



Decentralizing Climate Assistance

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This article is based on **“The role of MGNREGA in the climate crisis”** which was published in The Hindustan Times on 03/04/2021. It talks about how can MGNREGA help in tackling climate change.

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGA) has made immense contributions towards livelihood security and the creation of durable assets in rural areas.

While MGNREGA has been a valuable employment tool and safety net, as seen in the migrant crisis, its role in building ecosystems resilient to the climate crisis is being increasingly recognized.

A climate-smart MGNREGA can lower the risks posed by the climate crisis while providing legally mandated demand-driven employment to resource-poor households.

Hence, there is a need to bring upfront the scheme’s potential in addressing matters of lives and livelihoods while combating the climate emergency.

MGNREGA & Climate Change

- Although the MGNREGA was not designed specifically as a climate program, it incorporates three key elements with the potential to advance pro-poor climate assistance objectives:
 - Social protection through the provision of minimum wage labor;
 - The development of small-scale, natural resource-focused infrastructure; and
 - A decentralized, ‘community-based planning architecture.
- MGNREGS is a well-established mechanism for planning, delivering, and monitoring expenditure.

It can deliver climate finance at scale into the hands of poor rural households — particularly the most vulnerable groups including women and scheduled castes and tribes — based on their priorities

How Can MGNREGA Help in Tackling Climate Change?

- **Natural Resource Management:** In 2020-21, of the total expenditure spent on MGNREGA, about two-thirds were on works related to natural resource management (NRM).

The mammoth scale of the NRM component in MGNREGA provides a major boost to improving the productive capacity of the land, water, and forest resources.
- **Reducing Vulnerability to Climate Risk:** This will help reduce the vulnerability to climate risk as groundwater availability increases, soil fertility improves, tree cover is enhanced, drought- and flood-proofing measures are put in place.
- **Augmenting Climate Change Adaptation:** A recent study by the Centre for Science and Environment concludes that MGNREGA is the “world’s biggest adaptation program as it harnesses the labor of people to invest in building the wherewithal to fight drought and build resilience”.
- **Achieving INDC:** As part of its efforts to tackle climate change, India has to meet three key targets: building capacity for 40% electric power from non-fossil fuel, cut in emissions by 33-35% from the 2005 level, and create carbon sinks of about 2.5 to 3 billion tons.
 - India is on its way to meet the first two targets but lagging on the third one. Going by present trends, target achievement will prove to be a major challenge.
 - In the Report submitted by the Union government to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the MGNREGA’s contribution to sequester carbon was assessed at 62 million tonnes of CO₂ equivalent in 2017-18.
 - This performance needs to be enhanced.

Way Forward

To strengthen MGNREGA and dealing with Climate change linkage, the following needs to be done:

- **Augmenting Financial Resources:** Topping up administrative or convergence funds to strengthen MGNREGA functionaries and workers’ skills to build and benefit from climate-resilient and low-carbon assets.

This will make it truly demand-driven and engage more people to work for climate change remediation.
- **Deepening the Scope of Convergence:** There is a need to deepen the scope of convergence by proactively linking farm assets with climate-smart agriculture technologies and practices.

In this context, robust methodologies for measurement and accounting of environmental services can be developed.

- **Strengthening MGNREGA Monitoring and Evaluation Systems:** More independent studies and surveys can be conducted that can quantify the scheme's adaptation and mitigation capacity to climate risks.
Also, there is a need for the feedback proformas not just the numerical count of works being undertaken but also the environmental services provided.
- **Anticipatory Wage Employment:** Building climate risk information (weather, climate hazards, and climate vulnerabilities), services, and skills to support anticipatory wage employment.

Conclusion

It is time to acknowledge MGNREGA as a climate-smart green employment generation program. In a world that will continue to warm, the rural poor will suffer its worst consequences. As a public intervention, Climate-smart MGNREGA appears to be a step in the right direction.

Drishti Mains Question

In a world that will continue to warm, the rural poor will suffer its worst consequences. Discuss the role that can be played by MGNREGA in dealing with the climate crisis.