

Improving social audits

The institutionalisation of “social audits” to ensure implementation of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) has been challenging. Since being included in the 2005 Act at the behest of social movements, social audits have been ineffective in most parts of the country due to government indifference. So far, 26 States have created social audit units (SAUs), but the Comptroller and Auditor General’s (CAG’s) detailed guidelines are yet to be implemented. In the absence of any real commitment to make mandatory social audits a reality, the Central and State governments have exacerbated the implementation problems facing important social security legislations such as NREGA and the National Food Security Act.

State of play

A notable exception is Andhra Pradesh (now Andhra Pradesh and Telangana). In Telangana, the SAU has organised regular social audits on NREGA since 2008. It has completed eight rounds, organising 9,125 rural public hearings, and auditing over 21,827 panchayats. Though participatory social audits are designed to expose problems and deter corruption, in an exploratory study, conducted in partnership with the Society for Social Audit Accountability and Transparency (SSAAT-Telangana), we find that social audits are playing a significant role in redressing individual worker grievances, though social audits are not viewed by development practitioners as appropriate grievance redressal platforms or effective deterrents to corruption. Such views, focusing on the punitive impact of social audits, do not pay attention to the iterative and dynamic process that defines the decade long experience in A.P. and Telangana. While state-supported social audits are different from the social movement-led jan sunwais that inspired them, the process in Telangana is charting new grounds aligned with activists’ demands for transparency, participation and accountability.

What the data show

We surveyed 90% of the social audit facilitators, the majority of whom are Dalit youth (52%, 11% Adivasi), to understand how they perceive strengths and limitations of social audits. Two-thirds felt that 50% of the social audits they facilitated (in 2014-15) helped in deterring corruption.

An analysis of real time social audit data available through Rapid Social Audit Report (RSR) shows that the percentage of deviation of NREGA funds accepted by the Presiding Officer of the social audit public hearing has increased over the years, from 72.83% in 2014 to 88.35% in 2017. But we find a decline in the percentage of NREGA records given (compared to the total programme expenditure): from 98.71% in 2014 to 87.22% in 2017. Respondents also identified weak state responsiveness to social audit findings (33%) and lack of support from senior officials (21%) as the two major obstacles to social audits.

Without an independent agency to investigate and act on social audit findings, frontline social auditors in Telangana proactively focussed on individual workers’ grievances, the weakest link of NREGA. Publicly available administrative data show that SSAAT was able to resolve 32% of grievances received between December 2015 and November 2016, prior to the social audit public hearings. Follow up research using RSR Data shows, 57% of all the grievances registered during the audit process were job card related, an additional 26% were related to wage payments. This new problem-solving function of social audits helped local auditors better serve workers by improving on a poor performing phone complaint system that closed grievances without reason or redress. It also prevented individual grievances getting stuck in a non-existent corrective action system, highlighting the preventive role of social audits over the much-studied punitive role (detering corruption).

Court's reminder

On March 19, 2018, the Supreme Court once again reminded us of the importance of social audits in improving government practices. In its final judgment on the National Campaign Committee for Central Legislation on Construction Labour (NCC-CL) petition on the implementation of the Building and Other Construction Workers (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, the Court directed the Ministry of Labour and Employment, State governments and the UTs to “conduct a social audit on the implementation of the BOCW Act so that in future there is better and more effective and meaningful implementation of the Act”.

The Supreme Court's supportive position on social audits suggests this is a good time to take stock of the challenges to the social audit process and think through future strategies to improve the process. As the social audits process in Telangana completes a decade, we have much to celebrate: uninterrupted social audits despite change in state governments, and state bifurcation. This is an opportunity to draw on the decade-long experience in Telangana and A.P. to inform the national process currently being facilitated by the CAG.

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