MGNREGA's Information System Flawed, Misguiding

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(The editorial is based on the article "MGNREGA's information system flawed, misguiding" which appears in Down To Earth for 19th December 2018. The editorial shows how MGNREGA's Management Information System (MIS) destroys local accountability, promotes centralisation and administrative control, and gives out wrong data.)

There is a disconnect between what the government shows as performances of central schemes, especially social welfare programmes (performances judged through data captured by the Management Information Systems) and ground surveys and studies that give out a contradictory picture.

The MNREGA is said to have the best MIS, one that is aligned with the core idea of "proactive disclosure" of all information related to implementation of the schemes. It is a real time Management Information System and the implementation of the schemes are directly linked with the MIS.

Realtime MIS for MNREGA:

- **A real time MIS is one where there are checks and balances embedded in the system itself through software programming, which links different implementing mechanisms.**
- For example, activities are linked in the MIS in such a way that one will not be able to carry out "activity 2" without performing "activity 1".
- Also, job card and bank account details of a worker will have to be seeded in the MIS in order to generate Muster Rolls (MRs) for him/her.
- Similarly, DPR (Detailed Project Report) has to be frozen defining component-wise budgets for a particular scheme in the MIS in order to be able to perform pre-implementation geo-tagging of the scheme. **Geo-tagging is mandatory for generating any MR for the said scheme.**
- **The payment process is also linked with the MI**S and depends on the number of such processes to be carried out one after another to finally make payments to workers which is centrally done through the Electronic Finance Management System

(EFMS).

The complexity of the MIS linked implementation system is thus very clear. **Also evident is the administrative control, which in turn leads to zero local accountability. The MIS, supposed to show performance of implementation, has now become the key controller of the programme and a deciding factor of people's fate at ground.**

Why the NREGA MIS does not show the correct ground data

- **It is very easy to generate fake work demand and Muster Rolls (MRs) and enter into the MIS. This is a general malpractice that is observed everywhere.** One can observe people working on other people's job cards in almost every state. This reality is not reflected in the MIS figures. Dated receipts are routinely denied and work demand dates are generally falsely entered to avoid an unemployment allowance situation. While MR generations are routinely delayed beyond 15 days from demand, the truth is not visible from the MIS.
- The MIS website considers "wages paid" once the FTO (Fund Transfer Order) is signed by the second signatory. However, delays take place even in the processing of signed FTOs. **While the stage 1(till FTO signing) delays are calculated, the stage 2 (post FTO, until wage gets credited to the worker's account) are not shown on the MIS and thus the data on payments, which the system returns, is false and misleading.**
- It is very easy to make advance material payments to vendors. However as per rules, this should not be done. Almost everywhere, one can find payments made in advance to the vendors. **While the MIS website shows that material payment is made in a particular scheme, it is not necessary that the same has been supplied at the worksite.**
- **There is a growing pile of evidence which shows that genuine job cards are being randomly deleted by the administration to meet the 100 per cent DBT(Direct Benefit Transfer) targets and hence the number of job cards shown on the MIS website cannot be trusted.**
- **Moreover, the MIS website considers job cards as "active" if it has registered at least a single day of work in the last three financial years (including the current fiscal year). This notion of an active job card is ridiculous as there exist millions of families that stopped working in MGNREGA due to payments hassles and their own troubled experiences.** Instead of identifying these inactive job cards and finding out the reasons for their disinterest, the government conveniently ignores these families.
- **MGNREGA funds are routinely seized by the Union Ministry of Rural Development and hence work gets reduced and PD (person day) figures get affected. The MIS figures paint a false picture that the budget allocations are adequate while in reality, works and PDs get reduced due to drying up of funds.**

The MGNREGA MIS can be controlled and guided with a click of the mouse to show data as per the choice of the government.

- **The MIS website has a check on 100 days of 'work demand' instead of 100 days of 'work done' which would effectively mean that no further MR would be generated if a job card has registered 100 days of demand in the MIS, irrespective of the number of days worked by the family.** The workers are denied their rightful entitlements due to a wrongly written programme code or a flawed check on the system.

Way forward

- **There is a genuine issue with the integration of modern day digital management systems with the data-centric achievement motivation of the government.** Perhaps involving international software companies like Microsoft, Amazon or Google for example, to devise, design and run MIS solutions could help these management systems become smoother, easier to use, and most importantly could improve the quality of data collected and studied.
- **The MIS has become a tool to show whatever the government intend** and the whole system therefore works towards achieving the data on the MIS *(it is like setting 'data' first, working to achieve it later; it should have been 'work' first and gathering data later),* causing tremendous implications on ground.
- It is high time that the government focuses on **strengthening the local implementation and monitoring** through sensible policies. Without local involvement, data collection can be easily changed (i.e falsified for political gain or information mistakenly added or removed due to human error etc.) in the centrally controlled MIS.
- **It is a futile effort to introduce over-the-top technological solutions to deal with issues and leakages caused by complex social and administrative dynamics.** That is to say that though the MIS may be technologically sound, the social system (i.e rural areas with very low penetration of education, especially of technology) it is designed to serve isin't.
- **MGNREGA can be revived only through concrete decentralised grassroot processes and not by flawed MIS data.** Towards this end, there should be debate and discussions, involving various stakeholders from MGNREGA workers, contractors, bureaucrats, politicians to software vendors and companies.
- **Lastly, while MIS is useful in capturing data on work that has happened on ground, linking implementing processes with the MIS proves to be detrimental for the health of the programme as it destroys local accountability, promotes centralisation and administrative control, and most importantly gives out false and misleading data which can be tampered for one's vested interest.**