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**Achieving the employment guarantee: Coming to grips with the
sociology of legal entitlements in rural India**

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1. Introduction

The last twenty years of our global history have seen changes brought about that have drastically transformed our lives. The rise of information technology, liberalisation of trade borders, reduction in the role of the state, and expansion of the market's role have touched the lives of people the world over. However, with all these vast and extensive changes, there remains an uncomfortable continuity in our world. Little has changed regarding the state of employment over the past two decades. 2005 recorded the highest number ever of people officially unemployed ever, and over half of the world's labour force still earns less than \$2US a day, the same number as ten years ago (UN, 2006: 1). Gains have been made in productivity and efficiency; and GDP growth the world over has been considerable, but it appears that these gains have come at the expense of employment generation and instead led to jobless growth (Dasgupta and Singh, 2005: 28). The push for efficiency and conservative use of budgetary resources has had negligible consideration for the inefficiencies that are associated with the maintenance of unemployment, underemployment and expansion of the informal sector (Mitchell, Cowling and Watts, 2003: 9; OECD, 1992: 175).

Employment, and expansion of employment opportunities, has long been recognised to be the most sustainable and enabling mechanism for poverty reduction (ILO, 2004: 7). However, many countries have shied away from direct, sustainable public sector job creation and fiscal expenditure, especially at the scale that is required. The preference is instead to rely upon interventions such as creation of small business enterprise, loans from international financial institutions, or the benefits associated with increases in GNP to trickle down, and 'lift all boats'. Such mechanisms come with no guarantees, and are not instantaneous in their delivery of greater equality. There are many justifications, in addition to the direct financial benefits that vindicate an employment centred poverty reduction approach (Kostzer, 2005). The least of which relates to the inefficiencies that are associated with unemployment, and its deleterious effects on work habits, skill, self-esteem, and community poise (Mitchell, Cowling and Watts, 2003: 9; OECD, 1992: 175).

Contrary to international trends, India has not seen as considerable a decline in the role of the state, nor the imposition of overly stringent fiscal policies from external organisations (Dreze and Sen, 2002: 334). The political climate and public commitment of the Indian people has forced the preservation of social expenditure in consistent real per-capita terms over the past fifteen years, however small this is (compared to other developing/transition countries social expenditure is comparatively much less; some scholars (for example, Harriss-White, 1999) have argued that the level of Indian social expenditure is so low that it cannot be further cut). The state has therefore been forced to play a much more active and empowered role to address the severe problems of unemployment, underemployment and jobless growth in order to relieve poverty and offset hardships being experienced by their populous. A strategy that has been common to India, at varying scales, over the last thirty years has involved expansion of the public sector through provision of limited employment guarantees. Recently, the Indian government committed itself to the guaranteed provision of one hundred days of employment, at the rate of sixty rupees (AU\$1.75) per day, for every household in rural India.

While this is a great achievement for the Indian people, there are many political processes operating within and around employment guarantee schemes, and public

works programs alike, which hinder the effectiveness of the program's operation as a social protection instrument. Many times these programs and their evaluations give the impression that they are politically neutral, and open to all those who wish to take up the state offer of an employment guarantee. In truth process deficiencies in many of these programs entail the exclusion of some of the most vulnerable, in spite of theoretical or legal entitlement (Pellissery, 2005a). Consideration of the sociology of legal guarantees in the context of public works is therefore imperative if the policy objectives are not to be undermined by institutional corruption.

The paper will, first, emphasis the importance of employment for poverty emancipation, and then go on to give a historical encounter of employment guarantees within the Indian context. We will then turn our analysis to a review of the current policy, the National Rural Employment Guarantee, by considering the sociology of legal guarantees, and demonstrate how the poorest peoples' choices are constrained at each stage of selection and implementation of employment guarantee schemes by local political structures and potential workers' affiliations (or lack thereof). The paper will conclude with suggestions for future policy directions of employment guarantee schemes, including integration of training components, enhancing community involvement, and removal of bureaucratic administrative requirements, in order to achieve the offer of an employment guarantee, and more equitable outcomes for the most vulnerable within society.

2. Importance of work

Employment and earning a wage is not only about survival and meeting one's basic needs (ILO, 2001). Employment is regarded to be a fundamental necessity for poverty eradication, gender equity, distribution of growth and social cohesion. It is the mechanism through which one reaffirms identity, role and concept of self. Those around us understand us, our likes and dislikes, our expertises' and experiences' through the role that we play in the working environment. Absence of employment exposes people to physical and social vulnerabilities, such as stigma and eviction, and can impart enduring qualities that hinder one's emancipation from poverty.

It is not only employment that plays an important role however. It is the combination of quality and secure employment, the safety of the work site, opportunities for training and advancement, and the timely payment of wages, among many other things that make an employment experience decent and allow the cultivation of non-wage gains that are associated with work (ILO, 1999). Many workers, especially those who are poor and unskilled are vulnerable to exploitation of their labour, and may have no alternative but to work in conditions that undermine one's personal dignity and generate conflict in families and communities. It is therefore most important that governments take responsibility for the adoption of a decent employment agenda, and not just focus on the creation of jobs, with little regard for quality. One way to do this is to create a safety net program that is accessible to all, which also outlines various employment standards that can help to create comparable circumstances within private sector employment. Such interventions are becoming increasingly necessary and crucial for poverty reduction, as global economic growth is failing to secure and preserve working conditions that lead to reduction in poverty (UN 2006, ILO, 2004).

From 1999 onwards the International Labour Organisation has adopted a clear agenda focusing on the concept of decent employment (ILO, 1999). The concept of decent work originally encompassed four crucial elements, including the promotion of labour

rights, employment, social protection and social dialogue. Since its initial conception the notion has increased its breadth, to include vocational training rights as an integral part of decent work. There are however, numerous barriers that stand in way of the realisation and actualisation of decent employment for all. Many of the barriers and contextual deficiencies have their origins in the existence of unemployment and underemployment (ILO, 2001). The very existence of unemployment is a factor that can undermine working conditions, especially the conditions of those who are least skilled or productive. Furthermore, in many developing countries social assistance is rarely available to the able bodied working population. For people in this context it would rarely be feasible to remain idle, and wait for more favourable working conditions to emerge. These two common pre-conditions can create a context that fosters worker exploitation, and allows the persistence of working conditions that are hardly decent.

The Indian government's response to the existence of poverty and exploitative conditions over time has involved the role of various public works programs. The current program, the 'National Rural Employment Guarantee', which is embedded in a national common minimum program, goes a long way to establish decent minimum working standards in India. It outlines basic working standards and daily minimum wages that are to be paid for a day's labour. And as the program is open to all rural heads of households, it has the potential to help establish minimum standards in the private sector as workers demand at least equivalent standards. The program has also been accompanied by right to information legislation, in an attempt to enhance more political legitimacy and enhance the social protection features of the policy.

However, to date one feature of the decent work model remains unaccounted, and that is the incorporation of on-the-job or off-the-job training components within the NREG program. To a lesser extent there has also been an absence of social dialogue with those seeking to become beneficiaries under the scheme. These are not easy problems to address. Furthermore, a program, such as NREG does not emerge instantaneously, and to fully understand the program, and how the policy might be further enhanced and developed or exported to a different context, it is necessary to gain an understanding of the context from which it first emerged.

3. Public Works Programmes in India: an overview

Nurske's (1957) theoretical proposal, that rural labour, which is found in surplus in developing countries, could be put to effective use for national development, is at the heart of the rationale for public works programs. But it has largely been the relief component, which has focused on the remediation and enhancement of populations affected by natural disasters, especially drought that has been the chief motivating factor behind the roll out of many public works over time (Hirway and Terhal, 1994). Therefore, the historical context and specific labour market conditions of a particular country are very important in understanding the way that a Public Works Programs (PWP) might be adopted there.

In India, attempts at land reforms, which were given priority immediately after the country's independence in 1947, failed miserably except in the states of Kerala and West Bengal. Generally, the redistribution of land did not take place, and as a result many people were left displaced, landless and vulnerable (Dev, 1998). Further compounding this situation were the tremendous upheavals that took place in land production and farming (which entails change in labour) from the 1960s onwards,

when Indian agriculture witnessed substantial changes resulting from a 'green revolution', and agricultural practices were improved by various technological influences. This had a tremendous effect on the landless and small landholders who depended on large landlords in a patronage relationship (Breman, 1993). In addition to these important reasons, i.e., the state's failure to redistribute assets and changes in the traditional pattern of agriculture, research and theories developed in reference to the Indian rural labour market suggest further institutional complexities that necessitate unique interventions and policy formulation. And though the Indian economy is primarily led by its service sector, which contributes about 51% of GDP, this sector is concentrated in mega cities and surrounding urban areas. The major bulk of the Indian population (54%) depends on agriculture for their livelihood, but this sector produces only 22% of GDP. In rural areas where 74% of Indians reside, agriculture is the primary livelihood.

The theorists (Bardhan and Rudra, 1981; 1986, Binswanger *et al*, 1984; Dreze and Mukherjee, 1987, 1989; Bhaduri, 1973; Walker and Ryan, 1990; Datt, 1996) have found it difficult to apply standard theoretical frameworks of labour markets—subsistence theories, efficiency wages, interlinked markets and equilibrium with perfect competition—to Indian rural labour markets. In an attempt to come to grips with the contextual complexities, Radhakrishna and Sharma (1998: 3) concluded that given,

'the close linkage between land, labour and credit markets, labour market conditions of supply and demand alone could not explain the process of determination of wages and income of rural labour. The concept of livelihood or survival strategies adopted by rural labour has been found to be crucial in understanding the outcomes of labour arrangements.'

It is these interlinked processes that operate through non-market forces and the informal nature of employment contracts, which create the highly unique institutional context that is the rural labour market of India (Harriss-White, 2003).

The power dynamics of this byzantine context have prevented states from having effective intervention outcomes through traditional mechanisms, such as the enactment of laws like the Minimum Wages Act (1948) or the Bonded Labour System [abolition] Act (1975). PWPs, as a strategy for meeting local social protection needs, are another form of state intervention, which have had varying success over time.

The first nation-wide PWP in India was the Rural Works Programme in 1960. Since then a significant number of PWPs, funded both by state and central governments, have been implemented in rural India (see Hirway and Terhal, 1994). All these programmes had the twin goals of poverty alleviation and economic development. However, only Maharashtra's Employment Guarantee Scheme was focused on guaranteeing income or employment. Its uniqueness drew international attention; ultimately, employment guarantee schemes came to be seen as a model for best practice in the implementation of public works programs (Ravallion, et al., 1993: 1).

4. The Employment Guarantee Scheme

The Maharashtrian employment guarantee scheme began in 1972 in response to a severe drought in the state. Policymakers believed that by both providing gainful employment to poorer people, and creating durable assets in rural areas, poverty would be substantially reduced. Thus, under the Employment Guarantee Scheme (EGS), able-bodied persons willing to do unskilled work were guaranteed manual

labour, including manual earthmoving, shifting soil, and breaking rocks, through a self-selection method. Workers contributed to the creation of durable assets, such as percolation tanks, wells, minor irrigation projects, re-afforestation, rural roads, soil conservation, and horticultural programmes.

Evaluations of the EGS have commended the design and scale of the program for a number of reasons:

- a) The EGS was the first piece of legislation to operationalise the Indian Constitution's directive policy regarding the 'right for work for all' (Article 41). Under the EGS, if the Maharashtra government failed to provide work to a person who demands it within seven days of the demand being made, the government is legally obliged to pay Rs.10 per day to the litigant;
- b) The EGS scheme has been implemented on a massive scale. The average monthly participation was 261,000 persons in 2002-2003, during which period 154 million person-days of work were created with a total expenditure of Rs. 8,890,000,000 . The average wage per person-day was Rs.46
- c) EGS projects are selected on the basis of how intensively they use unskilled labour. In 1972, the program's founding law stated that 90 per cent of the cost of a project should go toward wages for unskilled labour and 10 per cent for skilled labour/material. However, this criterion was found to be difficult to meet and in later years it was relaxed to a 60:40 ratio of unskilled to skilled labor;
- d) A number of additional benefits were included for the workers on EGS, including drinking water facilities, shelter during work breaks, first aid facilities, crèches, maternity benefits for women labourers, death/injury benefit for workers, money for the hire of working tools and guaranteed availability of work within eight kilometers of the worker's house;
- e) 50 per cent of EGS's financing came through a tax levy on urban workers. The remaining 50% was contributed by the state government;
- f) Payment of wages was not gender biased;
- g) The method of self-selection reduced the administrative burden of 'targeting' the programme. This self-selection criterion is built into the programme: EGS wages are slightly lower than those offered on private farms, and EGS labour (such as digging and breaking rocks) is not likely to attract the non-poor;
- h) Forward planning of projects to ensure that jobs can be delivered at appropriate times.

Despite its impressive design, the EGS has been plagued by 'implementation lapses' that have limited its effectiveness. Many of the outcome-oriented evaluations we have referred to neglected to examine the political processes operating within and around the EGS; they gave the impression that the EGS was a politically neutral program open to all those who wished to earn higher wages. However, as Pellissery (2005b) has shown the poorest people's choices are constrained at each stage of selection and implementation of the EGS by local political structures and potential workers' affiliations (or lack thereof).

Many of the implementation deficits of employment guarantee programs are the direct result of irregularity and delay in starting the work, and payments or complicated measurements of completed work. Further problems that have been uncovered are

associated with discrimination against the weak or older persons and corruption of officials, which has been especially evident in the inflation of muster rolls (Pellissery, 2005a). Finally, many have criticised the infrastructure that was generated from the program, claiming that the assets were of poor quality (Bhawan, 2006). Though researchers frequently acknowledge these failings, the vast majority of reports conclude that EGS's have been successful programs, with the outcomes and benefits that are generated from the program overriding numerous program deficiencies.

After the EGS wage was increased in 1988, studies began showing that the non-poor were more likely to participate in the program than were the poor, thus the program began failing to deliver relief to the targeted population (see Ravallion *et al.*, 1991; Gaiha, 1996). Today, while there is no agreement as to why the program's targeting began to fail, researchers agree that some form of restructuring was urgently needed to ensure that the program can continue to deliver its dual objectives of poverty relief and economic development (Gaiha, 2001; Krishnaraj *et al.*, 2004; Desarda. 2001). The exact decisive avenues to be taken have been a hotly debated issue for India over the past three years, with many submissions, revisions and political negotiations leading the policy development process.

In response to constituent need and political pressure from opposition parties, the current government announced at program titled the 'national common minimum program', of which the 'national rural employment guarantee act' would be a major component.

5. The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act

In September of 2005, the Indian government passed legislation, which enshrined a guarantee of one hundred days of employment to any rural head of household within the nation, who is the holder of a 'job card' and willing to engage in manual labour. In February 2006, the National Rural Employment Guarantee (NREG) commenced its five-year implementation plan, with states such as Maharashtra, Orissa and Uttar Pradesh, the first to trial the scheme. The legislative act set up a national wage floor for the Indian economy, the right to demand employment from the state and if the demand is not met, the individual is entitled to unemployment compensation. Furthermore, the act entitles beneficiaries to the provision of childcare if there are more than five children on site and also stipulates that employment should be provided within a five-kilometre radius of the individual's village. The program goes a long way to institute minimum working standards for some of the most vulnerable people in rural areas of India, however it is worth noting that it does not cover people who reside in urban areas or people who are homeless.

The scheme has adopted a decentralised approach to implementation, with village governments (Gram Panchayat) playing a major role in the enrolment and administration of participants to the program, and also the selection and monitoring of projects at the village level. Those elected to the village government (Gram Sabha) are to be advocates of the scheme and are largely responsible for conducting social audits and maintaining the accountability and transparency of the scheme. The Gram Panchayat is responsible for meeting fifty per cent of the demand for employment. The remaining portion of employment demand is to be organised by district level management, in collaboration with non-government organisations and self-help groups. The district is also responsible for managing grievances. The idea of directly involving local government in the roll out of the program is an attempt to overcome

past experiences of corruption and exploitation, which occurred when supervision and implementation were out sourced to contractors.

The state government is responsible for providing institutional and technical support for the program, and they are to be involved in the monitoring and evaluation of the scheme as well. State governments also have opportunity to further develop the NREG as they see fit. Some states, for instance, are planning to extend the guarantee to 200 days and others are planning to increase the wage offered by the program. The remaining role, fulfilled by the central government is to ensure that the NREG meets the minimum standards of the legislation.

The legislation underwent many reviews and was developed in consultation with government agencies, people's organisations and academics. The act was originally designed with the purpose of enhancing the social and economic security of the rural poor by providing a minimum wage in exchange for the undertaking of meaningful, manual tasks that would be appropriate and valuable to their community. Advantageously however, the provision of an employment guarantee within rural areas serves many objectives of the Indian government. The NREG increases employment opportunities in rural areas, thus deterring the rural poor from migrating to urban centres in search of employment and subsequently easing the strain on already congested suburban slums. The provision of guaranteed employment may also give opportunities for female heads of households to enter the labour force, and facilitate the development of the social networks and breakdown of social castes within the community. There is no doubt that the implementation of the NREG scheme has important implications for not only the reshaping the geography of poverty in India, but also the extent of poverty experienced by the Indian people.

Activities that are permissible under the act include water conservation, environmental remediation, provision of irrigation systems, the construction of roads, flood control and the maintenance of assets that have been created under the employment guarantee scheme. As in previous employment guarantee schemes, the project coordinators are required to prepare a shelf of projects, which are to lay in reserve until a time when the demand for work under the employment guarantee cannot be absorbed into the current projects. The manner by which the monies allocated for the NREG are to be spent also remains in continuity with the previous employment guarantee schemes, sixty per cent allocated to the payment of unskilled labourers, and the remaining forty per cent is to be spent any other costs.

The presence of the act is an important step in the realisation of the right to work for the Indian people. It also embeds liabilities to those implementing the programs, and operates as a necessary anti-corruption mechanism. As previously noted, there has been a long history of the roll out of state provided employment and public works within the Indian landscape, with this many lessons of success and failure available to augment future directions. After only a year of operation already over 31 million job cards have been issued and over 13 million people have gained employment under the NREG (www.nrega.nic.in). There are however, some fundamental problems with the design of the NREG, which are extremely difficult to overcome. One of these problems is associated with the program not being universally available to all who wish to take up the state offer of an employment guarantee.

6. Inclusion and exclusion

The NREG adopts a policy of self-selection to attract its beneficiaries, but at the same time sets up requirements that beneficiaries have to meet in order to be eligible for the program. The program requires one to have a 'job card' in order to receive the benefit, the benefits are attached to households, rather than individuals and the guarantee is limited to an offer of one hundred days of employment. Programs such as these are often mistakenly referred to as universal because of their household targeting properties (open to all households). On the contrary, the program is targeted towards discrete populations for restricted annual time periods, and it is possible for the inclusion/exclusion of the targeted population to be vetted through the issuance of job cards.

Targeting can result in exclusion of potential beneficiaries even if they meet the various requirements. People who are eligible for support can be excluded from targeted programs for a whole range of reasons, including political affiliation, religion, nepotism and social status. The processes facilitating inclusion/exclusion start with power relations and the movement of knowledge through social networks. For instance, people who are not in the same social group as the Gram Sabha may be inadvertently excluded from recruitment processes, even though local governments have substantial obligations to advocate the program and enlist beneficiaries (Kostzer, 2005). In all of the past experiences of employment guarantee schemes, political clientelism has led to some areas not engaging the community at the rate or scale that is required. This was the case in Gujarat, India earlier this year, when Muslim minority groups were excluded from the program through lack of social ties with community leaders.

Exclusion of some sections of workers could take place because the type of program being implemented by the state may not suit the expertise of the job seekers. Work and occupation, as mentioned earlier, have important sociological significance. Social groups (including caste) are formed based on these sociological realities. As a result, some social groups may benefit hugely by participating in the program while others may not (Pellissery, 2005b).

The deficiencies of the employment guarantee schemes, as they are designed today, may force those experiencing poverty to look elsewhere for social and economic assistance. Inaccessibility to the safety net makes people experiencing financial hardship and poverty more vulnerable and exposed to private employers' work demands and wage settings. The sociological context and the various political processes therefore prevent the program from setting up a wage floor and minimum working standards for the economy. The only way to overcome these problems is to make the system universal with unlimited temporal participation. This would reduce the power of the bureaucracy to deny entry, and may also set up a more stable wage floor for the economy, thus protecting the most vulnerable workers. This brings us to our next point.

7. Daily verses piece

At first it seems that NREG sets up a wage floor of 60 rupees for a day's work. However, there is a clause in the legislation, which states the sixty rupees wage rate relates to time-based wages. But people may also be paid piece rate wages, and this is one of the places that may see peoples' rights eroded. The legislation allows both types of payment, but only stipulates wage rates for time-based activities, not task-

based activities. So, the right of one to earn the specified wage becomes value laden, and directly related to one's real contribution, rather than what one maybe physically capable or technically entitled.

The NREG implementation guidelines suggest that the wages for piece rates be related to standard regional rates, but ultimately, it is up to the local body to determine an appropriate measure. Often the local body develops a collective measure, which of course ends up favouring the able and strong, and being of disservice to the weak and disabled. The validity of task-based wages and one's contribution is further compromised by the level of supervision, especially on activities that employ multiple workers, as there is an ideology which suggests that a task based wages system of remuneration requires less supervision (Baland et al, 1999:457). If this is indeed the case then the very presence of piece rate wages undermines a decent work agenda and goals of poverty reduction through job creation by allowing unskilled workers to work in a degraded working environment. It is therefore essential that the government and communities take steps towards the rectification of this difficult situation.

8. Promoting decent work: training, social dialogue and community consultation

The concept of 'decent work' takes on more importance within the context of developing economies, where the dichotomous measure of 'employed' verses 'unemployed' becomes less useful. For instance, in India where there is chronic poverty and an estimated 87 per cent of the population finds its employment from within the informal economy (which entails no protection or minimum working condition for job seekers), people simply can not afford to be unemployed or remain idle. It would therefore make sense to consider the prevailing conditions in which people work to be a highly important measure (ILO, 2001).

The nature of decent work becomes difficult for the state to monitor in the context of huge informal sector economy, where micro enterprises are done by unpaid family work and self-employment. Here authoritarian principles within the family dictate who should do what, seriously affecting the intra-household allocation of duties and rights.

The ILO's guidelines for decent work go beyond these issues of secure work place, job protection or labour rights. The decent work agenda argues for cessation of 'unemployment solutions from being used as an excuse to deprive employed persons of reasonable working conditions' (Sen, 2000 cited in ILO 2001: 19). For this purpose Amartya Sen's concept of ensuring education, training and life long learning are used along with labour rights. Thus, the very right to work is seen along with a person receiving vocational training, whether it be conducted while on or off the job. This component is completely missing from NREGS. If a training component was included with the scheme then the subsequent skill advancement may allow the participants of NREGS to progress to other higher paying and more intricate job opportunities, and thus the state would take on a role of facilitator rather than an simply the role of the provider.

Another of the major problems identified with NREGS is lack of community awareness and lack of community participation (Bhawan, 2006). This could be mitigated by what ILO promotes as 'social dialogue'. Social dialogue in the context of public works is often limited to two types of dyadic interaction: First, for the purpose of policy making bureaucrat-researcher interaction is undertaken, similarly the

designing and implementation for a program is dominated by bureaucrat-politician interaction. There is little, if any consultation or effective dialogue that takes place at the grassroots level with the actual community who will be working on the program, at any stage of the planning or implementation stages. Bureaucrats, who may have little or no insight into specific community contexts and or their power structures, leave the processes of implementation to be handled by local politicians in collusion with a contractor. Consideration of the complex sociological context is virtually excluded, even though it has been implicitly recognised to be one of the major factors that had led to the demise of previous schemes. There needs to be much more independent scrutiny of these local bodies, and their communications and interactions need to be more closely examined to understand the effectiveness and the limits of this current form of social dialogue.

Local politicians are elected representatives in the local government. In societies such as India, where social divisions are huge (on the basis of caste, religion and other economic inequalities such as being landless and landlords etc), the local representatives raise their voice in the interest of the sections they represent, and therefore any negotiations that are reached tend to be orchestrated to suit the sectional needs. Furthermore, outcomes reached are also subject to the cleavage of political affiliations.

NREGS also needs to find an effective mechanism to generate a meaningful social dialogue through which labourers can directly collective bargain with the state. One of the methods is to make use of the occasions of vocational training as an opportunity to begin the social dialogue by allowing them to unite as unions and organisations. Such a social dialogue in effect will increase the social capital in a community, enabling synergy to demand public goods that could have most redistributing effect. It should create a community, which is not segmented with sectional interest.

Yet another way to overcome this would be through building up consultation with the actual people wishing to gain employment under the NREG. This could be done through the widespread advertisement and holding of community consultation forums, led by independent bodies, which could be held on a monthly basis. The forums would invite NREG workers, local politicians and other community members to put forward suggestions for what they think would be a valuable contribution to their community. An agreement could be reached for an agenda for the next month's works through this method, placing the community and NREG workers in an active determining role, instead of passive role where the work agenda is imposed. Incorporating community consultations as a major part of developing local agendas for EGS, could also be guided within an agenda that is set by the federal government. The important thing is that communities play a much more active role, and there is evidence to support the demand and will for this shift. This is evidence through the overwhelming community response to information made available under the right to information act led to the exposure of frauds and embezzlement taking place with employment guarantee schemes (Sohini, 2006).

9. Conclusion

There is an important sense that well executed employment guarantees schemes impart far more benefits upon the individuals involved, the community and the economy than they ever cost in financial terms (Gordon, 1997: 817). A NREG employee can receive benefits far beyond the scope of any financial remuneration

offered by the program. That said, there is much scope for improvement of the program, and it is time to move beyond a balancing of the scales approach to program evaluations. In order for the NREG to achieve the guarantee that it offers there needs to be serious consideration of how the scheme is including and excluding potential beneficiaries. There needs to be serious consideration over how the allowance for daily and piece rate wages undermines the setting of a wage floor and makes the most vulnerable more vulnerable. Finally, the program needs to move beyond its current function of acting as a provider, and progress to facilitator status through inclusion of training components and enhancing social dialogue in order to achieve some decent working conditions for all.

As Minsky (1965:300) wisely once put, ‘the basic approach is straight forward- accept the poor as they are and tailor make jobs to fit their capabilities. After this is done, programs to improve the capabilities of low-income workers are in order.’

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