



Organizing the Community to Provide Corruption-Free Delivery of Safety Net Entitlements in Karnataka State, India

CBO:	Nava Jeevana Mahila Okkoota (NJMO) & PRERANA
Years:	2009 – 2010
Country:	Karnataka State, India
Amount:	\$ 26,000 USD
Sector:	Controlling Corruption in Delivery of Social Services: Social Safety Net

Corruption Problem:	Community is unaware of NREGA entitlements and suffers from corruption in its delivery
Tools employed:	Capacity Building, Advocacy, RTI Social Audit, Constructive Engagement, Coalition Building, Community Mobilization, Survey, Awareness Raising

Citizens’ and communities’ inadequate knowledge about entitlements guaranteed through the government administered National Rural Employment Guarantee Act have prompted a local CBO, the Nava Jeevana Mahila Okkoota (NJMO), to engage with affected communities, raise awareness, provide education and help capacitate and organize the communities to form sustainable labor groups. The objective is to hold the government and service providers accountable while helping citizens benefit from the programs precisely designed to help India’s rural poor. NJMO has successfully established a model that has the potential to be self-perpetuating in the long run, forming labor groups that can transform into member-financed independent unions afterwards. The project has been successfully implemented and a second phase is currently underway.

Corruption Problem Addressed

In September 2005, the Indian Parliament passed a landmark statute called the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA). The aim of this legislation was to provide families in rural areas with 100 days of work and pay them no less than the minimum wage for the work completed.

Besides providing employment in the off-season (when demand for agricultural labor is low), NREGA was intended to stop rural migration into towns and cities and thus help build a vibrant village economy, investing in soil-moisture-environment conservation works.

Unfortunately, most people in villages were unaware of the new law. Instead, it was elected representatives and officials as well as local contractors who seized the opportunity to indulge in huge levels of corruption and embezzle the earmarked NREGA funds. The funds constitute the one funding scheme under which villages receive most of their funds from. For example, a village with 1,000 families would be allocated about INR 20 million (\$400,000 USD) per year, a large temptation for the corrupt.

Based on complaints made by people to officials, 80% of eligible workers’ families did not have job cards (necessary for claiming NREGA benefits) nor did they have bank accounts. At the same time, contractors and middlemen had cards faked for their own people to siphon money fraudulently from NREGA budgets. Corruption was also observed in Primary Health Centers (PHCs) and at various levels of government. Citizens,



communities and even NGOs were not prepared to fight and correct this injustice.

Actions Taken by NJMO

After analyzing and understanding the situation at the grassroots level, NJMO planned to tackle the problem in cooperation with officials and elected representatives. Regrettably, less than 5% of them were willing to engage with NJMO to ensure that eligible beneficiaries would receive the promised entitlements. As a consequence, NJMO decided to tackle the corruption problem directly and set out to build confidence and trust among communities empowering them to challenge elected representatives and officials. NJMO calculated that if 700 out of 1,000 families in any one village could be mobilized to demand corruption-free service delivery, they would create the critical mass necessary to obtain work and get paid. Mobilizing the community would thus be beneficial to each single citizen and automatically reduce the opportunity to misappropriate funds.

To implement the revised strategy, NJMO organized community members to form labor groups that would have collective bargaining power. The first step was to arrange village-level meetings with the aim of creating awareness about NREGA entitlements. Out of these gatherings, NJMO advised forming neighborhood groups of 50 people each, with a designated team leader. A second step included community training on how to obtain job cards, opening bank accounts, and applying for work. The third step included educating the groups on wage rates, grievance redress mechanisms and the scope of responsibilities and involvement handled by *gram panchayaths* (village councils). Building on the Right-to-Information (RTI) complaints filed by the neighborhood groups over time, NJMO linked the groups to district, state and national forums and

ensured that their grievances were heard and acted upon.

NJMO selected educated youth from each village and trained them in the basics of the projects implemented under the NREGA scheme (mainly road construction, canals, reservoirs, etc.), including mechanisms and tools on how to take measurements, how to calculate wages and other rates. In addition at least two women from each village were trained in the details of how to fill out job applications and ask for work. Awareness raising programs were undertaken, using easy-to-read pamphlets and pictorial posters, together with local songs.

Networking efforts with other state- and national-level networks formed another important aspect of the project intervention. Many intellectuals and development experts at the state and even national level were regularly briefed about the situation at the grassroots level and NJMO sought their advice and guidance to help take further action. NJMO also shared stories from the villages utilizing both print and electronic media outlets. One of their stories was published in *The Hindu* and caught the attention of the Supreme Court and High Court Judges. NJMO was able to attract state-level legislators and officials' attention mainly through the extensive media coverage accompanying their work, securing famous activists' support.

Challenges during the implementation included serious threats made by local politicians and contractors whose established routes of illegal income were challenged. Moreover, NJMO realized that communities would only subscribe to the project actions if implementation took place quickly and if results could be shown in the short terms.



Impact and Results Achieved

NJMO has achieved impressive results:

- ✓ At the grassroots level, the CBO has organized more than 10,000 poor families in more than 100 villages.
- ✓ These families have received around INR 50 million (\$1 million USD) in wages last year alone.
- ✓ In one occasion, NJMO demonstrated for 25 days in front of the district office and was able to get pending payments to the tune of INR 10 million (\$200,000 USD). The effort attracted like minded people from 10 other districts and prompted them to start similar processes in their own districts.
- ✓ Citizens receive an unemployment allowance (to be paid when work is demanded and not given), and compensation for late payments (payments not made within 15 days). Fines were levied on officials (for not resolving grievances within 15 days).
- ✓ Grievance Redress Mechanisms were set up at the district levels.
- ✓ The poor were empowered and have started inquiring and at times even agitating successfully for other public services, like PDS entitlement, schools, housing and health programs. They have started demanding *gram sabhas* (village assemblies) to be convened regularly and that all decisions taken should be taken at these forums, giving citizens a possibility to participate and voice their concerns. Six villages conducted effective *gram sabhas* in response to this demand.
- ✓ NJMO has also ensured that community voices are heard at state level by senior officers. As a result of sound networking, advocacy efforts and coalition building exercises, many important orders were passed, for example providing money for work tools and

determining a fair wage rates.

- ✓ Furthermore, NJMO in collaboration with the state administration worked on guidelines for social audits to be conducted regularly in the villages.
- ✓ Due to NJMO's advocacy efforts (and in collaboration with other coalitions advocating for better NREGA service delivery), more officials are being posted at the *panchayath* level to ensure corruption-free service delivery.

The established labor groups will be converted into unions with annual membership fees of INR 100. The unions will have service staff – one for every 1,000 families and will be paid for by beneficiaries. Similar structures have been designed at *taluk*, district and state level. The project thus has an excellent chance to be sustainable in the long run.

Documentation

Project completion reports (PCRs) and Project completion assessments (PCAs) can be accessed at www.ptfund.org under the “Where-we-work” tab.

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