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Research Note

Making Public Employment Schemes Work: Insights from Civil Society Engagement in India and South Africa

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The ongoing UNRISD research project *New Directions in Social Policy: Alternatives for and from the Global South* examines the emergence, nature and effectiveness of recent developments in social policy in emerging economies and developing countries. Public employment schemes are an important element in many of these policies, and the involvement of civil society organizations (CSOs) in the development and implementation of new social policies is a reoccurring theme in the *New Directions* project. This research note supports this ongoing UNRISD work by looking at the role of CSOs in two public employment schemes in major emerging economies: the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in India and the Community Works Programme (CWP) in South Africa.

Of special interest in this research note is how CSOs engage with and positively impact these public schemes. Evidence shows that the institutional environment that governments have established in and around these schemes, and in particular, the extent of government efforts to involve CSOs as genuine partners at various stages of the policy process, makes a difference. Meaningful participation of CSOs in social audits (a monitoring and evaluation tool to assess the impact of the programme on social development) and in the planning process is a crucial element in the partnership for public works. Public employment schemes with these features are argued to have better outcomes than those that do not.

MGNREGA in India: General features of the scheme

MGNREGA provides the legal basis for the largest employment programme in the world. Legislated in 2005, it guarantees a minimum of 100 days of paid employment with minimum wages in local infrastructure development projects to every rural household. Work in MGNREGA has to be offered on demand and in proximity to the place of residence. Moreover, the Act provides for the participation of disadvantaged groups and stipulates citizens' participation in decision making and monitoring.

Since its inception over 10 years ago, MGNREGA has offered employment to between 20 and 55 million households per year (equal to up to 30 percent of all rural households) and has achieved the highest coverage ratio for the target group among all major Indian social protection schemes (World Bank 2011). MGNREGA has received praise for providing a source of income to rural workers, increasing wage rates, achieving high female participation and creating durable assets (MoRD 2012). Yet, many studies have also pointed out that these achievements have been unequally distributed and that much remains to be done to realize the full potential of the Act (see Khera 2001; Ehmke 2015).

The Role of CSOs in MGNREGA

Among those who have continuously fought for the Act and stressed its transformative potential are CSOs. Without their constant lobbying, the Act would have probably never been legislated

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(see Chopra 2009). Additionally, CSOs have always been part of MGNREGA implementation. In the Act, CSOs are named as a potential implementing agency (IA): besides government bodies at various levels, IAs may be “any ... non-governmental organization authorized by the Central Government or the State Government” (National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2005, s 2(g)). Further, the fourth edition of the MGNREGA Operational Guidelines (2013) take up CSOs as official stakeholders, stating that CSOs working at the grassroots can play a very significant role in awareness generation among wage-seekers and in supporting and building capacities of Gram Panchayats (GPs, governments at the lowest tier in rural areas) and State Governments in planning, implementation and social audits of MGNREGA (MoRD 2013).

Examples of CSO involvement in implementation

Despite the inclusion of CSOs in the Act, the degree of CSO involvement in the implementation process has varied significantly between and within the Indian states. The following focuses on two states, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra, which have respectively shown strong and weak performance in terms of MGNREGA implementation.

In Andhra Pradesh, CSOs have played a significant role in helping participants in MGNREGA claim their rights. They are often involved in forming groups of workers which then collectively demand employment as a right under MGNREGA. Moreover, CSOs played a leading role in changing wage scales through their time-motion studies, which showed that wages had previously been set too low (Gopal 2014). A responsive state administration, which made sure to set up a dedicated state-run social audit structure that is independent from the state implementing agencies, provided an enabling environment for CSOs. At the state level, there are also regular round tables with the administration and CSOs involved in MGNREGA implementation so that CSOs can voice concerns, suggestions and difficulties.

In Maharashtra, CSOs are engaged primarily in information and education campaigns and social audits of MGNREGA. These are both conducted sporadically—rather than regularly as prescribed in the Act—and have been awarded in tenders to the bidder with the most economic offer, with reports of as little as INR 27 (0.65 USD) being paid per social audit per GP (Ambasta Shankar and Shah 2008). As a result, evidence shows that social audit structures in Maharashtra are not reliable, as they have not been able to collect necessary information, even in the case of special audits ordered directly from the central government (Committee of Experts 2014).

Among potential MGNREGA beneficiaries in Maharashtra, the knowledge that MGNREGA employment is a right is relatively limited. Even where this knowledge exists, the right is often not claimed partly due to the fear of losing access to other programmes or services. Independent implementation structures for MGNREGA were also not created, and as a result, MGNREGA benefits may be administered through the same office or official as other social programmes. People who see themselves as dependent on the goodwill of one or few government officers are less likely to claim MGNREGA employment out of concern that it would reduce their access to other benefits (Ehmke 2015). Thus, the capacities of CSOs to support people are limited by the lack of a designated, stand-alone channel through which potential beneficiaries can access MGNREGA.

CWP in South Africa: General features of the scheme

The South African CWP was piloted in 2007 and fast-tracked on instruction from President Jacob Zuma in 2009 (Ensor 2014; Faba 2014). The CWP aims to be “an employment safety net ... providing a minimum level of regular and predictable work” (Philip 2010b: 13). As such, the CWP provides access to a minimum level of regular work, usually two days a week (100 days per year) at a stipend rate of 66.34 ZAR (about 6 USD) per day. Working conditions are covered by a code of good practice and wage levels are determined at the ministerial level.

The CWP is an area-based programme, focusing on the poorest areas where market-based jobs are unlikely to develop. Thus, the CWP is a targeted program not available to all those who might seek it, which differs from MGNREGA's more universal approach. While the CWP is estimated to have created the equivalent of 2 million full-time jobs over the seven-year period from 2007 to 2014, the total number of jobs provided per year through the scheme was only about 66,000 (Jones 2013). This falls far short of providing work to the nearly 7 million potential beneficiaries in South Africa who were unemployed in 2014.

CSO involvement in scheme design and implementation

Unlike MGNREGA, the CWP uses CSOs as implementation agencies to develop organizational skills at the grassroots level, while integrating CWP activities with local government structures and existing development planning processes (Philip 2010a, b). The two main IAs involved in implementing the CWP—Seriti Institute and Teba Development—are non-profit organizations. They were appointed by the Presidency during the CWP initiation phase to work with and develop the capacity of communities to organize and manage the CWP themselves according to their needs.

A very important innovation introduced by the Seriti Institute is the 'Organisation Workshop' methodology, which comprises a month-long action-learning process that could involve up to 400 people at a time. The workshop teaches potential beneficiaries and develops their skills for work organization and task management. These skills are crucial to the effective running of the CWP, as many participants have never worked before and therefore stand to benefit from the training (SWOP 2011: 17). This process of building the capacity of community members runs at the same time as the CWP, so that existing gaps in skills or organization can be addressed without interfering with the work itself (Philip 2010a: 16). Thus, the IAs have played a dual role of strengthening communities' ability to interact with local decision-making structures and processes, and of developing capacity within the community (SWOP 2011: 15-16).

As the CWP was expanded to new sites and provinces, more layers of project management were introduced. As a result, implementation follows a three-tier model: at the top are three Lead Agents appointed by the Ministry of Cooperative Governance to oversee implementation in three provinces each. At the provincial level, Provincial Implementing Agencies (PIAs) assist the Lead Agents with programme implementation and roll-out, and PIAs in turn appoint Local Implementation Agents to manage project implementation at the site level (Faba 2014). This system threatens the intensive community consultation in the CWP, especially as provided by the Local Reference Committees (LRCs) that characterise the CWP (Vawda et al. 2013; Bruce 2015). These committees support CWP implementation at site level. Members include civil society representatives, municipal officials, local political leaders, community development workers, traditional leaders and the site manager (Mahler 2014). Functioning, properly constituted LRCs contribute towards fair recruitment in the CWP, facilitate favourable perceptions of the programme and involve communities in decisions about the kind of work undertaken in the CWP (Bruce 2015). In the three-tier structure, these bodies have already lost some of their functions to the provincial level. Recent suggestions to reform the CWP into a one-tier model relying on PIAs, if approved, would aggravate this trend and would further limit the functions of local actors in CWP implementation.

Traditionally, public works programmes focus on infrastructure development—this is also the case in MGNREGA. In the CWP, however, which allows the local community to determine what 'socially useful work' they require, many impoverished households prioritize care, and the CWP thus encompasses work in the social sector. The CWP serves as a catalyst for crèches, old age homes, schools and voluntary associations to fulfil their development potential. However, training given to CWP workers is still little and even though the work is conducted with dedication, the quality of the service workers are able to provide is often lacking. CSOs, in addition to the IAs, need more resources and structure to develop synergistic relationships with the CWP. IAs should be

streamlined without undermining the local context specific relationships of CSOs with the CWP and their efforts to further develop these relationships.

Key messages

Overall, the inter- and intra-country comparisons provided here offer important findings and messages relevant to policy makers:

- The public works programmes in both India and South Africa include CSOs in implementation. Their role in MGNREGA has been strengthened over time, while in the CWP, the initially strong CSO involvement has been put under stress after revisions to the implementation structure.
- The institutional environment established by the countries' governments in and around the schemes significantly shapes the capacities of the CSOs to support the implementation of programmes.
- Establishing mechanisms to reflect and take up local needs can be the key to making public works programmes socially as well as economically useful.
- Awareness campaigns may be insufficient unless the structural and institutional constraints on claiming rights and benefits are addressed.
- Proactive engagement of the government with CSOs as implementing agencies tends to produce better results in terms of implementation of public work programmes.

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