

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

NREGA Workers Union - Exposing Corruption, Ensuring Work

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In March 2010, large-scale corruption in the implementation of NREGA was exposed in Fatehpura block of Dahod district (Gujarat). The massive scale of the corruption is evident from the fact that NREGA authorities got a complaint of cheating registered with the police against 16 persons. These include a Block (Taluka) Development Officer and a bank manager.

This and some other exposures of irregularities in NREGA in the tribal belt of Gujarat became possible to a large extent due to the careful monitoring and solid mobilisation work done by the National Rural Employment Guarantee Workers' Union - Gujarat (NREGWUG). This union of NREGA workers, perhaps the first of its kind, had been repeatedly drawing attention to the widespread irregularities in the implementation of NREGA in Fatehpura block. "The extent of irregularities here is truly massive", says Ashwini Pratap, a co-ordinator of this union.

Quite aside from the financial scam, it is also evident from the details of the implementation of this scheme that in Gujarat there appear to be several departures from the rules and norms of NREGA. For example some forest workers who have been employed for several years told me that they have been asked to shift to work at NREGA sites at a lower wage. This aspect also deserves attention. However one of the main concerns of the NREGWUG was that the dues of the workers were being delayed to a shocking extent. In fact there have been reports of the non-payment of the wages of over 3000 NREGA workers for almost two years! While Fatehpura may be a particularly shocking case, there have been reports of serious irregularities from other areas as well, several of which have been documented carefully in studies and surveys take up by NREGWUG and/or its sister organisations.

During 2008 hundreds of complaints were received by NREGWUG related to non payment of wages, not starting work, even not giving job cards to many, improper measurement, absence of essential facilities at work-sites and the massive corruption. The union organised a protest rally on January 20, 2009 for demanding the prompt payment of long delayed wages of 1500 NREGA workers in Fatehpura block. Around 2,000 workers participated in this rally. A memorandum comprising a charter of demands was submitted to the BDO (TDO). It was pointed out that hundreds of workers who participated in this rally had not received their wages for 8 to 9 months. They had been forced to borrow money at high interest rate to meet their survival needs. The Talati cum Mantri (the village panchayat Secretary) was demanding bribe for starting work on wells.

Soon after this rally some work was speeded up and some payments were made. But this was not adequate and subsequently union activists also sent their complaints to the central NREGA committee in Delhi. It is likely that effective action against corruption was initiated only after this.

Another mobilisation effort (culminating in a protest rally on March 18 2009) was initiated in Limkheda block. Following

this the payment of wages to NREGA workers, who had not been paid for 4 months was speeded up. This was followed by a similar effort in Devgarh Bariya block. After collecting complaints about irregularities and poor implementation in a systematic way nearly 100 union members submitted a memorandum to Program Officer. After this NREGA work picked up to some extent and some of the due wages were also paid.

Some of these efforts have brought the union into conflict with corrupt sarpanches. In the action taken in the context of Fatehpura taluka in March 2010, cases of cheating were registered against two sarpanches also. At the same time, however, it is important to emphasise other aspects of positive inter-action with panchayats. The union helps in organising participatory planning training programmes so that various panchayats can prepare village development plans in such a way that their real needs for various development works can be properly prioritised. This can obviously be very helpful in ensuring that the various works taken up under NREGA are the ones that best meet the real needs of villages.

While this union's work is obviously strong at the field level, it doesn't ignore the need for meticulous research. It has prepared research reports on the implementation of NREGA in Gujarat and neighbouring states (parts of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Maharashtra) which have been widely covered by the media and helped to draw attention to many malpractices.

When I visited a village Phulpari (in Limkheda block of Dahod district) people told me that there had been absolutely no rain during the last year. But people were saved to some extent by the wells and check dams constructed under NREGA. As the union is active in this area, this could lead to reasonably satisfactory implementation of the scheme which not only provided wages at the time of extreme distress but also helped to prepare the base for sustainable development in the form of water/moisture conservation and minor irrigation.

Paulomee Mistry, General Secretary of NREGWUG says, "Protecting the rights of workers and ensuring prompt, fair payments to them is of course a priority of our union. But we strive to go beyond this and will be increasingly trying to ensure that NREGS lives up to its potential of increasing the green cover, conserving water and taking up all the priority works in a proper way so that the distress of drought and adverse weather can be reduced and a firm base is created for sustainable development in rural areas."