

NREGA AS SOCIAL PROTECTION AND BEYOND: A SHOT AT DIGNITY FOR WORKERS

September 2020

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During these times of high unemployment and a weak economy, NREGA is critical for two reasons: as the sole income source for many vulnerable rural households, and if improved and made more efficient then as a way to move labour markets in favour of migrant workers. We provide a ground-up view of the challenges in NREGA operations based on our recent experiences and describe how the tumultuous lives of migrant workers can be made less precarious through well-functioning and better-funded social protection mechanisms.

The true test for NREGA – employment guarantee for anyone who demands it

In April, a Mobile Vaani community volunteer spoke with [Koleshwar Kumar Mahto from Hazaribagh, Bihar](#). Mahto used to work in West Bengal but came back home when the lockdown was imposed and his employer could not afford to pay him or help in any way. “If the government gives some money to tide me through this time, I will not return to West Bengal; I am scared of contracting the infection. But if I have no assistance, workers like me have no choice but to go back.”

[An estimated](#) 20 to 30 million migrant workers returned home because of the COVID-19 lockdown. In surveys conducted during April and May on Mobile Vaani, a voice-based participatory media platform for people in hard-to-reach communities, [only 10 percent of returned migrants](#) planned to return to their migrant destinations any time soon. Life was also not better for people who had been working in their villages and towns: [nearly 2 in 3 local workers had not been able to resume or find work](#) even after the lockdown had been lifted in June.

These are the exact conditions that the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act was meant to cater to – offer seasonal employment and a fall-back option, in case other forms of employment dried up. Indeed, the government anticipated an increase in demand for employment following the lockdown and loss of jobs for both migrant as well as local workers. The government attempted to prepare for it and announced that NREGA works could start by April 20. While numbers were low in April, they quickly ramped up: the number of households who demanded work during April-July 2020 was [nearly 40 percent higher](#) than the same period last year. As millions of city-based migrant workers returned to their villages, the availability of surplus labour was quite evident – “With migrants returning home, previously-deserted streets in villages are now teeming with people roaming around looking for work. They go to contractors who exploit them with poor wages; a contractor asks for 5 people – 8 are ready to work. Earlier, contractors would struggle to find labourers,” says [community volunteer](#) Ranjan Kumar from Gidhaur, Bihar.

[8.3 million new NREGA job cards](#) have been issued between April and September 2020, the highest annual increase in seven years. A [NREGA tracker](#) from the People's Action of Employment Guarantee (PAEG), a group of activists, academics and civil society members who came together to advocate for the NREGA in 2004, shows that 0.2 million households had already completed the 100 days of employment guaranteed for the entire year. Many states have spent most of the year's allocation for NREGA between April and August itself, especially in migrant origin states such as Odisha, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan.

Yet, the PAEG tracker also reports that 17 percent of those who asked for NREGA jobs did not get them (as of August). Even on Mobile Vaani, throughout these months our platforms were flooded with complaints from people that they needed NREGA work but they were not getting it, or that they did not have job cards to avail NREGA. Like [Surendar Yadav from Ghazipur](#), Uttar Pradesh, who got a job card six months ago but had not been sanctioned any NREGA work as yet. Or [Shailesh Yadav](#), also from Ghazipur, who wanted a job card and even spoke to his *pradhan* about it, but did not manage to get it.

This paints a mixed picture – of NREGA being a rope for people left adrift due to the lockdown, but also not reaching nearly 1 in 5 who sought its help. With the economy in doldrums, the need for NREGA is only bound to increase.

At Gram Vaani, our volunteers responded to these issues with NREGA in multiple ways.

In early June, we aligned with a call from the Right to Food Campaign to demand that *panchayats* should take prompt action to issue NREGA work to all those who demand it, and our community volunteers hand-delivered letters with a list of demands on these lines to nearly 300 *panchayats*. *Panchayat* heads – referred to as the *sarpanch* (in Madhya Pradesh), *mukhiya* (in Bihar and Jharkhand), *pradhan* (in Uttar Pradesh) – are responsible for many aspects of NREGA, such as work allocation, preparing rosters of workers, and for issuing job cards with the help of a *rozgar sewak*. Interestingly, those village heads we spoke with told us that only few people wanted work, and that they were doing their best to use their available budgets to provide job cards and NREGA work to those who demanded it.

“People find the wages to be too low, and only those on the verge of starvation really want NREGA work. Nevertheless those who want to do NREGA work can apply for a job card and get work under the scheme,” said the [mukhiya of Nuagadhi West panchayat in Munger](#), Bihar. Speaking with us in June, [the mukhiya of Sadar panchayat in Munger](#) said that he had not received any job card applications since the lockdown. He mentioned that the low wages and poor payment process could be keeping many people from taking up NREGA work.

However, the user grievances we continued to hear on Mobile Vaani told us otherwise, that the demand for NREGA was much more. Some *mukhiyas* were candid – off the record – about low funding, which affects their ability to raise work demand from their areas in time.

We therefore stepped in more deeply to understand how best to assist people in availing NREGA benefits, and to also work closely with the *Panchayats* to understand the bottlenecks at their end.

Since June, our volunteers have facilitated job card and work demand applications, and helped institutionalise a *Rozgar Diwas* each week through our campaign in Bihar *Harr Budhwar Maange Rozgar* (demand employment on every Wednesday), and pushing for similar asks in Madhya Pradesh (every Saturday) and Jharkhand (every Thursday). In the following sections, we outline our learnings based on the last three-month of our campaign and offer suggestions to plug these gaps.

NREGA-on-the-ground: Operational issues

#1: Getting a job card

By early May, [Hadma Khatoun from Ghazipur](#), Uttar Pradesh, had been out of work since almost three months with her cleaning job at the local school, and had not earned any money from tailoring work either that she used to do from home. She did not have a NREGA job card, and when she went to the *pradhan*, she was told to come back after the lockdown with her Aadhaar card and other details.

Getting a job card is the first step in the long process to demanding – and receiving – work in NREGA. Understandably, the number of people looking to get NREGA job cards increased after the lockdown was imposed, and the demand was both from returned migrant workers and local workers who lost their other means of income.

In our first phase of the campaign on NREGA, we helped about 200 workers apply for job cards by assisting them in filling out the required forms. We then kept in touch with them to inquire if they had received the cards – 60% had received them, the other 40% even two months later were still waiting for their job cards.

Varying myths abound about when and how one can get a job card (like Hadma's, that she could only apply for the card after the lockdown). But also prevalent are stories of favouritism by the *pradhan*. [Praveen Chauhan](#), also from Ghazipur, used to do carpentry at weddings, and tried to apply for a NREGA job card. He claimed that the *pradhan* only gave job cards to people he knew. "He [the *pradhan*] just told me that it [the job card] can't be created," said Chauhan.

#2: Demanding and getting work

Those with job cards have not been very lucky, either. [Sumit Kumar](#) used to work in Delhi but returned to his hometown following the lockdown. He had a job card but did not get work. "I have nothing to do now. I'm just roaming the streets and we [his family of four] are managing with whatever little food we have." He says he demanded work from his *mukhiya* but has not got anything yet. The government is just bluffing, he says.

The fact is that many people are unaware of how to formally raise a demand for work, by filling out the necessary forms at the *panchayat*. Only 30 percent of NREGA job cardholders

whom we encountered, knew how to demand work through this official process. One in four ended up simply going to the *mukhiya* to verbally ask for work. One such person is Ghazipur resident [Sanjay Kumar](#), who came back from Mumbai in March and has not got any work in NREGA yet. “I do not know how to register my demand for work. I can do electrical work, but now I’m open to doing anything that will pay.”

We assisted another 400 NREGA job cardholders to demand for work, but over half of them had not received any work in almost two months since formally raising the demand. A third got work for 10 days or less, and only 20 percent got 10-20 days of work in the last two months.

This is where the government appointed cadre of *rozgar sewaks* come into the picture. They work with *panchayat* representatives to help people apply for job cards, register for work and ensure that applicants find work within 15 days of demanding it. They are also required to organise a *rozgar diwas* (employment day) at the ward level at least once a month to help people with these tasks.

These *Rozgar Diwas* however were not conducted regularly during the lockdown or even in the subsequent months – 72 percent of the NREGA workers we met, said that the *Rozgar Diwas* had not been conducted regularly in their *panchayat* all these months. During August in Jharkhand, hundreds of [rozgar sewaks went on strike](#) to demand permanent employment and better pay, revealing another layer to the reasons behind poor implementation of many schemes.

These experiences on the ground lead us to believe that the [17 percent of unmet NREGA demand as per the official NERGA portal](#) is actually an underestimate. There are many more who do not have job cards or even among those with job cards, have not – or are unable to – register their demand for work. Millions more seem to need NREGA because they have no other option to earn an income.

#3: Getting paid on time

NREGA’s record with making timely payments is also sketchy. The PAEG tracker mentions that as of August 3, the central government was yet to transfer to states up to 40 percent of the NREGA payments for July. Although the deficit was lower in the previous months, such delays in transfer affect those who urgently need the cash.

In our calls with those whom we helped register for NREGA work and they received the work, 56 percent got payment for their work done 10 days, like [Naram](#) from Ghazipur, who has been working in NREGA since before and after the lockdown. He says he has been getting payments into his bank account soon after completing work. Another 22 percent got the payment within 10-20 days, but 22 percent of the respondents had not received wages even after three weeks of completing the work. The scheme promises payment within 15 days. Take the case of [Rajkumar](#), a migrant worker who used to work in a saree company in Surat and moved back to Allahabad after the lockdown. He got a job card made after the lockdown and did some work under NREGA but has not been paid. He raised the issue with the *pradhan*, but kept getting told that “it would come in 3-4 days” – two months have passed since then.

DBT (Direct Benefit Transfer) issues that [plague other schemes like PM-KISAN and Jan Dhan](#), are also prevalent in NREGA. Shah Alam from [Ghazipur](#) reported that his remuneration for NREGA went to his deceased father's bank account but which does not have any nominee listed, and he is now not sure how to access the funds. Problems of [Aadhaar cards linked to the wrong bank account](#), and inactive accounts due to KYC issues, are also quite common.

#4: Tackling corruption at different levels

A slew of corruption issues still plague NREGA, reducing the likelihood of deserving people being able to benefit from NREGA. Much of these are to do with middlemen who add ghost workers to the roster, pocket the wages, or keep job cards or ATM cards with them and withdraw payments before they reach the workers.

Some issues are to do with arbitrary works being sanctioned, such as [lakes being renovated and then dug up again](#), or sanctioned works not being completed, like [NREGA-funded playground construction](#) that was left incomplete. Other issues are to do with middlemen who took payment from people to get them job cards, but the cards were never seen again. These people do not know how they can get their job cards made again and most of them [do not know about the role of rozgar sewaks, says Ranjan Kumar](#), a community volunteer from Gidhaur. Another common complaint is that of machines being used to get work done – something that is not allowed under NREGA. In this story, also from Gidhaur, [machines were used for NREGA work](#) and workers in a Maha-Dalit *mohalla* were forced by local musclemen to place their fingerprints on blank sheets, and their job cards taken away.

In several cases, local officials have also been involved. One [community volunteer narrates](#) the story of a village in the Kalyanpur block of Samastipur, Bihar, where the *mukhiya* keeps job cards of *panchayat* members and colludes with the local Customer Service Point (CSP, a rural banking services point) to get the people's fingerprints to withdraw money, and gets work done using machines. Speaking to us in June from Ghazipur, [Asarathi](#) worked for 11 days laying a road under NREGA and had not been paid yet. The *pradhan* had kept her card and kept saying it would come through "in a few days".

NREGA-on-the-ground: Strategic issues

#1: Finding work that is suited to individual's skills

[Shiv Muni](#), based in Ghazipur, used to work as a *mistri* – a skilled supervisor at a construction site – but with no other work now, he has been doing manual labour under NREGA. He used to make 500 rupees a day earlier as a *mistri*.

Despite skill mapping being done especially among returned migrant workers [by the central government](#) and across states such as [Uttar Pradesh](#) and [Chhattisgarh](#), many end up doing tasks for which they are overqualified.

[Rajendar Kumar Mahto](#), who returned from Gujarat, was reluctant to take up NREGA work because it is manual labour. He migrated in the first place because he was not getting jobs

that matched his qualification. “I request the government to give us work that is according to our education,” he says.

#2: Low wages

[Jayprakash Ram](#) from Ghazipur, who ferries construction debris, has hardly worked in NREGA since getting a job card in 2008. Following the lockdown, he says there have been announcements for NREGA work but he would rather continue his current work than to take up NREGA, given the low wages. “We need higher wages,” is his message. Similarly, [Lakshman Ram](#) used to work in Telengana, earning 600 rupees a day. He did not have a NREGA job card, and had little information about NREGA jobs opened up in his village, but he wanted the daily wage to be at least 400 rupees to sustain his family.

The NREGA wage hike announced by the government in March has been [criticised by activists](#) and there have been [many calls for an increase in wages](#), an [increase in the number of work days guaranteed](#), and [to not count days per household but per individuals](#).

#3: Availability of work throughout the year

The pandemic also highlighted issues with providing work throughout the year, under NREGA. As the monsoon swept through the country, NREGA work suffered immensely as anything to do with construction or pond digging had to be suspended.

[Anil Kumar Gupta](#), a *mukhiya* in a village in Bihar, told Mobile Vaani: “We are trying to give work under NREGA, but it is not sufficient; with the rains, we are not able to initiate tasks that require digging. So we are able to only give work to 50 percent of those who want to work under NREGA.” [Ranjan from Gidhaur](#) describes a similar situation. Digging and similar work during the monsoons could lead to accidents – [our Shivpuri community volunteer](#) reported the death of four people who were buried when doing an excavation.

The kinds of work sanctioned under NREGA have to be diversified to allow for continuous and safe availability of work throughout the year. A [panchayat representative](#) tells us that they are trying to initiate NREGA works such as building goat sheds and similar personal assets. Similarly, a campaign [Pani Roko, Paudha Ropo](#) was initiated in Hazaribagh in Jharkhand, providing employment opportunities in tree planting through NREGA to thousands of migrant workers who had returned.

Why rural welfare schemes are important and how they can be strengthened

Our learnings from the last few months of working deeply on NREGA issues point to the importance of fixing systemic problems in a rights-based act that is meant to guarantee employment to those who demand it, even during difficult times. Working with the people and administration, we managed to, in eight *panchayats*, institutionalize the holding of a *rozgar diwas* every Wednesday and helped several hundred people apply for job cards, demand work, and get work. However, our follow-ups with the people indicate that the efforts went only halfway – getting a job card or demanding work doesn’t guarantee that work will be given, and that getting NREGA work doesn’t translate to getting paid on time.

This is why we called for changes to address these systemic issues in our campaign [#NotStatusQuo to improve the delivery of social protection measures](#). We identified several ways in which the state can strengthen social protection systems:

1. Leverage simple IVR (Interactive Voice Response) or SMS based technology systems to enable people to register their work demand without having to fill out paper forms, and request for corrections or to register grievances such as on delays in getting job cards, demanding work, or discrepancies in the number of work days recorded and payments made.
2. Improve G2C engagement to keep people updated about their requested NREGA services. Proactively solicit grievances through these G2C engagement methods, so that any delays or discrepancies can lead to auto-filled registration of grievances endorsed by the people.
3. Make these statistics and grievances publicly available for both the administration to internally monitor the performance of NREGA, and for civil society to conduct social audits based on the information.

The pandemic is NREGA's litmus test, and the scheme has not achieved its true potential, plagued as it has been with issues flagged by activists and workers for years. However, the need for the scheme is stronger than ever.

The relevance of NREGA also goes beyond just providing employment when people in rural areas are out of work. It has an important role to play in labour markets where migrant workers link the rural with urban. Millions of migrant workers who returned to their villages during the lockdown, like [Koleshwar Mahto](#) with whose story we started this article, would rather work locally close to their homes than migrate for higher wages to cities where work and living conditions are precarious. Yet they are forced to do so, and they have gone through a roller-coaster these last six months.

The distress faced by migrant workers left [stranded in the cities](#) will remain a blot on human consciousness forever. Living in [cramped quarters](#), violated by employers who [skipped on paying their wages](#), [harassed by landlords](#), and out of [food and cash](#), workers trying to eke out an honest living had to [cry for help to get meals](#). Most were left with no choice but to go back to their villages: some [running away at night to escape the landlords](#), [walk for miles](#), [cycle](#) or [hitch a ride hiding inside](#) trucks like criminals [making a getaway](#), or [wait in parks](#) and [railway platforms](#) for train bookings. Their problems did not end upon return: they had to stay in quarantine centres without [clean water](#) or [food](#) or [electricity](#), many [ran away](#), [many protested](#), but finally they came to terms and tried putting their lives back together. Some set up [thelas selling corn](#), some tried [helping out their families with farming](#), some tried [work under NREGA](#), and some even set up [new enterprises putting their skills to work](#), but most of them remained out of work. With no income for several months and dwindling savings, since July our Mobile Vaani platforms have been flooded with grievances and news of protests by people about problems they were facing in [getting their due ration under](#)

[PDS](#), [loans for setting up small enterprises](#), and access to [funds for PMAY](#) and [toilet construction](#) – anything that could put food or money in their hands.

With no options, many [chose to come back to the cities](#). Newspapers carried [stories of employers buying air tickets](#) and [promising advance wages](#), paying their due respect to migrant workers, but this was only half the reality. The fact is that many workers who returned to the cities have faced even harsher conditions. Work is not available in a regular manner. Many [factories opened for a few days but shut down again](#), sometimes due to [COVID-19 cases being detected in the factory](#), sometimes because they [did not have enough orders](#) and were [only clearing up their earlier orders](#), or sometimes because of [shopfloor disputes that disrupted work](#). Workers were left in a worse-off position once in the city, for they again had to [take up a room on rent](#), which means a [regular outflow of cash, but with erratic income they are left without any bargaining power at the workplace](#). Even travel allowance or meals provided by the employer for their journey back to work, are being [deducted from their wages](#). For many of them, [work intensity has reduced](#), [payments remain erratic](#), work is mostly done on [piece-rate now rather than salaries](#), and [wages are down to less than half of what they were making earlier](#). Others face greater pressure at work with [longer hours](#), or being put to [work on machines they are unfamiliar with](#), leading to accidents, [but with compensation from the employer or government](#) and [treatment of workplace injury](#) remaining lacking. There also remains an [undeniable fear of infection due to social-distancing norms not being followed rigorously](#), and new returned workers joining back [without adequate testing](#).

For most, work has therefore become not a calling but just an alienated means of survival. The already frayed bonds between employers and workers are getting even weaker. Promises by employers to pay advance wages are looked at with suspicion and [workers warn one another to take everything in writing](#) and to [first get their pending wages](#). Employers too use different means of applying pressure and to hold back workers, like [withholding pending wages](#), or [threats of blocking Provident Fund withdrawals](#). Workers also do not feel confident anymore and [choose to walk away once they get their weekly wages](#), [without any commitment to come back the next day](#).

Under such circumstances, social protection schemes like NREGA are not just a lifeline, but also have the potential to strengthen the bargaining power of workers in the labour market. Serving as a basic floor wage, NREGA is known to have pushed [higher wages for agricultural work in rural areas](#). In the current pandemic, higher wages in NREGA can lead to a similar effect of higher wages even in the cities by reducing the labour supply of migrant workers because of the inextricable coupling between rural and urban labour markets. However it needs to work well, round the year, offer work for diverse skills, and [pay well for people to hold back from migration](#). Other social protection schemes like [PDS are similarly known to lead to a lowering of labour supply and consequently higher wages](#), but ration problems continue for many people. Even employment based social security like the [Provident Fund or welfare boards](#) are extremely weak, [registration](#) and [withdrawal remains difficult](#), or adequate schemes [do not even exist for many categories of informal workers](#). With India

not having any [strong policies for unemployment allowance either](#), it may seem like a puzzle to explain the continued inaction by the government to improve social protection and increase welfare spending. An explanation that is hard to refute though, is that a neoliberal state needs to ensure that a surplus labour supply is always maintained that can be exploited for low wages, and that [workers do not have strong fallback options to mobilize collective action](#).

If social protection offered by the government is [too low then it leads to protests](#), but if too high then it can skew the labour market towards higher wages and [reduce competitiveness for Indian companies in today's globalized markets](#). Arguments were made earlier when lockdowns were imposed in many countries that [governments faced a choice between saving lives and saving the economy](#). The Indian government made its choice back then, although the execution remains questionable, but the choice it now faces is whether to provide a life of dignity to its citizens or to bow down to the pressures of neoliberalism in both the domestic and the global economy. Finding the fiscal space for increased welfare spending is not a challenge – [direct taxes and wealth taxes can bring the required capital](#). Ensuring a better implementation of social protection mechanisms is also not an unsurmountable challenge – the right intent, aided by the right institutions, can build [robust citizen-government and worker-employer interactions](#). The inability to create enough employment opportunities for both skilled and unskilled work is actually just a limitation of imagination – the right mix of schemes like Mudra to have skilled workers set up small enterprises and NREGA to [apprentice unskilled workers to them](#), as suggested in Jean Dreze's DUET's model, will create new employment for diverse skillsets. The real choice for those running the Indian state is therefore to demonstrate whether they will stand up for citizens and workers, or whether they will cower under the pressures of capital for their own political survival.

A stronger NREGA – one that provides work for people across diverse skills, pays respectable wages, on time, to anyone who asks for work – has the potential to give workers, at the bottom of India's economic hierarchy, a dignified life and a chance at making the [labour market less exploitative](#). Recent discussions on an [urban employment guarantee](#) are relevant for the same reasons – to provide employment when the economy is weak, and to push labour markets in favour of the workers. Recent changes in the labour code, and state-level suspension of labour laws, [do not however send the right vibes about a commitment of the government towards protecting worker rights](#). The opposition political parties, unions, and the civil society should rally behind these causes to have any chance of [countering the neoliberal state at a time when it is the weakest all over the world](#).

Thanks to Gram Vaani team members and to our community volunteers across India for their unwavering support for vulnerable communities.