

DIALOGUES FOR DEMOCRACY, LESSONS FROM RAJASTHAN

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Public Policy Making

– Fri, 19. June 2009 7:26 PM SM - 21/06/2009 - CCI_Hindu_NewsDeskR6_GFS3R6JVD.1.jfif
Date Publication Title/Caption Sun, 21. June 2009 12:00 AM The Hindu An opportunity for rural renewal: An NREGA project site in Rajasthan. Photo: Bata Dungarpur Sun, 21. June 2009 12:00 AM The Hindu An opportunity for rural renewal: An NREGA project site in Rajasthan. Photo: Bata Dungarpur Sun, 21. June 2009 12:00 AM The Hindu An opportunity for rural renewal: An NREGA project site in Rajasthan. Photo: Bata Dungarpur | Photo Credit: [FILE PHOTO/Bata Dungarpur](#)

It is 45 days and counting since lakhs of farmers have gathered in Delhi protesting against the farm laws. Leaving aside the merits and demerits of the laws, many are aggrieved about the process of promulgation of the laws as it lacked any consultation with those that the laws are purportedly meant to serve.

Very often, policy makers ignore the need for dialogue and deliberation with beneficiaries. Consultations are needed during the initial stages of law making of a government programme as much as a continuous dialogic exercise must be the norm for effective programme implementation. Even when policies are anchored in good principles, their implementation is often messy and requires iterations based on people's concerns. In particular, redistributive, people-facing welfare policies need constant feedback.

We illustrate this through an example of the implementation of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in Rajasthan. Rajasthan has a healthy tradition of consulting with worker groups and civil society organisations not only in the initial stage of policy formulation but also to take continuous feedback from the field and carry out periodic midway course corrections. In the case of MGNREGA, engagement with civil society organisations had been institutionalised in the MGNREGA *samvads*; some of which were attended by the Chief Minister of Rajasthan.

MGNREGA wages are now directly credited from the central government to a worker's bank account. While there is a case to be made for direct transfers, this system is not without its pitfalls. An overreliance on the technical architecture of MGNREGA has subverted workers' rights. The troubles are compounded when things go wrong as workers run from pillar to post knocking on the doors of various government officials, banks, payment disbursement agencies, panchayat officials, etc.

One such vexing problem is that of payment rejections which are like bounced cheques. These occur when the government initiates the payment, but money does not get credited due to technical issues. There are numerous reasons for rejections and their resolutions require a thorough understanding of the complex payment architecture that not only involves various line departments and banks but also the National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI). Workers are bereft of their own money unless the core underlying problems are successfully addressed. For example, on occasions, the block level data entry operators make errors in entering the account or Aadhaar details of workers. At other times, banks consider accounts as 'dormant' when the accounts are not used for some time.

While these are somewhat tractable, a very common rejection reason called 'Inactive Aadhaar'

is more complex to resolve. This happens when the linkage of the worker's Aadhaar and their bank account is broken in the software maintained by the NPCI. Let alone workers, many government officials and bank officials are unaware of how to resolve these errors. Short-staffed and overcrowded banks mean that workers have to make multiple trips to banks only to be told rudely that their 'payments have not come'. Field officials often resort to temporary and incorrect quick fixes which backfire leaving the workers in an abyss.

Notwithstanding the range of hostilities workers face in the process, the reasons for rejections are rarely provided, thereby adding more uncertainty to their precarity. From the perspective of the administration, it is difficult to look into each payment, understand the reasons for rejection and help the worker take action on an individual basis.

To resolve payment rejections, the Department of Rural Development of the Government of Rajasthan has held numerous discussions. These resulted in a workshop involving worker groups and civil society organisations who interacted directly with the aggrieved workers, administrative officers from the village level to the State level, and bankers. As the dialogue evolved, detailed guidelines were issued with well-defined responsibility, clear timelines, and monitoring and protocols to be followed by officials. This has resulted in a significant reduction in payment rejections in Rajasthan. In a period of one year from the workshop, the Rajasthan government was able to clear 380 crore worth of payments to workers that were earlier stuck due to rejections. Currently, only 2.7% payments are pending regeneration from the State government, and 12.3% are under process by the banks; the goal is to ensure that every person who has worked, gets their full payment on time.

Open communication channels, an eagerness to work with worker groups and a keen ear to the ground have benefited thousands of MGNREGA workers in Rajasthan. The Right to Information (RTI) Act that had its origins in people's movements in Rajasthan, mandated proactive disclosure of information. However, programme information on many occasions continues to be inaccessible and, when available, some are in ill-defined formats. This provision got a major boost in Rajasthan as the Rajasthan government launched the Jan Soochna Portal, or JSP (<https://bit.ly/2LmKLMv>), in 2019. The JSP is a single platform in the public domain providing information across 60 departments of over 104 schemes. The design and formats of each scheme have been painstakingly arrived at through a 'digital dialogue' involving government officials and numerous civil society organisations.

The American civil rights activist Jesse Jackson said, 'Deliberation and debate is the way you stir the soul of our democracy.' Federalism and good governance require constant constructive engagement between people and officials. If a government is committed to constitutional principles, then paying attention to multiple points of view and listening to the voices of the marginalised is a prerequisite. While there is still a long way to go, the ongoing consultative experiences in Rajasthan do offer hope.

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