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[Back](#)

[Opinion](#) - [Leader Page Articles](#)

## **Programming NREGS to succeed**

Pramathesh Ambasta

*A humungous programme like NREGS needs an independent body that looks after IT, human resource development, evaluation, social audit and grievance redress, without which quality outcomes will remain elusive.*

In two general elections since 2004, the “other” India has spoken loud and clear to the few enclaves of prosperity that dot the country’s grim development landscape: if growth is not inclusive and broad-based, its wheels will come off, severely undermining the very fabric of Indian democracy. In this context, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme acquires great significance. For, it marks a historic opportunity for pushing ahead with governance reforms in rural India. However, much more needs to be done before NREGS possibilities become a reality. For, the average days of work per household were only 48 in 2008-09. The record of productive assets creation has been poor if not altogether dismal. Long delays in wage payments, sometimes for several months, and the spectre of corruption rearing its ugly head indicate the failure of entitlements reaching the poorest of the nation, thus defeating the very purpose of NREGS.

An analysis of these symptoms suggests that there are clear reasons why the results are not along expected lines. Though no magic bullet or quick fixes exist, solutions may well be within our reach. As several observers have remarked, a critical lacuna in the implementation of NREGS has been the shortage of dedicated human resource, with an overloaded bureaucratic structure given “additional charge,” leading to delays and poor quality output. Attempts to piggyback a radically new people-centred programme on to a moribund bureaucratic structure of implementation simply do not work.

However, a dedicated implementation structure will only solve part of the problem. The second crucial missing link in the implementation chain is concurrent monitoring. Here, Information Technology (IT) has a huge role to play in making necessary information available transparently and at high speed. Rich though the NREGA Management Information System (MIS) is, there is much scope for improvement. The MIS, for instance, is not able to raise an alert on delays in wage payments because data are normally updated post-facto, thus undermining the very basis of monitoring.

Evaluation and social audit are the third aspect of NREGS implementation in need of qualitative improvements. Both are integral to the bottom-up architecture of the scheme. Finally, despite the best design and rollout, problems and gaps in execution will always persist. It is here that a lack of any grievance redress mechanism is glaring for, such a system can work wonders in building confidence in the scheme.

Taken together with other reforms, changes in these four essential directions — human resource development, better use of IT, independent evaluation and social audit and effective grievance redress — can begin to make NREGS perform to its potential. However, the important question here is: who will oversee these key functions and ensure that all implementation agencies across the country comply with standards and norms established in all these aspects? We strongly believe that the largest employment programme in human history must be armed with an independent, dedicated National Authority to anchor and steer it. Such a national authority for NREGS (NAN) should be set up as an autonomous body. The function of coordinating the implementation and monitoring of the programme by the States would remain with the Department of Rural Development, as at present. But evaluation, social audit and grievance redress would become independent of the department. For, as a matter of principle, the agency executing the programme should not be the one evaluating its own work. In addition, NAN would be charged with the key functions of human resource development (deployment as well as capacity-building) and streamlining IT systems to facilitate effective monitoring and social audit.

In order to ensure maximum autonomy, the chairperson of NAN should be an individual of established integrity and eminence chosen from public life. The road map for autonomy along with its legal-constitutional implications should be worked out through detailed

deliberations in the public domain. The executive arm of NAN should be headed by a Director-General (DG), an officer not below the rank of Secretary to the Government of India, competitively recruited from the open market using a search committee headed by the Cabinet Secretary and including persons of eminence/experience working on NREGS. Serving government officers would also be able to apply for the post. The DG will report to the chairperson of the Authority.

NAN should have four departments — evaluation and social audit, grievance redress, information technology and human resource development — each headed by a Deputy Director-General (DDG), a Joint Secretary rank officer, again recruited in the same manner as the DG.

The evaluation and social audit department will be responsible for mounting evaluation through a carefully selected panel of experts and institutions from across the country, and ensuring that social audits are undertaken and monitored. The grievance redress department will be a window for immediate response to any complaint made by wage-seekers or their representatives or organisations, lay citizens, or any other agency wishing to bring to the notice of NAN any violation of the Act anywhere. The department will appoint ombudsmen throughout the country — citizens of proven eminence, integrity and track record of service to the nation who will be fully empowered by NAN to work as its eyes and ears, arms and legs. The ombudsmen will receive complaints and take them up with the district administration and the State Employment Guarantee Council. If needed, they may go to the site from where the complaints originate, or appoint a team to go there, or organise a multilateral committee made up of representatives of the government, the ombudsman concerned and the complainant, to find out the true facts within a time frame. The committee would submit a report with clear recommendations specifying the time within which action needs to be taken. The ombudsman would report to the NAN about the action taken or not taken.

In order that NREGS becomes a vehicle for governance on the doorstep of the poorest, the speed and power of computer networks must be harnessed with a thorough understanding of the needs of different stakeholders. IT must enable availability of updated information which is as close to reality as possible for tracking NREGS. There must be a system in place, which is tightly integrated end to end, in which IT deployment is central to the workflow, so that data are as real time as is possible. In addition, there is need for a

hardware and connectivity backbone which allows real-time online update of data. The system must also constantly innovate to bring more and more such areas, which have traditionally belonged to note-sheets, files and red tape, under its purview. It must constantly seek to harness newer ideas and innovations to fulfil the goal of digital inclusion. The Unique Identity can find a place within this information system to deliver much more than a number to every Indian, by allowing for real-time, non-repudiable authentication of beneficiaries in critical NREGS transactions. The NREGS worker will biometrically confirm receipt after the payment has been made. Given the importance of information systems, NAN's IT department must use the best technical expertise available in the country, which will take responsibility for putting in place and constantly streamlining the IT backbone for NREGS implementation. The department will also ensure that the States comply with the ICT requirements of data returns and updation.

The people-centred architecture of NREGS requires delving deep into complex technical and social processes. This necessitates personnel equipped to do the job. While such a human resource requirement is treated as obvious for infrastructure projects of "national importance," it is tragically never understood that the demands of governance and development in partnership with the rural poor require as much creativity, skill and professionalism, if not more. The human resource department of NAN will be responsible for ensuring that a professional tier is created for the cutting edge of NREGS implementation, work out standards for the personnel recruited, and a system of certification. It will set needs-based standards for training institutions across the country to build the capacities of NREGS implementers. It will also work out a detailed policy, aimed at rewarding performance, weeding out non-performers, low attrition and high retention of people who perform.

For the flagship programme to be effective, it needs to be programmed to succeed. A central anchoring agency such as NAN may well hold the password to such a programme, in the course of time, unlocking the gates to let the necessary changes in.

*(The writer is National Coordinator, Civil Society Consortium on NREGA)*

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