



## **Empowering Communities to Demand Accountability and Correct Delivery of Safety Net Entitlements in Odisha State, India**

<b>CSO:</b>	People’s Rural Education Movement (PREM)
<b>Years:</b>	2009 – 2010
<b>Country:</b>	Nuagad Block, Odisha State, India
<b>Amount:</b>	\$21,000 USD
<b>Sector:</b>	Controlling Corruption in Delivery of Social Services: Social Safety Nets

<b>Corruption Problem:</b>	Corruption permeates local service delivery with respect to access to guaranteed entitlements under the PDS, NREGA and FRA social safety net schemes.
<b>Tools employed:</b>	Advocacy, Citizen Monitoring, Awareness Raising, Community Mobilization, RTI, Social Audit, Public Hearing

Reports indicate that amounts of up to 75% of all funds allocated to social safety net programs are embezzled by corrupt government officials in India every year. The *‘People’s Rural Education Movement’* (PREM), a local CSO in Odisha State, India, decided to implement a Citizens Against Corruption (CAC) project in 12 Gram Panchayats<sup>1</sup> (GPs) of Nuagad Block in the Gajapati District. The projects name was *‘Reduction of corruption in NREGA, FRA and PDS in Nuagad Block’*.

The project succeeded in preparing the ground for citizen monitors and community based organizations (CBOs) to further hold government officials to account. It also realized significant progress in fighting corruption in the three targeted social safety net schemes. A second phase of the project is currently underway.

### **Corruption Problem Addressed**

A high level of corruption in public service delivery often correlates with equally high levels of mass poverty, illiteracy and under-development in other

areas. Institutionalized corruption and the inability of politicians to curb corruption is a serious challenge holding India back in its efforts to eradicate poverty. It is precisely low-income households that are affected most severely by corruption, mismanagement and misuse of public resources that should otherwise guarantee local service delivery, spurring economic growth and greater equity.

The prevalence of corruption in Nuagad Block, is reflected in the statistics on various welfare schemes such as the *‘National Rural Employment Guarantee Act’* (NREGA)<sup>2</sup>, the *‘Forest Rights Act’* (FRA)<sup>3</sup> and the *‘Public Distribution System’* (PDS)<sup>4</sup>. A

<sup>2</sup> NREGA aims at enhancing livelihood security of households in rural areas by providing at least 100 days of guaranteed wage employment in a financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work.

<sup>3</sup> FRA provides opportunity for tribal communities to assert rights of ownership over land, forest and water resources.

<sup>4</sup> The Public Distribution System (PDS) is a subsidy for essential commodities such as rice and kerosene which is issued every month to Below-Poverty-Line (BPL) card holders.

<sup>1</sup> Local self-government institutions at the village or town level.



study by the 'National Institute of Rural Development' (NIRD), Hyderabad, and the 'Centre for Environment and Food Security' (CEFS), New Delhi, on corruption in the implementation of NREGA in Odisha, found that 75% of the total of all allocated funds were misappropriated by corrupt government officials and middlemen in the financial year 2007/2008. Perpetrators are commonly identified as local level officials who act in collusion with middlemen, contractors, bank officials and Block level employees.

Key factors preventing effective mechanisms to counteract continued mismanagement and embezzlement of public funds are

- ✓ Lack of awareness about a) entitlements and b) the tools to fight corruption within the affected communities
- ✓ Lack of communication materials and targeted government outreach provided in local languages
- ✓ Poor (or limited) empowerment of institutions at the local level of government
- ✓ Lack of proper sensitization of government officials to issues and challenges facing citizens at the grass roots level

## **Actions Taken by PREM**

PREM geared its project interventions toward raising awareness, mobilizing the community, building capacity and engaging constructively with different stakeholders involved in local service delivery schemes. The aim was to rally the community and local officials around the mutual aim to advocate for and eventually guarantee corruption-free services. PREM worked with community based organizations (CBOs), citizen monitors, village committees, block level government officials and elected PRI

representatives<sup>5</sup>. In addition, PREM established and fostered links with local media and the Tribal and Dalit Peoples network. In collaboration with community volunteers, PREM introduced various peer learning tools, including teaching citizens how to use Right-to-Information (RTI) Act tools and introduced the concept of public hearings and social audits. Specifically, PREM

- held – in collaboration with community level activists – regular village meetings to build capacity, improve planning and problem-solving skills of interested community members
- organized orientation meetings with PRI members and joint workshops of community members, PRI and government officials - building capacity and introducing the overall strategy for project implementation
- organized Block level media workshop to highlight corruption issues and sensitize the media to be part of constructively engaging officials
- set up a muster roll watch conducted by local government activists at an NREGA work site
- selected 2-3 social watch monitors from each village and conducted capacity building on RTI tools
- established two RTI clinics to help community members file RTI inquiries on different issues
- collected information material on FRA, NREGA, RTI, food security and other government provisions in local languages from government bodies and other CSOs to disseminate this information among the community

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<sup>5</sup> Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) comprise decentralized and properly elected local government assemblies at three levels: village, block and district



- painted walls with information about RTI, FRA, NREGA and other entitlements in every village or town
- telecast a documentary film on NREGA and RTI
- facilitated the FRA land verification process with local government activists and in collaboration with the revenue department
- built capacity to guarantee participation and assert direct democracy mechanisms as set out in PESA with the aim to properly exert oversight over village management
- introduced social audit and public hearing concepts

#### **Obstacles and Challenges encountered**

Most of the tribal villages are hard to access as they are situated in hilly terrain. Some areas are deemed insecure as they are home to various Naxalite groups, considered terrorist groups by the Indian government. This serves as a legitimate concern as well as sometimes excuse for government personnel to not visit villages and provide government services. Strikes called for by these Maoist groups restrict movement further, both for government officials as well as the PREM project team. Another challenge, and directly connected to the politics in the affected area, are corrupt officials threatening to brand project staff as Maoist when community activists engaged in anti corruption campaigns.

#### **Impact and Results Achieved**

First results of this CAC project include successful information mainstreaming of entitlements under the PDS within the communities and a significant rise in the communities' awareness of the need and possibility to raise their voice against corruption.

- ✓ All BPL card holders now receive the correct PDS entitlements every month with right quantity in all the GPs observed. While quality issues on rice grains persist, the kerosene ration has been distributed correctly.
- ✓ Corrupt practices in the verification stage of FRA claim have been reduced by the engagement and monitoring exercised through project staff, CBOs and social watch monitors.



Mr. Nahasan Majhi, a GP level activist whose knowledge about RTI tools gained through the project have led to unintended but hugely beneficial outcomes in other areas than targeted by the initial project.

- ✓ The average working days allotted through the NREGA implementation has increased from 31 days to 52 days. Wage payment delays have been reduced from 30 days to 15 days.
- ✓ The fight against corruption is not limited to NREGA, FRA and PDS; Communities started raising their voice against other forms of corruption, e.g. the case of Punjab National Bank where a community member with the support of the local government and the use of RTI tools filed an application seeking information regarding his loan, which in turn helped revealing huge discrepancies on loan amounts for more than 200 loan applicants. This incident led to the detention of the bank manager.



- ✓ Gradual growth and empowerment of the CBOs '*Palli Vikas*' and '*Margdarsini*' taking on ownership of this CAC project to ensure the sustainability of project impact over the long term.

## Documentation

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

The PREM homepage can be accessed at <http://www.prem.org.in/aboutus.html>

PREM Newsletters can be found at <http://www.prem.org.in/news.html>

The NIRD/CIFS study can be accessed at <http://www.cefs-india.org/reports.html>

For further information, please contact [premoffice@prem.org.in](mailto:premoffice@prem.org.in)