded in another 130 districts and the remaining rural districts were covered under the third phase on April 1, 2008 (MoRD, 2017). In Jammu and Kashmir MGNREGA was launched in three most backward districts viz., Doda, Kupwara, and Poonch in the year 2006, later in 2nd phase the program was extended to two more districts Anantnag and Jammu and in its final phase, it was extended to the entire State in 2008-09. The objective of the program is to enhance the livelihood of the people living in rural areas by providing them wage employment, which will simultaneously help in infrastructural development. Under the scheme, there is a provision of guaranteed 100 days wage employment in a financial year to any adult who is willing to do any unskilled manual work. The program has envisaged the power within people to designate

the functioning of the program and in particular, the Gram Panchayat has a great role to play in the working of MGNREGA. The program also aims in bringing down the poverty ratio by directly fulfilling the necessities of rural life. In a study, it was found that 44 % of the total respondents joined MGNREGA to fulfill their necessities of life like food, clothing, and shelter making a slight difference in their quality of life (Garg &Yadav, 2010). The enactment of the MGNREGA program indeed is a significant development in Indian polity. In other words, it symbolizes the triumph of civil society and people's struggle for the right to food (Venu& Menon 2008). The Scheme envisages the enhancement of the livelihood security of the people in rural areas by generating wage employment. The choice of works seeks to address the causes of chronic poverty like drought/moisture stress, deforestation, and soil erosion. As such, the scheme has also the potential to transform the agriculture and rural poverty scenario.

Information Communication and Technology (ICT)-based initiatives are being implemented under MGNREGA to augment its implementation, whereby rural people can access information on their work history, demand jobs against a dated receipt, and also receive wages on a simple biometric registration. The problems which MGNREGA is facing like muster roll maintenance, handling records, transparency, delay in wages can be easily handled by the use of proper techniques of ICT and digitalization (Sharma and Upadhyay, 2017). ICT can be used in MGNREGA at all levels of its implementation. It will help in disseminating the information on time which will help in ensuring transparency. The MGNREGA workers are largely illiterate, poor, and at the bottom of the social hierarchy. They cannot articulate their demands 'formally' in writing. The absence of a written application for employment, non-issuance of dated receipts, non-payment of unemployment allowances, or compensation for delay in wages are not on account of administrative lapses in record-keeping but reflect the social undercurrents and dynamics that prevent workers from exercising their rights in demanding work from the Gram Panchayat in an equitable manner (Kumar, 2013).

Methodology and Objectives of the study

The present study has been conducted in two backward districts of J&K ,i.e Kupwara and Poonch. From each district, two blocks were selected based on the implementation status of MGNREGA. A sample of 200 beneficiaries was taken with 100 beneficiaries from each district. The inclusion criterion for the selection of beneficiaries was the possession of a Job Card. A detailed interview schedule was employed with beneficiaries besides conducting FGD's at the village level. The descriptive statistical analysis was used for the data analysis. The prime objective of the study was to understand the role of ICT in the implementation of MGNREGA and the specific objectives were:

- To find out whether the ICT tools are being used in MGNREGA implementation.
- To identify potential ICT tools that can be used in promoting MGNREGA in backward districts of Jammu & Kashmir.

- To assess the implementation and functioning of MGNREGA with ICT tools and to suggest measures to strengthen the program through the usage of ICT tools.

Findings

ICT has the potential for economic growth and social empowerment (Nandi, 2002). Thus, ICT can play a role in economic and social development through the effective implementation of MGNREGA. The ICT augments the implementation process of MGNREGA by fostering accountability and good governance. Although, the ICT is part of every aspect of the program but the scope of ICT is more seen in Communication&Mobilization, Planning& Execution of Works, Monitoring of Works, and Grievance Redressal System.

Communication & Mobilization

The awareness among primary stakeholders related to MGNREGA entitlements is the key to the success of the programme. The majority of labourers in MGNREGA are unaware of the basic entitlements of the scheme which deprives them of claiming their shares. (Bebarta, 2013). Primarily communication and mobilization of beneficiaries are one of the crucial aspects under any rural development program and particularly it is a basic prerequisite under MGNREGA. The initial enlisting of rural poor is directly linked with strategies of mobilization that are adopted under the program. For the success of the program, a comprehensive policy of mobilization is required. Mobilization is contextualized as a process whereby people are given awareness about the program and its structure and are encouraged to enlist in the program and take benefit out of it. The process of mobilization needs a strong medium and a good strategy. The significant medium and strategies include the usage of Community Radio, Television, and the Internet. It has been found that under MGNREGA mass mobilization was to be done by using these ICT tools. The ICT interventions can usher communication and mobilization for publicizing the MGNREGA programme through community radio, television, internet, and Common Service Centres (CSC). The present study has conducted an assessment in two districts of Jammu & Kashmir. For the purpose of this study, five important tools of ICT have been analysed. These ICT tools of mass mobilization are Community Radio, Television (TV), Internet, Information Kiosks, and CSC's. The presence and essence of each tool were assessed in terms of its availability and usage for information dissemination.

Community radio, as distinct from commercial and public service broadcasting, serves to bring small communities together, focuses on the general public's day-to-day concerns, and helps in realizing local demands and aspirations. In this sense, it aims to enrich the livelihoods of the local people, through the content that is created by the people and for the people of the community (Wadia, 2007). Community radio is also defined as a non-profit agency that is considered to serve specific local communities; thereby broadcasting programmes and contents which are relevant to the community and with organizational

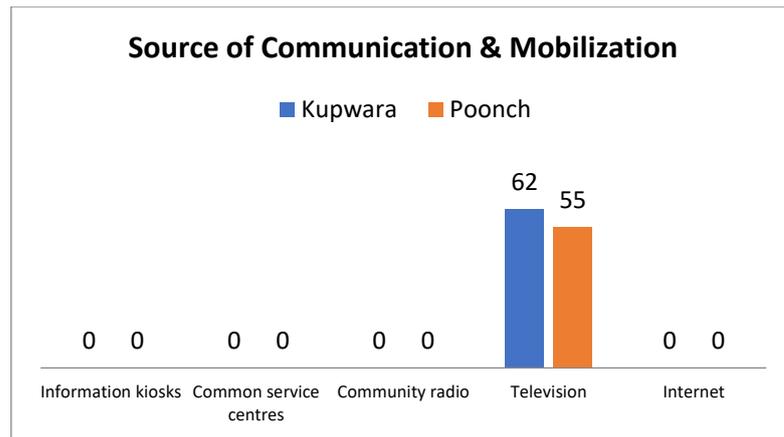
structures that represent the community the radio station work for (Fleming, 2002). The role of community radio as a tool of mass mobilization in MGNREGA could prove important for its implementation. The basic assumption being that still radio holds a place in rural India. Despite its new forms or additions, the community radio is absent in both districts i.e Kupwara and Poonch. The beneficiaries of MGNREGA in these districts have no idea about community radio.

Information kiosks An Interactive Kiosk is a computer terminal featuring specialized hardware and software designed within a public exhibit that provides access to information and applications for communication, commerce, entertainment, and education. With the introduction of the Kiosk, it was believed that many rural problems can be easily eliminated because they will be available to each village. Besides, the information can be disseminated in regional languages. The aim of using kiosks in rural areas is to also get daily updates and forecasts related to farming like rain, temperature, market prices, etc. The setting up of Kiosks in rural areas could also help in augmenting the basic services of MGNREGA. However, the provision of Kiosks in district Poonch and Kupwara is still a distant dream. On inquiry about the absence of Kiosks at the village level, the rural administration believes that there is a lack of funds for establishing the same. Moreover, it was found that the rural local administration is lacking policy-level information for the establishment of kiosks.

Common Service Centre (CSC) is a strategic keystone of the National e-Governance Plan (NeGP), approved by the Government of India (GoI) in May 2006. A part of the National E-Governance Plan Scheme named Common Service Centre Scheme is started by the Government to provide Government to Citizen (G2C) and Business to Citizens (B2C) services at the doorstep of citizens under Bharat Nirman. The provision of CSC has been found in both the districts but provision has not been community-based rather cluster-based one. The presence of cluster-based CSC has not helped in communication-related to basic entitlements of MGNREGA at the community level nor has it helped in the mobilization of rural people for enrolment under the program.

Television has been the only source in both districts Kupwara and Poonch as a major tool in communication and mobilization. 62 % beneficiaries in Kupwara and 55% in Poonch have reported the TV as the primary source of information related to MGNREGA. Thus, in the mobilization and enrolment of rural people under MGNREGA, the TV has played a significant role. However, there seems to be very little role of TV in contemporary times. Most of the beneficiaries have reported that they received the basic information on MGNREGA years before. Now the content and viewership of TV have altogether changed and hence there is no role of TV in the process and implementation of the program.

Table 1.1: Source of Communication & Mobilization



Source: Field survey

ICT and Awareness about Planning and Execution

The effective implementation of MGNREGA is based on the creation of awareness among rural people and other stakeholders, particularly MGNREGA workers in respect of the scheme provisions as well as their rights and entitlements. Apart from IEC activities, there should be an aim at facilitating and dissemination of information on right-based provisions of the program to ensure that the workers know their right to demand wage employment and exercise their right by applying for jobs as per their need. The role of the various stakeholders is pivotal because at times in rural settings the importance of ICT is not visualized. The states are preparing their programs for awareness based on local procedures. The effective tools of ICT are supposed to help in various procedures of the MGNREGA program and can be used for addressing the following issues;

- Lack of comprehensive knowledge about the Scheme
- Lack of knowledge on how to exercise their rights by applying for the job
- Connectivity with towns/satellite towns
- Wage differentials
- Lack of infrastructure and capacity at GP/Block/District level
- Delayed wage payments
- Delayed fund release to the GP etc.
- Availability of alternate employment opportunities in primary, secondary, and tertiary sectors
- Proximity to urban areas
- Low visibility of the programme

- Lack of knowledge about what all works can be taken up under MGNREGA¹.

(Source Field survey)

Less emphasis on ICT tools for awareness generation

There is a huge availability of relevant agencies and staff for the dissemination of information regarding MGNREGA. The availability of various agencies for awareness generation and implementation of the program are not sensitive towards the usage of ICT tools. In the district Kupwara and Poonch of Jammu & Kashmir there is the availability of the following agencies for awareness generation and implementation of the MGNREGA program.

- District Rural Development Authority (DRDA)/Block level officials/ Village Level Worker (VLW).
- State Level Officials
- Gram Panchayat (GP)/Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) members
- Opinion makers/Teachers
- Social Workers/Activists
- Politicians
- CBO's

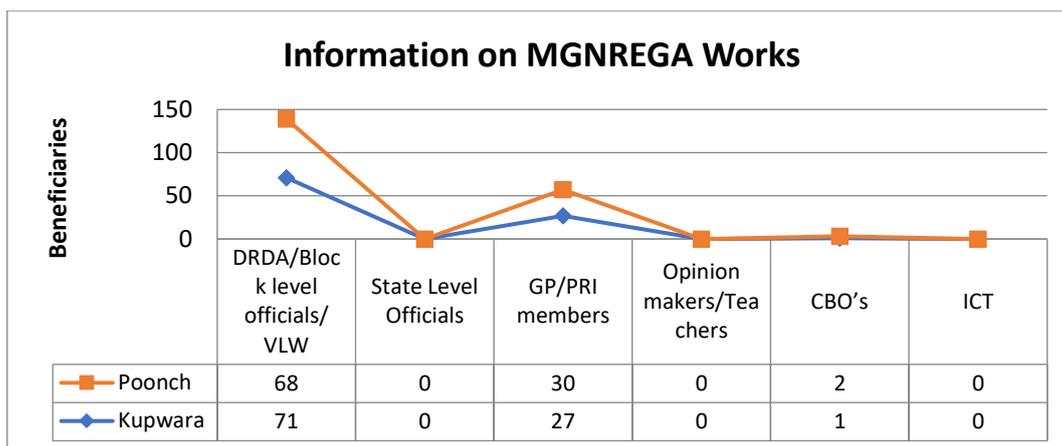
The role of all these agencies was assessed in both districts. The DRDA/Block level officials/ VLW is still a major agency for the dissemination of information related to the planning and execution of works under MGNREGA. 68% beneficiaries of Kupwara and 71% in Poonch believe that DRDA/Block level officials/ VLW are the main sources of information. Although, there is some role of GP/PRI members as active partners in information flow but that is little. The contractors at the village level have also been found in generating awareness in both the districts of Kupwara and Poonch. Although, the specified role of contractors is negligible in works as per MGNREGA guidelines but their participation and involvement are reflecting violations. In district Kupwara there has been a more active role of contractors as compared to district Poonch. Their active role reflects two fundamental outcomes in MGNREGA;

- I. Violation of operational guidelines of MGNREGA.
- II. Less focus on ICT and marginal role/less involvement of various stakeholders.

The role of ICT in the implementation of MGNREGA works is negligible in both districts of Kupwara and Poonch. The reason of the negligible role as per the DRDA/Block level officials/ VLW is that they believe that rural poor are not able to use the ICT media and even if they may use it becomes vulnerable for them. This clearly reflects that there is not only a need to introduce ICT tools at the community level but there is also a need to build capacity among the rural poor for its effective usage.

Table 1.2 Information on MGNREGA works

¹ Operational guidelines, 2013, MGNREGA. Ministry of Rural Development Gol, New Delhi



Source: A field study

Level of involvement of ICT in Planning and Execution

The ICT platform has a high role in the Issuance of Job Cards, digitization of Muster Rolls, Persons Employed and Smart Cards/Biometric cards for the sake of planning purposes. It has been found in both districts that all these operations are done without the aid of ICT tools. There is the only exception that muster rolls are generated after work for sake of uploading information on *nregasoft*. One of the purposes of using ICT tools in MGNREGA is to track every beneficiary in the region and the status of his/her involvement in the program. In execution of works, the ICT tools help in a work management system. It also helps in authenticating records of the attendance at the worksites. In all the worksites at district, Kupwara and Poonch works management record is done manually

Table 1.3 Usage of ICT in Key operations.

S.No	Key Areas for ICT operations	Kupwara		Poonch	
		Manual operations	ICT operations	Manual operations	ICT operations
1.	Job cards	100%		100	
2.	Digitization of muster rolls		100		100
3.	Person days worked	100%		100	
4.	Smart card Biometrics	NA	NA	NA	NA
5.	Works management record	100		100	
6.	Attendance	100		100	

Source: A field study

Conclusion

ICT acts as a vital tool to enhance the transparency and operational efficiency within MGNREGA in rural India. The usage of ICT tools is improving the participation of workers at grass root level in the program. The two important and initial pillars of MGNREGA implementation are communication and mobilization can be augmented through the proper usage of ICT tools. The ICT shall help in transparent information dissemination related to

program activities and can also help in enhancing all stakeholders' participation to ensure maximum and effective participation of the poor. There is a need to have all the key operational areas like job cards, individual information related to person days worked, work management records, daily attendance, and wage disbursement through ICT operations. This will not only reduce the time taken on manual operations but will also foster transparent information dissemination. A lot of human resources are being used for information flow like DRDA, Block level officials, VLW, State Level Officials, GP, PRI's, etc. due to less emphasis on the usage of ICT tools. In this regard, there is a need to develop the institutional mechanism and infrastructure to enlarge the usage of ICT tools. There is also a need for capacity building among beneficiaries for service delivery usage of ICT and also training the implementation partners for facilitative ICT usage.

Operating the CSC centres in line with MGNREGA guidelines can further help in increasing the efficiency of the program. With more than 15 years of implementation of MGNREGA in Kupwara and Poonch, the functioning of CSC centres should have been pivotal in expanding the benefits of programs to the rural poor. Although, in both districts, the basic infrastructure of CSC is present at the cluster level there is a need to create the CSC's at the Village level with valid technology and professional human resource. There is a need to equip the CSC centres with modern ICT-based tools and impart training to existing human resources for conducting ICT-based operations in MGNREGA. Further, community radio has also a role in expanding program coverage. Community radio has three key aspects; non-profit making, community ownership & management, and community participation (Pavara & Malik, 2002). In this regard, the Community Based Organizations (CBO) are regarded as one of the agencies for awareness generation and implementation of the MGNREGA program. The CBO's can act as a direct partner in community radio and shall help in leveraging the MGNREGA goals especially in remote communities or most backward districts. Since Kupwara and Poonch are regarded as backward districts CBO's need to come up with community-based radio.

The MGNREGA has not been able to justify its existence in terms of achieving its envisaged objectives and desired results. With more than a decade in implementation of the program, the impact assessment studies on MGNREGA have indicated a need to have good governance, management practice and procedures, efficient processes, and the factors that may contribute to the envisaged outcome. Therefore, the need is to see the impact of MGNREGA on the rural community through community-based structures and usage of ICT tools.

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