How Rural Call Centers and Social Watch Groups Help the Poor Gain Employment and Income: A Success Story from the Grassroots Level in India

In India, the national rural employment guarantee scheme (NREGS) aims to provide 100 days of guaranteed wage employment for all employment seekers in rural areas above 18 years of age and willing to work. However, even after many years of implementation of the scheme, the poor in remote villages of India are not benefitting enough from the scheme, mainly because of their lack of knowledge of NREGS, its rules and regulations, the benefits they are entitled to, and a fear to speak up. Typical problems are: insufficient number of days of employment provided, insufficient or no wages provided, fake job-card entries, petty corruption practiced by middlemen and contractors, and threats from vested interests. Consider the following examples:

45 poor residents of Durdura Gram-Pachayat, Jashipur had worked six weeks under the Government’s rural employment generation program (NREGS), but, due to their lack of knowledge and fear of the authorities, had not been paid for one year.

Because of poor roads, Badajhili village was having major transport problems. It had been promised funding for a road, but, because of corruption, this project was awarded to another village. Illiteracy and lack of knowledge of their rights kept the villagers from complaining.

Bimbla Nayak, 35-year old, lives in Miriginondi village, Karanjia. She has a husband and children, but the husband does not earn enough and the children are too young to work. Therefore, she had been trying to get work under the employment generation scheme, but had not succeeded so far. She tried to get the necessary papers, but had not been able to get them.

15 poor residents of Deogoan village, Karanjia had not been paid for work provided under the employment generation scheme, and they were threatened by the employment generation scheme officials when they complained.

Parameswar Naik, 40 years old, lives in Badagoan village. He received a very poor education because of financial constraints, and the same thing was starting to happen to his children. When he went to the school to complain, and ask about teaching and school meals, he was told that he was illiterate and should go home.

The people and villages mentioned above are located in Jashipur and Karanjia blocks in Mayurbhanj District in India’s Odisha State. The blocks have large groups of tribal populations. Although the literacy rate in those
two blocks is higher than the national average, they are still quite underdeveloped. Mostly because of lack of employment and poor delivery of basic services, many people have migrated elsewhere.

In 2009, with British (DfID) aid, the Partnership for Transparency Fund (PTF) awarded a grant to a grassroots civil society organization (CSO) – Sambandh – to help citizens implement a project to check corruption in these blocks by setting up Rural Call Centres and Social Watch Groups. Sambandh started its project activities in Jashipur in 2009, followed by coverage of Karanjia in 2011. This note summarizes the strategies used, results achieved, and lessons for wider use.

Governance and Corruption Problems in the Project Area

In preparing its activities in Jashipur, Sambandh found major irregularities and corrupt practices in the implementation of the NREGS program, with the rural poor frequently not getting job cards, 100 days of guaranteed employment, timely and full payment for work completed, equal treatment of men and women, and proper equipment. This was worsened by a serious lack of knowledge among those poor villagers of what they were entitled to under NREGS and by efforts of some of the authorities and middlemen to keep the villagers from knowing any better.

Actions taken by Sambandh to Address Corruption and Poor Governance

Sambandh thus started a comprehensive project to empower the communities and to encourage them to break the culture of silence and repression, allowing them to raise their voice against the vicious cycle of corruption in the implementation of NREGS activities at the grass root level. To achieve this, Sambandh relied on rural call centres where information on NREGS and other relevant programs was to be made available (using as needed the Right to Information-RTI- law), on social watch groups to gather all local stakeholders for community decisions, and on transparency workers to reach out to the poor and help them get acquainted and provided with the necessary information to gain access to what they were entitled to.

Since the start of the project, Sambandh helped to upgrade the existing rural call centre in Jashipur, helped to establish a new rural call centre in Karanjia, trained social watch group and transparency members and workers, promoted the involvement of relevant government officials and the media, became part of a local network of CSOs, carried out substantial publicity campaigns, and tried to go beyond small-scale improvements at the local level to also gain up-scale policy improvements. All of these activities were aimed at greater transparency and accountability, ensuring that all stakeholders, starting at the lowest level, had the necessary information on the NREGS rules and regulations, how to access those, and also how to seek redress when needed.

Specifically, the strategies used and activities included:

- Training programs in social audit and public hearing techniques, community score cards, and RTI for transparency workers and vigilance committees at block and district levels
- Regular meetings of villagers with transparency workers
- Distribution of brochures and social watch news bulletins, as well as installation of billboards on NREGS at community level
- Demonstration meetings on proper planning and implementation of NREGS at block, district and state levels

www.ptfund.org
Challenges Faced and Results Achieved

As a result of these activities over the course of only a few years, much was achieved. In Jashipur, 95 percent of eligible excluded households were provided with job cards and in Karanjia 90 percent, with the required 100 days of work for all card holders. All card holders also received their full wages of Rs 126 per day, with 80 percent receiving wages in 15 days and 20 percent in 30 days. Wages were equal for men and women. Minimum worksite facilities such as water and shade were adequate. Social watch group and transparency members and workers, as well as many villagers, became better acquainted with NREGS policies, rules and regulations, and on how to demand their rights. And finally, although still much has to be achieved, responsible government officials have started to listed to the villagers, to take corrective action, and to change rules and regulations where needed.

It is because of these activities and the hard work of Sambandh and all of the people involved- the poor villagers, the transparency workers, the social watch group members, the rural call centre staff, the media, and a host of government officials at various levels of responsibility- that the five problem cases mentioned at the beginning of this paper have a positive ending. It can be mentioned that:

- Kuar Tudu, a transparency worker, was told about the lack of payment of the 45 workers in Durdura Gram, and made them aware of the law, regulations and rights, as well as the need for them to raise their voices against this injustice. A village meeting was held, and a written complaint was submitted to the responsible authorities. When there was still no corrective action, 30 people demonstrated in front of the government office, and forced a decision. As a result, within three days the 45 workers were paid.

- Noha Tudu, a ward member, became aware of the road problem in Badajhili village, and organized a village meeting to collect and share information. Based on an understanding of their rights, the villagers went to the authorities, who then promised that the next road work would be undertaken in their village. As a result, the villagers can now expect an end to their transport problems, and have gained the knowledge and confidence to speak up when needed.

- Transparency and other social workers were told of Bimbla Nayak’s plight. She was informed about the employment generation scheme, and how to file an application. She was also told to keep a receipt of her application, and that she was entitled to an unemployment allowance if she did not get work within 15 days. However, she did get work, and now is able to provide financial support to her family.

- A transparency worker heard about the lack of payment and the threats against 15 workers in Deogoan village, and arranged a village meeting to inform the residents of the law and their rights. Despite efforts by some interested parties to suppress the information, the transparency worker did manage to get the necessary information. He then contributed to getting this published in the local newspaper. As a result, the 15 workers received their long-overdue payment within a few days.

- A transparency worker told Mr Parameswar Naik about the Right to Information (RTI) law and about how to file
for information. Again, various people with other interests urged him to stop his efforts, but he persisted, and filed the necessary RTI documentation with the help of the transparency worker and some social workers. He then received official information on the number of authorized teachers at the school, as well as on the free lunches supposed to be provided to the students each week, and he shared this information with his fellow villagers. As a result of this new information, and at the urging of all villagers, the teachers are now attending school regularly and a timetable for the school lunch is now published.

The overall positive outcome of the Sambandh activities has been confirmed by various sources. Sambandh produced its own project completion report, which documented the results of the project in great detail, and this was confirmed through an independent assessment by PRIA, an Indian CSO contracted by PTF.

Lessons Learned

Although the Sambandh activities only covered a small part of Odisha State, let alone of India, the result of its activities over the course of only a few years confirm that the CAC approach is the right one: fight corruption by providing people with knowledge, the will, the ability, and the support needed to speak up and fight injustice. Get them trained and encouraged to pursue their own interests. In other words, “give them voice”. At the same time, ensure the cooperation of responsible government officials, in which effort the media can often play a major role. Indeed, the involvement of all major stakeholders is of critical importance.

It should be noted that the project outcome was to be expected, since the approach of capacitating and enabling people to handle their own interests has worked around the world. As again shown in Jashipur and Karanjia, corruption is a disease, and it can be fought at the grass root operational decision level, as well as at higher policy decision levels!

Documentation

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

Prepared by: Willem Struben, PTF Adviser