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Strengthening Women's Livelihoods Through the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)

Policy Strategies for Resilience and Inclusion¹

The “Bhubaneswar Charter”



Image: A group of women discussing their ideas for assets under MGNREGA in Odisha state.

Photo credit: Travelling Tripod

¹ Note: Portions of this policy note draw on a previously published blog post by some of the authors. This version expands upon this line of work with additional insights and recommendations.

Social protection as a way of building resilience

Globally, there is increasing recognition of the significant potential for social protection programs to support sustainable livelihoods and build household resilience to climatic and economic shocks (Jordan et al., 2021; Norton et al., 2020). For women—who disproportionately bear the burden of these shocks—such programs serve as a critical safety net and a pathway to economic empowerment (Kosec et al., 2023; Mason & Agan, 2015). Yet, the extent to which social protection delivers on this promise depends on robust financing, inclusive program design, and effective implementation. Evidence suggests that public interventions often fall short in addressing gender inequalities, and that complementary efforts must be made to redress entrenched disadvantages that women might face in shaping, accessing, and benefiting from these programs.

Extensive research highlights India’s Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) as a program with considerable potential to support women’s economic inclusion and resilience (Afridi et al., 2021; Esteves et al., 2013; Gehrke, 2015; Muralidharan et al., 2021; Narayanan et al., 2020; Ranaware et al., 2015; Ravindranath & Murthy, 2021; Tiwari et al., 2011; Zimmermann, 2023 among many others). By design, MGNREGA facilitates women’s participation in the workforce and explicitly aims to build durable assets that can enhance natural resource management and sustainable livelihoods for men and women. Emerging evidence also suggest that the assets built under the MGNREGA can catalyze value chain development, strengthening local economies (Narayanan et al. 2024, for example).

Yet, despite women’s significant participation in MGNREGA as workers, their voice and agency in decision-making around MGNREGA—particularly in asset selection, management, and utilization—remains constrained. Integrating the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) with the MGNREGA has shown promise in bridging this gap. Documented successes of leveraging MGNREGA for women’s sustainable livelihoods offer valuable lessons that can be systematically incorporated into program guidelines and implementation strategies.

Bringing together program stakeholders to address key barriers

On September 28, 2024, the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) convened a [workshop](#) in Bhubaneswar, Odisha titled *Leveraging the MGNREGA for resilient livelihoods for women: New insights, old bottlenecks, innovative solutions* ([The Bhubaneswar Consortium, 2024](#)). This workshop built on IFPRI’s research on various aspects of the MGNREGA across multiple states (Kosec et al., 2024; Narayanan et al., 2024; Raghunathan et al., 2024). It also led to a set of recommendations endorsed by workshop participants which we call “The Bhubaneswar Charter.”

The goal of this workshop was to bring together researchers, donors, and government and civil society representatives to deliberate how to strengthen women’s voice and agency in acquiring assets under the MGNREGA in Odisha and ensure assets help promote resilient livelihoods for women and men. Over 30 participants from within and outside Odisha contributed insights at the workshop.

- ▶ **Scheme-agnostic, end-to-end training:** Current training programs are too often siloed within individual schemes. An integrated, end-to-end approach could prepare communities and individuals to graduate from the MGNREGA program while supporting their long-term resilience.
- ▶ **Leverage digital tools to support training:** Digital content—such as videos illustrating potential role models or voice recordings of training content in local languages and dialects—could be productively leveraged for training purposes. These tools can help address restrictive gender norms as well as language barriers without requiring digital literacy on the part of participants. Live video links that connect women across locations that allow them to share problems and build a community can foster peer learning and eventually substitute for some in-person visits. These materials can include technical extension advisories and information on resources to support better use of assets. However, the group emphasized that in-person training is critical to build trust and rapport with trainees and must always precede digital modes of engagement and training.
- ▶ **Design and deliver training for impact:** There was consensus that successful training requires proper community needs assessment, identification of skills (both technical and soft skills) that need to be built or strengthened, and an active, participatory approach. For greater impact, the training needs to repeat key messages and be conducted at a regular frequency. At the workshop, participants also discussed specific participatory tools like social mapping, role playing games, and joint deliberation on action points and next steps, and the potential of these tools to be integrated into existing training programs. These tools include those developed by IFPRI, that provide beneficiaries with information on MGNREGA, a role model video illustrating women’s pathways to obtaining MGNREGA assets within Odisha, and a training course aiming to walk women through a social mapping exercise to identify their asset needs and to enhance their skills to demand assets through role play. Links to these publicly available tools are provided in the “Tools Annex.”

Strengthening the MGNREGA for Resilient Livelihoods

The group also identified institutional and programmatic changes needed to ensure that MGNREGA assets effectively build long-term resilience and agency for women:

- ▶ **Promote bundling of assets:** Bundling complimentary assets can maximize returns, reduce risks, and support graduation from MGNREGA. It has been observed that a bundling approach—where several assets are provided together—leads to higher benefits to households than disparate individual assets. Potential examples include intercropping of horticultural and other crops in plantations to ensure short-term returns; backyard or homestead as well as plantation models of tree crops to allow for flexibility in land availability; combining farm ponds with water recharge structures; boundary plantations of trees and horticultural crops; and combining cattle sheds with the production of bio inputs such as vermicompost pits and organic fertilizers made from cow urine and cow dung, among others. Researchers could partner with government to develop an evidence-based library of bundles of assets that yield higher returns and increase the probability that beneficiaries exit the MGNREGA program when provided jointly versus individually to guide implementation.
- ▶ **Improve convergence across departments:** Convergence efforts should occur not only at the block level, but also through active coordination at the district and state levels. The district administration can play a key role here, as all key departments report to the district administrator. Convergence efforts could be reviewed in regular meetings with line departments. Sharing GIS coordinates

of geo-tagged MGNREGA assets with schemes like NLRM would enable NLRM to plan complementary activities around these assets, including providing credit to beneficiaries. Although there have also been efforts to share beneficiary lists from other government schemes with MGNREGA functionaries with the idea that MGNREGA could then provide assets for these targeted beneficiaries, this information-sharing tends to work less well since targeted beneficiaries of one scheme might not be eligible for MGNREGA or be current job card holders.

Experts in the workshop also cautioned that the need for coordination across line ministries must be balanced with preserving commitment to bottom-up asset planning. Coordination across line ministries run the risk of normalizing top-down decisions about which assets to build and for whom—which might sideline critical local knowledge about needs.

- ▶ **Incorporating flexibility and cost effectiveness considerations:** Current practices assume that asset durability is linked with high-cost designs. However, high-quality, durable assets need not be expensive. Locally adapted, low-cost designs can also be durable: for example, goat sheds built with local sustainable materials cost only 1/3rd of the prescribed allocation currently under the MGNREGA guidelines. A curated library of such low-cost but durable asset designs from NGOs and other partners that are appropriate for different agroecological contexts could boost MGNREGA's impacts and cost effectiveness.

- ▶ **Levering MGNREGA assets for climate mitigation and disaster resilience:** A sharper focus on MGNREGA assets that can help sequester carbon, halt soil erosion, and recharge groundwater is warranted. These can build household resilience against climate shocks. We recommend three specific actions:
 - **Identifying a list of MGNREGA works specifically for climate hazard proofing, disaster preparedness, and restoration activities.** Identification of climate data needs is essential to enable this. A useful starting point could be to put together State Action Plans for Climate Change, District Disaster Management Plans, and Gram Panchayat Sustainable Development Goals targets and local climate action plans to identify how the MGNREGA can support these plans.
 - **Adapting designs to location-specific climate hazards**, such as altering dimensions or materials based on climate assessments.
 - **Training and communication of climate issues** to allow community members to participate in deliberations on MGNREGA assets for tackling climate risks. For this, the effective transformation of complex remote sensing and climate data into messages that are easy to communicate and understand is necessary. Despite ongoing GIS training of MGNREGA functionaries, few are able to incorporate this into asset planning; it is important to make this training more effective. The Gram Rozgar Sevak (GRS), the lynchpin of the MGNREGA at the GP level, can be trained as well as supported at the back end so that asset planning is better aligned to climate action plans locally.

- ▶ **Investing in additional human resources:** The GRS operates under many constraints and often has too much to do. A supportive cadre of village resource persons from OLM/ Mission Shakti can strengthen the creation of assets under the MGNREGA, especially for women. It might also be advisable to have a cadre that supports households in registering for different programs, informs them about schemes, links them to NRLM, and so on. In Bihar, VLRPs are an example – they have information on JEEViKA, NREGA, and other schemes.
- ▶ **Planning for assets that respond to needs:** At present, there is a gap between what people want and what they get. Assets should better reflect the needs of the MGNREGA workers, even as they need to be appropriate for local agroecological contexts. The participatory bottom-up approach that is envisioned in the guidelines can help ensure this and thereby strengthen each community’s ability to self-govern and make decisions. Like the Rozgar divas (a day set aside weekly to demand work), holding “**Sampati divas**” (a day devoted to demanding assets each month) during the MGNREGA planning window starting October 2, 2024, could help focus attention and highlight the potential of MGNREGA to provide assets.
- ▶ **Allowing for repair and maintenance of both individual and community assets under MGNREGA and line departments:** Long-term viability of assets requires ongoing maintenance. Currently provisions allow for repair and maintenance for community but not individual assets. Allowing for maintenance for both individual and community assets can be built into the MGNREGA guidelines and incorporated into the schemes and policies of the converging line departments, such as including guidelines within the horticulture department for plantation maintenance, within the department of fisheries for maintenance and repair of fishponds, and so on.
- ▶ **Including Persons with Disabilities (PWDs):** The group agreed that provisions to address the needs of PWDs, who may be particularly vulnerable in the context of climate shocks, can be incorporated explicitly with little additional effort, both as workers and beneficiaries of assets. The group noted that while schemes to support PWDs exist, for example, free distribution of aids pensions, etc., those for productive (self-) employment are limited. Several states, such as Tamil Nadu and Telangana, have good examples of success and viable pathways for inclusion of PWDs (Agnihotri & Singh, 2016).

Conclusion

A diverse set of policy makers, practitioners, and researchers participated in the Bhubaneswar workshop. Participants unanimously affirmed MGNREGA’s potential to support and strengthen sustainable livelihoods and to build individual and community resilience, especially for women. The recommendations outlined above draw on both empirical evidence and the deep, rich and sustained engagement participants have had with the program over many years and can guide reforms in Odisha and other states.

As we approach twenty years since the Employment Guarantee Act was first enacted, a renewed commitment to realizing its full potential is essential. We hope that the “Bhubaneswar charter” can provide a useful foundation for action – ensuring the MGNREGA remains a cornerstone of inclusive, climate-resilient development.

TOOL ANNEX

International Food Policy Research Institute; Traveling Tripod; Kosec, Katrina; Kyle, Jordan; Narayanan, Sudha; and Raghunathan, Kalyani. 2023. Empowering Women: Inclusion in India's Government Planning. Washington, DC: International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U2hv4BnZZIM>. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U2hv4BnZZIM>

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