

1 The National Consortium on MGNREGA

1.1 The Context

The last twenty years in India have been characterized by two major themes. The first and foremost amongst these is India's growth story. In the era of market reforms, India's GDP growth has accelerated. During the last two decades the rate of GDP growth has consistently been above 5% (Nagaraj, 2008). India is the 12th largest economy in the world in terms of GDP and is one of the fastest growing economies in the world today (World Bank, 2008).

The other major theme of this period has been the passage of the Constitution 73rd Amendment by the Indian Parliament in 1992, followed by its extension to scheduled areas in 1996, which has been heralded as the largest decentralization project in the world (Widmalm, 2005). The vision informing this decentralization project is that an elected 3-tier local government structure, collectively known as Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRI), will take the lead in ensuring inclusion and empowerment (providing the "missing link between accelerated growth and inclusive growth" MoPR, 2008) in an era of high growth. This systemic move towards decentralization has paved the way for a host of people-centred legislations such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), the Forest Rights Act and the upcoming National Food Security Act.

Yet the experience of the past decade and more has shown that inclusion remains elusive. To begin with, growth has remained confined to enclaves of prosperity surrounded by vast hinterlands of deprivation, home to 77% of India's population or over 836 million people, with a per capita consumption expenditure of less than or equal to Rs.20 per day (roughly \$2 in PPP terms) (NCEUS, 2007; Sengupta, et.al., 2008). The latest National Family Health Survey-3 of 2005-06 shows that the share of anaemic under-3 children has risen to 79% over the previous (NFHS-2) survey of 1998-99, when it was 74%. Nearly half of India's under-3 year children continue to remain underweight. India has the highest percentage (87%) of pregnant anaemic women in the world (World Bank, 2007). Moreover, as per the World Bank's World Development Indicators of 2005 and 2007, India's infant mortality and under-5 mortality rates (63 per 1000 and 87 per 1000 respectively) are not only amongst the highest in the world but are also substantially higher than that of Bangladesh (46 per 1000 and 69 per 1000 respectively), which has a substantially lower per capita gross national income.

There is also glaring evidence of inter-regional inequalities in these indicators. Thus for instance, states within India are in the same bracket as some of the poorer parts of the world in terms of infant mortality and under-5 mortality and malnourishment. There is also reason to believe that inequities in social sector provisioning such as health, both spatial and inter-group, have persisted, and have probably worsened (Shankar and Shah, 2009).

55% of India's population between 2000 and 2008 were found to be in Multi-dimensional poverty, according to the UNDP's Multidimensional Poverty Index in its Human Development Report (UNDP 2010)¹. The report states that there are 421 million poor people in eight Indian states (Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal), which is more than the number of poor people (410 million) in

¹ The index is based on 3 dimensions – health, education and living standards. There are 10 indicators which feed into these 3 dimensions, viz., nutrition, child mortality, years of schooling, children enrolled, cooking fuel, toilets, water, electricity, floor and assets.

the 26 poorest African countries combined. Of these, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and Jharkhand states have infant and child mortality rates comparable to that of sub-Saharan African countries. There is also evidence that shows that while enrolment for primary schooling has increased in India after campaigns like the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, the drop-out rates continue to remain high and quality of education has not improved at all.

The tribes of India, who make up only 7% of its population have perhaps taken the brunt of such exclusion and tribal communities occupy the lowest rungs of deprivation. As per the NFHS-3, under five mortality rates, child malnourishment and anaemia in women is higher among scheduled tribes as compared to scheduled castes and other social groups. In absolute terms, the number of people below the poverty line declined between 1993-94 and 1999-2000 for all other groups except the Scheduled Tribes (ST). In terms of the Head Count Ratio and the Poverty Gap Index, both indicators again show significant declines in the case of other groups but marginal decreases only among the STs. The disparity can also be seen in the average monthly per capita expenditure (MPCE) by different social groups as per the National Sample Survey's Report No.514 of 2007. The average MPCE of all classes of households was 1.37 times that of the scheduled tribes in the 55th round of NSS. This ratio further rose to 1.47 times in the 61st round, indicating that the MPCE levels of tribal households have increased at a slower rate compared to the MPCE of all classes of households.

Poverty and distress are thus increasingly concentrated in the drylands of India and its hilly and tribal areas (Shah, *et.al.*, 1998), which are also home to violent expressions of discontent. In the list of "170 most backward districts including 55 extremist affected districts" (Planning Commission, 2005), 118 are located in 5 big states - Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh (Shankar and Shah, 2008). At the other end of this spectrum are thousands of farmers continuing to commit suicide (Ghosh 2005). This is no ordinary crisis but one which reflects the complete breakdown of governance in large parts of the country (Shah, 2007).

At the heart of this exclusion are two sub-themes. First, the last two decades have also coincided with the poor performance of Indian agriculture and deceleration in the rates of growth of irrigated area and output of foodgrains since the 1990s. The major impact of this decline has been felt in the drylands which are home to more than half the workforce but whose share is only 18% of the GDP. The second sub-theme has been that the decentralization vision has been seriously hampered by an ineffective devolution of funds and functionaries to the PRIs.

Poor performance of Indian agriculture

Over the last two decades, the performance of Indian agriculture has been poor. For the first time since mid sixties, the 1990s witnessed a rate of growth in foodgrain production, which was lower than the rate of growth of population. As a result, both per capita foodgrain production and availability were lower in 2000-03 than their pre-Green Revolution (1960-63) levels. The decline has been the sharpest in the 1990s. Consumption data based on NSS surveys show that foodgrain consumption and calorie intake has declined substantially during 1990s, in aggregate and for poorest deciles in terms of expenditure. While irrigated agriculture appears to be hitting a plateau, dryland farming has suffered neglect. Available data shows that the period 1990-2000 was not a happy decade for Indian agriculture. The overall

growth rate of crop production declined from 3.72% per annum of the previous decade to 2.29% in the 1990s and crop productivity fell from 2.99% per annum to 1.21% in the same period (Planning Commission, 2002). Average yield levels of rice and wheat have more than halved between 1986 and 2002, indicating a plateauing of productivity in these two major foodgrains. The output of crops grown and eaten by the poorest of the poor (coarse grains, pulses and oilseeds) and grown largely in the drylands, actually declined during this decade and the rate of growth of their yields decelerated considerably

The worst performers have been those regions where rainfed farming predominates. Rainfed drylands account for 48% of area under food-crops and 68% of the area under non-food crops. In terms of crop groups, 77% of pulses, 66% of oilseeds and 45% of cereals are grown under dryland conditions. More than 90% of the area under sorghum and pearl millet, 57% of maize, 62% of cotton, 76% of gram, 88% of pigeon pea and nearly 80% of groundnut, sesamum, linseed and soybean are located here. Rainfed areas account for nearly 80% of the output of coarse cereals, nearly 50% of maize, 65% of gram and pigeon pea, 81% of groundnut and 88% of soybean.

To compound the above scenario are emerging limits to irrigation development. Gross irrigated area in India went up by over 300%, from 22.56 million hectares (mha) in 1950-51 to 75.14 mha in 2000-01. At present, India has the largest irrigated agriculture in the world. However, a remarkable fact is that since the mid-1970s, the rate of expansion of irrigated area has undergone a decline. Both the rate of growth of irrigated area (1.83%) and average annual increments (1.28 mha/year) were the lowest in the period 1990-93 to 1999-2000, compared to earlier decades².

It is estimated that 4400 (large, medium and small) dams have been constructed in India so far (CWC, 2002). The pace of dam construction reached its peak in the mid-1980s, subsequent to which it slowed down considerably. A severe financial constraint restricts the possibilities of growth in surface irrigation based on big dams³. Evidence of problems such as waterlogging, salinity and alkalinity emerging in irrigation commands point to the ill-effects of over-irrigation. It should also be remembered that the track record of development projects in handling the problem of proper rehabilitation of displaced persons has been extremely poor (ILO-ARTEP, 1993).

Of the addition to irrigated area of 25.7 million hectares (mha) between 1970 and 1990, groundwater accounted for over 85%. The most dramatic change in the groundwater scenario in India is that the share of tubewells in irrigated area rose from a mere 1% in 1950-51 to 40% in 2007-08. Groundwater availability is dependent on the water storage and transmission characteristics of underlying geological strata. About 65% of India (comprising mainly the continental shield) is underlain by formations usually referred to as "hard rocks". Deeper seated aquifers often have good initial yields, but a tubewell drilled here may be tapping groundwater accumulated over several hundreds of years. Once groundwater has been extracted from a deeper aquifer, its replenishment depends upon the inflow from the shallow system. The path

² This is aligned with the global trend (FAO, 2003) since the global rate of expansion of irrigated area, which was 2.17% between 1961-63 and 1971-73, steadily came down in the subsequent decades, reaching 1.23% between 1990-93 and 1997-99. Incremental irrigated area reached its maximum (4.01 mha/year) between 1971-73 and 1981-83, which came down to 3.19 mha/year between 1991-93 and 1997-99.

³ The Steering Committee on Irrigation for the Tenth Plan categorically states that "given the large number of projects taken on hand, the frequent changes in project scope, and the escalation of project costs due to a variety of reasons, there is little likelihood that the outlay in the budgets can ever match the total demand" (Planning Commission, 2002).

this water has to traverse is characterized by relatively unfavorable media, which greatly slows down the rate of groundwater recharge. This poses a severe limit to expansion of tubewell technology to areas underlain by these strata.

Potential of dryland agriculture

It is now well-known that over the last sixty years, the share of agriculture in national income has fallen dramatically (from 54 per cent in 1931 to 18 per cent in 2008), without a corresponding decline in its share in the work force (which was 71 per cent in 1931 and 56 per cent in 2008). This indicates that the labour productivity in agriculture has fallen relative to the average labour productivity in the economy as a whole (Bhaduri, 1993). The continuing inter-sectoral differences in labour productivity, together with the fact that agriculture and related activities are still the major source of livelihoods is among the abiding causes of poverty in India. The flip side of this phenomenon suggests that if we want to raise overall output and employment in the economy, the most effective means would be to raise the productivity of agriculture. Since national per capita income can be expressed as a weighted average of sectoral productivities, it follows as an arithmetical identity that a rise in productivity in agriculture would lead to a greater increase in national output than the same increment in the productivity of the other sectors. In developing economies with a predominant agricultural sector, growth in agricultural productivity and employment is attainable through careful management of natural resources including water. This is also the pre-condition for greater labour absorption in agriculture through greater crop diversification and increased cropping intensity⁴ (Bhaduri, 2005).

In fact, by disaggregating the agricultural sector into a Green Revolution sector and a dryland sector, we could extend Bhaduri's analysis and argue that the maximum returns to a unit rise in productivity (across sectors) are obtainable from the dryland agricultural sector in India. This is because the drylands sector is characterized by the lowest levels of productivity, even while employing nearly 50 per cent of the labour force in Indian agriculture. Thus, both the scope for raising productivity and its potential aggregate impact are the highest in this sector. Since the poorest sections of Indian society live here, a rise in productivity in this sector would have an immediate impact on poverty alleviation, without having to await the rather doubtful and tenuous 'trickle-down' from the core to the periphery. It would also have a positive impact on the pattern of inter-regional inequality by benefiting the most backward areas.

Finally, if we concentrate our investment in these areas on labour-intensive works which raise productivity through the process of environmental regeneration, we could go a long way towards making the overall growth path of the Indian economy both employment-oriented and sustainable in the long run. Data from the Rural Labour Enquiry (Labour Bureau, 2004) reveal that the proportion of the landed among agricultural labour households is very high⁵. The NSS 61st Round shows that in 2004-05, as many as 76 per cent of the rural households in the country were marginal farmers (owning less than 1 hectare of land) and another 13% were small farmers (with landholding size between 1 and 2 hectares) (NSSO, 2007). Thus, small and marginal farmers accounted for nearly 89% of the landholdings. An increasing number

⁴ This path of "extensive growth" has been advocated also by Raj (1984) and Ishikawa (1967).

⁵ The share is around 50 percent in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, 60 in Orissa and Uttar Pradesh and over 70 in Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand. And if we focus on Adivasis, the proportion shoots up to as high as 76-87 per cent in Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Rajasthan (Shah, 2009)

of these small and marginal landowners, operating low-productivity holdings are being forced to enter the labour market. If priority is given to raising productivity in the fields of these landed labourers (occupying an estimated 8 million hectares), it would be a major contribution towards direct poverty alleviation in India.

The decentralisation experience

The other sub-theme can be said to be the very slow progress in actual devolution and democratic decentralization. A major bottleneck in this regard has been insufficient progress in devolution of what is known as the three Fs – Funds, Functions and Functionaries. Essentially, this means that while the legislation has been passed, the actual work of making PRIs in charge has proceeded very slowly and the progress has been uneven across states (Aiyar, 2005, Widmalm, 2005, ARC, 2007, MoPR, 2008). Thus, even if functions have been demarcated to be carried out by PRIs, the requisite funds have not been placed at their disposal but have been diverted by state governments, even if temporarily, to meet their own “ways and means requirements” (Aiyar, 2005, p.65), or the functionaries have not been made fully accountable to them, with line departments still maintaining their stranglehold (Social Watch India, 2009), or there has been a lack of clarity on demarcation of powers and functions to be performed between tiers of the PRI system. An index of devolution, based on scores for different parameters of devolution suggests that while there has been some progress in devolution, this progress has been uneven across states (NCAER, 2009).

A serious consequence of such decentralization without adequate preparation has been on the one hand a universalization of basic social services without sufficient attention to quality (Shankar and Shah, 2009). On the other, such “subsidiarity without empowerment” has also the possible implication of effectively absolving the state of its responsibilities in the social sector (Shah, 2007).

1.2. MGNREGA: Potential, Performance and Problems

The passage of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in 2005 marks a new chapter in Indian history as well the history of decentralization in India. Through this Act, the state is committed to providing employment (“not less than one hundred days of such work in a financial year”, NREGA, 2005 Ch. II) to every rural family which demands such work and whose adult members volunteer to do such work. Such work will be provided at the minimum wage rate and, as far as possible, within a 5 km radius of the village where the applicant resides. Failure to provide such wage employment within 15 days of the receipt of the application will entitle the applicant to receive a daily unemployment allowance. The Act moves towards ensuring the right to work and lays the basis for development interventions which do not depend on the wilful benevolence of the state but legally bind the state to provide employment for any rural family that demands it. Since April 2008, the coverage of the Act was expanded to all districts of India, making it the largest employment programme in the world. The principal implementing agency under the Act is the Gram Panchayat (GP). MGNREGA is also supported by unprecedented operational guidelines (MoRD, 2005), which give central emphasis to community participation in quality planning, implementation, social audit and transparency. A remarkable feature of MGNREGA through which it makes a decisive break with the past is that it places a complete ban on the use of contractors and also

lays emphasis on labour-intensive work for water conservation, drought- and flood-proofing as priority works under MGNREGA, underscoring water security as the pre-requisite and foundation for rural transformation in India (NREGA, 2005, Schedule I). The transformatory potential of MGNREGA lies in creating sustainable livelihoods through well targeted public investments in rural areas for creation of durable assets in priority works as listed above, thus easing the resource constraints faced by the poor, rural labour households, a very high proportion of whom are actually owners of land (Labour Bureau, *op.cit.*)⁶.

Backed by a constitutional right, it is MGNREGA's mandate of addressing chronic causes of poverty, redressing imbalances and deficiencies in the natural resource base, empowerment of the poor and governance reform that makes it stand apart from all social sector initiatives hitherto attempted.

This acquires particular significance in the light of growing realization in economic thinking about the synergies between equity and growth (see Bourguignon, 2004, Ravallion, 2007 for a discussion of the issues involved). The reasons are for one, in an unequal situation, the impact of growth on poverty would be muted (Datt and Ravallion, 2002, Deaton and Dreze, 2002). And, through a reversal of the growth-poverty linkage argument, on the other, by an understanding that the poor remain poor because of lack of access to productive resources (say for instance due to imperfect credit markets or an unequal distribution of wealth [Bourguignon, *op.cit.*, 2004]), which in turn inhibits their productive growth-oriented potential from being unlocked. Thus, the poor are not simply passive receptors of growth but, as producers, are contributors to it, representing both a "slack" in the system and an opportunity, which, with systematic and well-directed investments (such as the priority activities listed in Schedule I of the MGNREGA), could actually begin to contribute to the growth process itself. MGNREGA funds could be initially utilized to create the basic water infrastructure in villages through proper grassroots planning. Over time this could serve as the basis for a range of income-generating livelihoods interventions. Together, these would ensure that the investments made are productive, put the economy on a sustainable growth path and further that the number of dependents on a state-sponsored guarantee would steadily decline. The recent amendment to allow MGNREGA work on lands of small and marginal farmers (MoRD, 2009), has further deepened the possibilities of working on such activities under MGNREGA.

However, for such possibilities to be fully articulated, the bottom-up architecture of MGNREGA would have to become a reality, the key to which in turn, is a deepening of democratic decentralization. It is to an understanding of these issues that we now turn.

MGNREGA: Performance and achievements

Over the past 4 years or so, MGNREGA's performance according to key aggregate indicators has been quite impressive, particularly when compared with previous employment programmes. For one, budgetary allocation for MGNREGA has expanded steadily from its base of about Rs.11,300 crores in 2006-07 to Rs.40,100 crores in 2009-10. As per data available from the MGNREGA website, the cumulative expenditure under MGNREGA works since 2006-07 has been Rs.1,03,760 crores. The cumulative employment generated has been 8790 million person-days over the same period.

⁶ The intention behind the legislation goes well beyond the narrow goal of providing relief employment or unemployment doles.

Since its launch, the benefits of MGNREGA has reached women, SC/ST families and the poor. Over the last four years, the share of SC/ST families in the work provided under MGNREGA has ranged between 50-60%. The share of women in the employment provided has risen steadily from 41% in 2006-07 to 50% in 2010-11. With nearly 10 crore bank/post office accounts opened for MGNREGA workers, and about 85% of NREGA payments being made through them, MGNREGA has also moved financial inclusion of the poor several steps forward.

A recent study by Chandrashekhar and Ghosh (2011) point to the impact of MGNREGA on rural wages. The study, based on the 64th round of the National Sample Survey Organization's survey data concludes that real wages for casual labour in rural areas have increased between 1993-94 and 2007-08 and the increase has been more rapid for women workers. Further, that between 2004-05 and 2007-08, public works accounted for a greater share of economic activity and this rise was particularly greater for women, with the days of employment of rural women in public works increasing by a factor of 4.4. Finally, average female wages in MGNREGA were slightly higher than average male wages, whereas they were lower in non-MGNREGA public works and even lower in non-public works.

Major issues in MGNREGA implementation

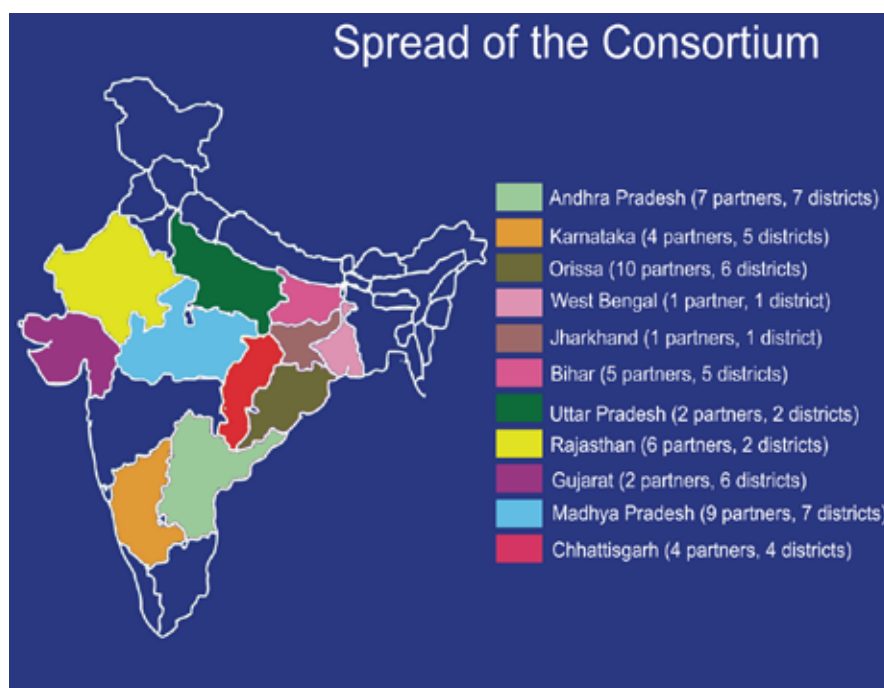
Aggregate figures of achievement however, hide several lacunae in the core MGNREGA objectives of people-centred planning, transparency and bottom-up architecture, even in states which are performing well on the employment generation criterion (see Kumar *et.al*, 2008 for a discussion of such issues related to Andhra Pradesh). It has been observed that wage payments are delayed, works are of a poor quality, there is corruption, contractors tend to find ways to beat the system and planning and social audits do not involve people (see for instance Shah, 2009, Ambasta, 2009, Dreze *et.al*, 2009).

While with the passage of the Act, the bottlenecks of Funds and Functions seemed to have eased up, the lack of functionaries at the cutting edge of implementation has serious consequences for the bottom-up, people-centred architecture of MGNREGA. The shortage of staff has had an adverse impact on key parameters like high-quality people-centred planning and implementation of works, availability of employment on time, timely measurements and hence timely payments, as shown above. It is clear that the sheer size of the guarantee makes it impossible to be carried out on an "additional charge" syndrome. However, this is precisely what has been happening with MGNREGA.

1.3 The National Consortium

It was in such a context that the consortium was born, out of a vision of making NREGA effective by active participation of Civil Society Organizations in planning, implementation and social audit of NREGA works. The National Consortium on NREGA is a loosely federated collective of civil society organisations (CSOs) that have come together to try and make NREGA a success.

These CSOs have developed relationships with Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), including Gram Panchayats (GP) and Gram Sabhas (GS), in some of the most backward and neglected districts of India. Reflecting the immense diversity of this vast nation the strategies adopted by the CSOs for building these partnerships have been different in each case.



They have supported GPs and GSs in various aspects of planning, implementation and social audit of NREGA work.

On the foundation of this growing engagement with PRIs, the CSOs have sought to partner the state and central governments, in building training material, mainstream innovative ideas and help build capacities of government functionaries. As the map shows, the Consortium has 72 partners spread over 85 blocks in 58 districts of 11 states of India. The table below gives details of partners and the districts in which they are working:

State	Partners	Districts covered
1. Andhra Pradesh	1. WASSAN 2. REDS 3. EFFORT 4. APMSS 5. PILUPU 6. ARTS 7. Foundation for Ecological Security	1. Anantpur 2. Prakasam 3. Nalgonda 4. Warangal 5. Karimnagar 6. Srikakulam 7. Chittoor
2. Karnataka	1. Samuha 2. Samrasa 3. Ingrid 4. Outreach 5. Foundation for Ecological Security	1. Raichur 2. Gulbarga 3. Bellary 4. Bidar, Koppal 5. Chikkaballapur, Kolar
3. Odisha	1. Lokadrusti 2. Vikalp 3. Bolangir Gramodyog Samiti 4. Bolangir Bikash Parishad 5. Aanchalik Jan Sewa Anushthan 6. Adhikar 7. Shramik Shakti Sangha 8. Jan Mukti Anushthan 9. Foundation for Ecological Security	1. Nuapada 2. Bolangir 3. Koraput 4. Angul 5. Dhenkanal 6. Kalahandi 7. Keonjhar 8. Sundargarh 9. Gajapati 10. Nabarangpur
4. West Bengal	1. PRADAN	1. Bankura

State	Partners	Districts covered
5. Chhattisgarh	1. Lokshakti Samiti 2. Sarguja Gram Vikas Sansthan 3. Margdarshak Sewa Sanstha 4. Vardan Samajik Sansthan	1. Raigarh 2. Jashpur 3. Sarguja 4. Rajnandgaon
6. Madhya Pradesh	1. Sambhav 2. Parhit 3. Niswarth 4. Gram Sudhar Samiti 5. HARD 6. Nirman 7. Foundation for Ecological Security 8. Spandan 9. Samaj Pragati Sahayog	1. Tikamgarh 2. Shivpuri 3. Sidhi 4. Anuppur 5. Mandla 6. Khandwa 7. Dewas
7. Rajasthan	1. SPWD 2. Hanuman Van Vikas Samiti 3. Jagran Jan Vikas Samiti 4. Prayatn Samiti 5. Samarthak Samiti 6. Foundation for Ecological Security	1. Udaipur 2. Bhilwara 3. Pratapgarh
8. Gujarat	1. Anandi 2. Manav Kalyan Trust	1. Dahod 2. Panchmahals 3. Sabarkantha
9. Jharkhand	1. Vikas Sahayog Kendra	1. Palamau
10. Uttar Pradesh	1. Aarthik Anusandhan Kendra 2. Vanangana The PANI Network 3. Grameen Vikas Sansthan 4. Gram Vikas Sewa Sansthan 5. Lok Jagriti Sansthan 6. Grameen Punarnirman Sansthan 7. Bhagwan Manav Kalyan Samiti 8. Mahila Swarojgar Samiti 9. Sadbhawana Grameen Samiti 10. Srishti Sewa Sansthan 11. Jan Gramin Vikas Sansthan 12. DAHA 13. Lokpriya Janhit Sewa Sansthan 14. Janshikshan Kendra 15. Mahila Gramodyog Sewa Samithi 16. Swami Vivekanand Samjik Sansthan 17. Jan Kalyan Gramin Uddhan Sansthan 18. Akhil Bhartiya Jyoti Mahila Sansthan 19. NSCBJSPS 20. NYSSSS 21. Jan Sewa Prashikshin Sansthan 22. Varun 23. Brij Jan Jagran Samiti	1. Mirzapur 2. Chitrakoot 3. Ghazipur 4. Sultanpur 5. Ambedkarnagar 6. Azamgarh 7. Mau 8. Varanasi 9. Basti 10. Maharajganj 11. Bahraich 12. Pratapgarh
11. Bihar	1. Megh-Pyne Abhiyan 2. Samata 3. Kosi Sewa Sadan 4. Gramyasheel 5. Ghoghardiha Swarajya Vikas Sangh	1. Supaul 2. Saharsa 3. Madhubani 4. Khagaria 5. West Champaran
Total: 11 States	72 partners	58 districts

The consortium partners have adopted different approaches to their work, given their own distinct orientation, contexts, experience and capacities. Broadly speaking, the work

done falls into the following categories:

- Mobilization
- Assistance to Gram Panchayats for Plan Preparation and Implementation
- Implementation, where the states allow for such a participation
- Capacity building and support to each other and to other agencies such as panchayat and line department functionaries
- Advocacy of required policy changes at the local, the state and the national levels.

The first annual report of the National Consortium on NREGA was published in Hindi and English and released to the nation by the Minister for Rural Development, Government of India on 14th October 2009 at a special function held in New Delhi. Mr. Nandan Nilekani, Chairperson of the Unique Identification Authority of India was the Guest of Honour. Dr. Mihir Shah, Member, Planning Commission, represented both GoI and the Consortium and was the link between the two. The report has become a major reference document for policy issues in NREGA. Several of its recommendations have found their way into the policy discourse. It is hoped that this will pave the way for eventual implementation of much-needed reforms in the NREGA space. The report listed the following major achievements of the consortium partners in the panchayats selected by them for intensive work:

Worker registration

- In Andhra less than 50% households had job cards, the figure rose to more than 90% (increase of 60%)
- Karnataka registered 80% increase in job card coverage (In Koppal 228% over base)
- In Orissa, 210% rise overall; some partners registered between 300% to 618% rise
- In West Bengal, from no job cards to 15,365 cards
- In Chhattisgarh, 25% increase (Jashpur 87%)
- Madhya Pradesh: 37% overall, in Sidhi and Anuppur 3-fold increase; some partners have obtained 100% worker registration
- Rajasthan: 30% change
- Gujarat: 115% increase in Sabarkantha; In Devgadhi-Baria block of Dahod district, RRLJ led to 28% increase

Work demand

- In Orissa, 182% rise overall from 3183 to 8896; some partners registered 5 to 7 fold increase
- In Chhattisgarh, 34-fold rise from 211 job applications to more than 7000
- Madhya Pradesh: 123% overall increase from 8500 to more than 18000 applications
- Rajasthan: 174% increase
- Gujarat: 273% increase in Devgadhi-Baria block and 124% increase in Dahod district as a result of RRLJ

Work sanctioned and implemented

- In Karnataka, works sanctioned increased from only 10 to 120, value from Rs.28 lakhs to Rs.3 crores (10-fold rise); implemented rose from Rs. 4 lakhs to Rs. 77 lakhs (18-fold)
- In Orissa, works sanctioned increase from Rs.83 lakhs to nearly Rs. 7 crores (740%); imple-

mented increased from Rs.73 lakhs to Rs.2.1 cr (193%)

- Chhattisgarh 7-fold rise Rs.97 lakhs to Rs.7.04 cr in works sanctioned; 4-fold increase in works implemented
- Madhya Pradesh: 8-fold increase from about Rs.1.4 crores to Rs.13 crores in sanctioned works, 8-fold increase in value of works implemented
- Rajasthan: 175% increase in value of sanctioned works
- Gujarat: RRLJ's impact led to 275% increase in Devgadhi-Baria block of Dahod district and 124% rise in Dahod district

Planning and Implementation Support

- In all states, partners have worked with village communities and panchayats to create detailed micro-plans worth more than Rs. 125 crores
- These plans have been ratified by the Gram Sabhas and are being used by panchayats for implementation
- Impact on incomes, indebtedness and migration have been dramatic.
- In several instances, partners have built upon the water infrastructure created under NREGA to converge livelihoods interventions in agriculture and micro-credit.
- The present report highlights the further work done by the Consortium partners in consolidating the achievements of the previous phase.

The Road Ahead

Given the status of MGNREGA, efforts of the National Consortium gain significance. For they are able to demonstrate what is possible given requisite support to the GPs. This demonstration forms the basis for exerting pressure on the mainstream implementation interface to reform itself.

The Consortium's experience of the previous years has shown that concerted effort at the grassroots is bound to yield positive results. In this sense it has clearly shown what is needed to be done by the mainstream implementation interface to strengthen the functioning of MGNREGA. The process has also strengthened the confidence of Consortium partners since they have gained the necessary experience of making MGNREGA work in what was perhaps its most difficult phase – the beginning.

However, this effort needs to be taken further. The major component of this strengthening strategy is to appreciate the fact that the cutting edge in terms of implementation and monitoring lies at the block, district and state levels. Unless changes take place at these levels, the overall outcomes from MGNREGA will continue to suffer. We plan, therefore, to build partnerships with state governments so that the agenda for MGNREGA reform can be taken deeper through participation of civil society.