



IMPACT OF MGNREGS ON CHILD LABOUR

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ABSTRACT

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), launched in 2005, is one of the most ambitious centrally sponsored schemes of India. Its scale and complexities continue to test the strength and creativity of India's public systems in new and existing ways. Most of the rural poor are largely dependent on the prospects of agriculture sector which is facing the problems of productivity in absolute and relative terms. The promised 100 days of guaranteed wage employment per household per annum at the stipulated minimum wages would not only reduce the rampant under and unemployment in rural areas, but also impact the stagnant wage structure for the rural unskilled workers. It is well recognised that child labour is one of the important vulnerable groups in Indian society. The country has probably the largest number of child labourers in the world. Social protection programmes such as MGNREGS create several pathways for better outcomes in nutrition, health and education of children. These pathways can be grouped under three heads: (1) indirect effects of reduction in risks and vulnerabilities and increase in livelihoods and incomes of households (2) women's well-being and say in intra-household decisions (3) direct effects of child-care facilities and linkages with SSA and ICDS. MGNREGS is expected to help reduce chronic poverty, risks and vulnerabilities of households particularly the poor. It also seems to have positive significant impact on child well being. This will have long term benefits for children in terms of reducing child labour, malnutrition, ill-health and improve education. In this respect, the rights approach followed for MGNREGS will also help in protecting child rights.

INTRODUCTION

Child labour is driven by economic and social vulnerabilities associated with a host of interrelated factors such as unemployment, ill health, disability, old age, conflict and natural events. India's Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is such a policy intervention that has immense potential for transforming the lives of impoverished and socially excluded families and children. It is particularly



significant as it: prohibits the employment of children below the age of 18 years in any work under the scheme (thereby raising the standard regarding the employment of children above the national one); encourages the participation of disadvantage gender-based discrimination against women in employment while keeping in mind women's care economy roles by requiring the establishment of childcare facilities at worksites to facilitate their inclusion and mitigating the likelihood of children dropping out of school for household and care work; views employment and income generation as a right and not an ancillary outcome of the overall development process, thereby placing direct obligations and accountability on the public system; and encourages convergence of other existing public social protection schemes for optimal impact. These are all necessary ingredients that could lead to the progressive elimination of child labour in India. Most certainly the ensuing study indicates that additional income from MGNREGA employment is contributing to improving the educational and health status of children.

However the study also shows there are challenges. For example, despite the legal ban, adolescent children are found working at MGNREGA sites for various reasons, albeit in small numbers; they are dropping out of school to support parents in household chores and many small children are found at worksites with little or no care facility posing health, safety and well-being concerns. As other research has indicated, none of these issues are insurmountable, what is required is concerted action to address them with the array of existing child-focused programmes.

Mahatma Gandhi stated: "The difference between what we do and what we are capable of doing would suffice to solve most of the world's problems." The challenge now is to close this difference. We hope this study contributes to the debate and inspires further resolve and action to tap existing capabilities and potential so evidently inherent in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme to stem child labour in India.

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), launched in 2005, is one of the most ambitious centrally sponsored schemes of India. Its scale and complexities continue to test the strength and creativity of India's public systems in new and existing ways. Recognizing that state governments are likely to adopt it differently because of the diversity of the country, the scheme has allowed state administrations a fair amount of autonomy in its implementation.



MGNREGS

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, is an unprecedented intervention by the Government in reforming and reenergizing the (rural) labour market both by way of correcting the prevailing anomalies and in providing livelihood security to millions of rural poor. Most of the rural poor are largely dependent on the prospects of agriculture sector which is facing the problems of productivity in absolute and relative terms. The promised 100 days of guaranteed wage employment per household per annum at the stipulated minimum wages would not only reduce the rampant under and unemployment in rural areas, but also impact the stagnant wage structure for the rural unskilled workers.

The salience of child well-being in India's development architecture is well known. India has several targeted and universal social protection programmes to protect and support people from their "cradle to grave." These include child-focused social protection programmes such as the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), Midday Meal Scheme (MMS), and so on. Given its overarching objective to alleviate poverty, the MGNREGS can have a significant impact on the well-being of children. MGNREGS is the most important rights-based social protection programme in India that has demonstrated varying degrees of success across the country. If harnessed optimally, MGNREGS, by improving the right of women and men to employment, can in turn enhance the rights of children. There have been many evaluations of the employment, infrastructural and social impacts of MGNREGS among others but there are hardly any systematic studies relating to the effect of the scheme on children.

There have been many evaluation studies on the impact of MGNREGS but there are hardly any systematic studies relating to impact of the scheme on children. This paper tries to fill this gap. There is a huge literature on awareness, implementation problems, impact on the livelihoods, women, migration, agricultural wages, marginalized sections etc. This paper makes use of some of the in-depth studies on various States of India. We have also undertaken a limited focus group discussion in Rajasthan on the implementation and impact of the scheme on women and children.

The importance of child well-being for India's development is well known. India has many social protection programmes (both universal and targeted) for social protection which protect people from „cradle to grave“. The country has many child-sensitive social protection programmes such as Integrated Child Services (ICDS), mid-day meals etc. The National Rural



Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) can also have significant impact on the well being of children.

The objective of this paper is to examine the impact of MGNREGS on the well-being of children particularly on reduction in child labour, improvements in health, education, nutrition etc. It is well known that women's well-being and empowerment are crucial for the well-being of children. Therefore, this study also examines the impact of the scheme on women. Another important aspect of MGNREGS relates to rights perspective. The rights approach on employment can also have positive impact on rights of the children. As mentioned below, the rights approach puts pressure on the governments to deliver more effectively as compared to earlier public works programmes. Better working of MGNREGS can also improve rights of children. Well being of women also can be improved with increase in the effective functioning of MGNREGS.

There have been many evaluation studies on the impact of MGNREGS but there are hardly any systematic studies relating to impact of the scheme on children. This paper tries to fill this gap. Examination of social protection initiatives and their impact on child labour are central to the ongoing child well-being and equity studies being developed by SPPME in partnership with the Institute for Human Development, and this paper will contribute to the larger study being prepared on inclusive social protection.

MGNREGS IMPACT ON CHILD LABOUR

It is well recognised that child labour is one of the important vulnerable groups in Indian society. The country has probably the largest number of child labourers in the world. The Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes that every child should have a right to education. In other words, many children in India are being deprived of this right. Child labour is concentrated in agriculture in India. Nearly two-thirds of child labour is in agriculture. From tending sheep or harvesting crops to handling machinery children in agriculture represent over two thirds of working children. These children work in crop and livestock production, helping supply some of the food and drink we consume, and the fibres and raw materials we use to make other products. Examples include cocoa/chocolate, coffee, tea, sugar, fruits and vegetables, along with other agricultural products like tobacco and cotton.

There are significant regional disparities in the incidence of child labour in India. Several supply and demand side factors determine the incidence of child labour. Poverty is considered as one of the determinants of



the proportions of child labour. Poor people tend to send their children to work to augment their income. Therefore, poverty variable is one of the important variable for supplying child labour. Economic development is another variable which is supposed to reduce the child labour with better opportunities for adult labour and increasing education for the children. It is also possible that economic development may also increase child labour for the same reason of better opportunities. In other words demand for labour.

MGNREGS- Creating pathways for better outcomes for children

Social protection programmes such as MGNREGS create several pathways for better outcomes in nutrition, health and education of children. These pathways can be grouped under threeheads: (1) indirect effects of reduction in risks and vulnerabilities and increase in livelihoods and incomes of households (2) women's well-being and say in intra-household decisions (3) direct effects of child-care facilities and linkages with SSA and ICDS.

1. Household Risk And Vulnerability Reduction And Rise In Incomes

Social protection programmes like MGNREGS can reduce vulnerability to risks, increase incomes and reduce chronic poverty. Such programmes thus have a positive impact on child well-being. Poor households are vulnerable to health 'shocks' like illness, injury, accidents, disability; labour market risk as many work in the informal sector and face a high risk of unemployment and underemployment; harvest risks; life-cycle risks; social risks; and special risks for vulnerable groups. In addition, they face risks as a community during droughts, floods, cyclones, and also when structural adjustment policies are put in place.

2. Impact on child labour

India probably has the largest number of child labourers in the world and they constitute one of the most vulnerable groups in our society. Two-thirds of child labour is concentrated in agriculture sector in the country. From tending sheep or harvesting crops to handling machinery, these children work in crop and livestock production, help supply some of the food and drinks we consume and the fibres and raw materials we use to make other products. Examples include cocoa/chocolate, coffee, tea, sugar, fruits and vegetables, along with other agricultural products such as tobacco and cotton.

There are significant regional disparities in the incidence of child labour in India. Several supply and demand side factors determine the incidence of child labour. Poverty is one of them and is considered a



determinant of the proportion of child labour: poor families use child labour to augment their income. On the other hand, economic development is supposed to reduce child labour, with better opportunities for adult labour and increasing education for children. Nevertheless, economic development may increase the incidence of child labour because the demand for labour may concomitantly increase; development also provides better earning opportunities for the family if all hands are put to work. Here the wage rate becomes a crucial determinant. If wages are high for adults, there is a possibility of reduction in child labour.

3. Impact on Households

The positive impact of NREGS on households also engenders child well-being. In this section, we look at the evidence with regard to the effect NREGS has in terms of the participation of the poor, contribution to household income, contribution to the village, usage of NREGS wages and migration. Participation of the poor, vulnerable and disadvantaged As NREGS is a self-targeted scheme, we were interested in assessing whether the programme was reaching the poor and vulnerable. Many field studies have shown that NREGA is reaching the poor and socially and economically backward sections like the Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST). Dreze and Khera (2009), based on their GBPSSI study, said that 73 per cent of the sample households belonged to SC/ST families in the six states of north India (Table 5). Their study also showed that 81 per cent of them lived in a kaccha house, 71 per cent did not have electricity and 61 per cent were illiterate.

1 Impact on Child Well-Being

This study on Andhra Pradesh shows a positive correlation between programme participation and anthropometric scores as indicators of health outcomes although the results are not robust. On the other hand, the study finds robust results on child labour. NREGS reduced child labour by 13.4 per cent for boys and by 8.9 per cent for girls.

2 Provision of on-Site Facilities as Stipulated by the Act

Work-site facilities are missing in many cases. Although drinking water and first aid are provided, crèche facilities are not available. As a result, women with small children hesitate to participate in the scheme. This is one of the gaps in the functioning of NREGS that adversely affects child well-being.



3 Impact on Households

This was gauged in terms of participation of the poor, contribution to household income and to the village, usage of NREGS and migration.

- a. Since it is a self-targeted programme, one expects the poor to participate in it. National level official data shows that the share of SCs and STs together was around 51 per cent in 2009-10. Many field studies have also shown that NREGA is reaching the poor as well as socially and economically backward sections like the SCs and STs.
- b. According to field surveys, the contribution of NREGA to total income is less than 10 per cent in the sample states. The shares were 2.4 per cent in Jharkhand, 4.3 per cent in Gujarat and 8.4 per cent in Bihar. However, the share of NREGS income in the total wage income in Madhya Pradesh was 19 per cent in the kharif season and 26 per cent in the rabi season.
- c. The income from NREGS made very significant contribution to children's well-being by reducing hunger, improving health and educational outcomes. For example, in a survey of six north-Indian states (Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh), around 69 per cent of the sample workers told that NREGS income helped them avoid hunger, while 47 per cent said it helped them cope with illness in the family. Around 38 per cent of the workers mentioned that it also helped them send their children to school.
- d. There are, however, significant inter-state and inter-district variations in the use of NREGS income on food, health and education. The percentages are high for Rajasthan, Haryana and Himachal Pradesh. In Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh, around 30 to 40 per cent mentioned that it helped in coping with illness and also helped them in providing education to their children. In the case of Gujarat, NREGS income had not helped in redressing these issues. Surprisingly these percentages were also lower for Andhra Pradesh where NREGS is reasonably doing well.
- e. NREGS also improved assets in the village economy. Significant proportion of respondents indicated that it brought about an improvement in employment, connectivity, water table, drinking water, reduction in soil erosion, etc. Village development indirectly helped in improving child well-being.
- f. Various field studies indicated that NREGS helped in reducing migration. It helped in improving nutrition, educational and health outcomes of children. The scheme also helped in reducing child labour.



For example, the FGD in Rajasthan revealed that the percentage of child labour going to Gujarat from Dungarpur in Rajasthan during cotton cultivation season had declined by around 50 per cent.

- g. Based on field surveys, NCEUS (2009) identified several positive externalities due to NREGS. “They include reduction in distress out-migration, improved food security with wages being channelled into incurring expenses on food, health, education and repaying of loans, employment with dignity, greater economic empowerment of women workers, and sustainable asset creation” (p.219, NCEUS, 2009).

4 Impact on empowerment and well-being of women

One of the successes of the NREGS is that the participation of women in the scheme. To conclude, the evidence on NREGS’ impact on child well-being is mixed. The positive impacts on household incomes, empowerment and well-being of women have helped in improving nutrition, health and education outcomes of children and reduction in child labour. Around two-thirds of child labour is in agriculture. Related to the issue of employment of children in agriculture, especially girls, is the gender aspect of recognizing women as producers and farmers and its links to household food security. Strengthening the curriculum on extension training on gender and child protection issues in agriculture can help in reducing child labour. One negative phenomenon observed was that women often marked their attendance and then left their teenaged (14-16 year old) daughters at the work sites to proceed with household chores. The study in two districts of Andhra Pradesh showed how participation of women in NREGS can lead to situations wherein education of school-going children is interrupted as they may have to look after younger siblings when the mother goes to work.

5. Direct Child Care Facilities

May increase with economic development. Here the wage rate becomes crucial. If wages are high for adults, there is a possibility of reduction in child labour. The related variable that reflects demand for opportunities is work participation rates. Another factor that is generally related to low fertility and in turn reduction in child labour is female literacy.

Mgnregs can have Impact on Child Labour Through Income Effects

Since child labour is concentrated in agriculture, MGNREGS can have significant positive impact on reduction in child labour. The scheme increases incomes through higher wage rates, rise in agricultural wages, decline in migration etc. These positive effects can reduce child labour. In



some places, child labour migrate to other places to work in cotton crop areas. Reduction in migration can reduce decline in child labour in cotton cultivation including seed preparation. MGNREGS can reduce risks and vulnerabilities due to shocks. The shocks can raise child labour due to withdrawal of children from school. Similarly, women's empowerment due to MGNREGS can reduce child labour. The positive impact due to intra-household decisions can raise participation of children in education.

Apart from indirect effect on children, there are some direct impacts of MGNREGS on children. According to guidelines of MGNREGA, some facilities are supposed to be available at the worksite. These are safe drinking water, shade for children and periods of rest, first-aid box with adequate material for emergency treatment for minor injuries and other health hazards connected with the work. The Act states that "in case the number of children below the age of six years accompanying the women working at any site are five or more, provisions shall be made to depute one of such women workers to look after such children" (Schedule II, Para 28). Further, the person who is deputed to look after young children is entitled to the same minimum wage as other labourers.

It may be noted that availability of quality child care services is an important contributor to women's status. This can lead to enhancement of women's participation in work without adversely affecting the well being of children. Thus, Safe drinking water, shade for children and crèche facilities at the work sites will not only help well-being of children but also improvements in women's status as earners. Creche facilities can also help in reduction in child labour. Otherwise, older children may have to take care of the younger siblings by not attending school.

The income from NREGS made very significant contribution to children's well-being such as reducing hunger, improving health and education. For example, a survey in six North Indian states (Bihar, Chattisgarh, Jharkhand, M.P., Rajasthan and U.P.) shows that around 69 per cent of the sample workers told that it helped them to avoid hunger, while it helped to cope with illness for 47 per cent. Around 38 per cent of the workers mentioned that it helped in sending children to school.

CONCLUSION

MGNREGS is expected to help reduce chronic poverty, risks and vulnerabilities of households particularly the poor. It also seems to have positive significant impact on child well being. This will have long term



benefits for children in terms of reducing child labour, malnutrition, ill-health and improve education. In this respect, the rights approach followed for MGNREGS will also help in protecting child rights.

This study on Andhra Pradesh shows that there is a positive correlation between programme participation and anthropometric scores as indicators of health outcomes although the results are not robust. On the other hand, the study finds robust results on child labour. It reduces child labour for boys by 13.4 per cent and for girls by 8.9 per cent.

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