Social Security Measures & Civil Society Action:

The Case of National Rural Employment Guarantee Act in India

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In India, poverty, deprivation, vulnerability and social security issues have been a consistent cause of concern. In post independent India a range of social security measures, differing in scope and nature, have been adopted and till recently anti-poverty programmes have been the most widely adopted form. The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), is an innovative scheme that came into force in 2006. NREGA marks a complete paradigm shift in social security measures, moving from a welfare to a legal entitlements approach (Dreze & Sen, 1999). The primary objective of the Act is to enhance livelihood security in rural areas by providing at least 100 days of guaranteed wage employment in a financial year to every household. People's participation and flexibility in the operationalization of the act has been inbuilt to cater to local circumstances. NREGA today is the largest social security scheme being implemented in the world.

Evaluation of NREGA's first phase indicate several bottlenecks that are impeding the effective implementation of the Act (Chakraborty, 2007; Datar, 2007). Successful implementation of the scheme is being attributed to, amongst other factors, the emergence of partnerships between Civil Society organizations and State governments (Ambasta, Shankar, Vijay, & Shah 2008). Proactively partnering with the State Government, CSOs have innovatively responded on a range of challenges from, defining local norms of the act, mobilization of local bodies to active participation of the community in the monitoring and evaluation of the act (Hiraway, 2004). Playing several roles CSOs have acted as Monitors - becoming whistle blowers and watchdogs of irregularities and correctness in implementation of various aspects of the act; Innovators- developing new systems or doing things differently to overcome hurdles; and or Advocates- championing the cause among different stakeholders. Their multilevel efforts have helped to overcome implementational bottlenecks, prioritize local issues and in agenda setting for developing more responsive state policy guidelines, suitable to local circumstances.

The present paper maps the experiences of civil society organizations in the implementation of NREGA and suggests a framework for understanding the role and level of activities performed by CSOs. The framework provides insights about not only the space and boundaries CSOs occupy, but can also act as a tool for guiding CSOs in the role they can play in the effective implementation of the act in the future.

REFERENCES:


