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Social accountability in DRM

drawing lessons from social audit of MGNREGS

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Case Study

Social Accountability In DRM – Drawing Lessons from Social Audit of MGNREGS

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The basic objective of Social Accountability is to ensure public accountability in implementation of projects, laws and policies. It is a process in which details of the financial and non-financial resources used by public agencies for development initiatives, how effectively the target population benefit from the scheme and how the benefits are shared with the people are evaluated, often through a public platform. Social Accountability allows people to enforce downward accountability and transparency, providing the ultimate users an opportunity to scrutinize development initiatives. It is a continuous process of public vigilance and monitoring. Effective social accountability demands the presence of proactive disclosure based on a legal statutory mandate like Right to Information Act or Information Disclosure Act, decentralized decision making structure and community social facilitators. It is very important that common people for whom the programme or the project is intended to benefit are empowered to ask questions about the targeting, effectiveness, outcome and impact of the programme. When common people question the implementing agency based on information it leads to accountability. It also helps increase people's awareness about their rights and entitlements, pave the way for participation and improves delivery of programme services. It has been experienced that poor delivery of programmes are improved through people themselves through accountability measures.

Broadly, process of social accountability involves the following components: (a) Availability of information / details of the financial and non-financial resources used by public agencies for development initiatives, (b) Organizing the ultimate users / beneficiaries / people and, (c) Scrutiny of the information by the end users. Success of social accountability depends on how the relevant project information is demystified and placed before people so that they derive meaning out of it to check compliance, appropriate targeting and relevance of the programme. Usually poor people do not ask questions on public programmes, hence they need to be encouraged and empowered to ask questions about the effectiveness of the programmes meant for them. Social accountability is facilitated through citizen monitoring of services through report card, public hearing and social audit. In this paper, the key lessons of the social audit practiced in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) are drawn to make a proposal for social accountability in DRM projects.

Social Audits in NGNREGA

As a part of social accountability in MGNREGA, social audit has been made mandatory. This is the first programme in India where social audit has been introduced. Social audit is new to the Indian development programmes. In the last four years it has generated diverse forms of practice as well as debate. In the recent past, there has been wide ranging social audit practices and discourse as a part of reforming governance and ensuring public accountability. Broadly there have been three types of practices in different parts of country.

The first approach focuses on legislative framework of self-regulation through pro-active disclosure in the Gram Sabha. The information bulletin boards at the work sites to provide information on involvement of labour and expenditure started from Kerala and being practiced in many States. Kerala has made significant progress in disclosing details of NREGA related information in the bulletin board. This is linked to their prior commitment to the peoples' planning process and proactive disclosure. Citizen interest and engagement is enhanced when they are provided relevant information about the development programmes. In many of the States there have been increase in peoples' participation in the Gram Sabha for beneficiary selection where local people discuss in a transparent manner. The Social Audit manual of Rajasthan provides step-by-step approach to conduct effective Social Audits. It also initiated the process of appointment of government officials, outsourcing the Local Audits at the Gram Panchayat level. This is expected to work as a necessary monitoring mechanism. In Andhra Pradesh an independent society has been constituted by the government to facilitate social audit. The Working Group on Transparency and Accountability under the MGNREGA Central Council is of the opinion that such a model is most effective to institutionalize social audit. In a recent report it was mentioned that the Andhra Pradesh social audit has identified Rs. 880 million of misappropriations, which have been recovered through people's demand. The legislative framework provides an institutional framework to practice social accountability in a scale and in a transparent manner. Many State Governments are now formulating their own social audit manuals.

The second approach is a collaborative model between the local bodies and civil society organisations rooted in the values of partnership for consensus building and promoting accountability. The approach is centred on creating spaces for dialogue and collective assessment. However, this approach is in a nascent stage. The civil society organisations in many States have been approaching Panchayats and government officials to conduct social audit. These are primarily voluntary, but have enough scope to demonstrate new methodology.

The third model relates to challenging the corruption. The critical and distinctive factor of this model is the absence of the State agencies and the PRIs. The approach relies on the use of the Right to Information (RTI) to access public records. The primary forum is Jan Sunvai (public hearing), which is used for community mobilisation for action on the issue of corruption. It is evident that such initiatives have developed road map for empowered engagement of common people to hold the service delivery institutions accountable.

The first model (proactive disclosure) has continued to remain as an officially approved procedure as it has the potential to scale up with the involvement of the network of government agencies at different levels. In the absence of empowered citizens to facilitate the process, often the powerful people obstruct the process without valuing or actively undermining the voices of the marginal people. The decisions are an outcome of 'coercive agreement' rather than 'consensual agreement'. In this model, the community participation is very weak, information is put in such a manner that people do not understand and any public questioning is highly discouraged. The institution conducting the Social Audit has internal resistance and the process lack public confidence. In such circumstances, the deprived groups are not able to marshal their strength to raise questions before the Gram Sabha. To avoid this, the states like Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat have created an independent group of facilitators to support the village vigilance and monitoring committee for the social audit.

The overall purpose of social audit is to identify programme gaps by the people themselves under a forum of public scrutiny to ensure programme effectiveness and check leakage. However, in order to reach this stage, a step by step enabling mechanism need to be created so that the poor, the beneficiary, the workers, feel empowered to raise their voice in a free and fearless environment. There is a need for countering the environment, which has resistance to Social Audit. The first step is to establish the legitimacy of the process in the eyes of all the stakeholders. The process need to be viewed as objective, not aligned to any particular group and need to be robust in terms of its acceptance and redressal of issues. The process needs to be framed under a legislative framework/government order/resolution. In addition to this, support mechanisms need to be created for participation of villagers in all stages of the social audit process.

The Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) has clear provisions to conduct social audit and it is the first programme in our country to which ensures downward accountability and transferred the rights to the people to exercise it as an entitlement. Provisions for social audit under MGNREGS are explained below.

Lessons from Social Audit in MGNREGA and its Application in DRM Projects

Social Audits of governance institutions and/or basic service providers like primary schools, primary health centres, fair price shops, relief and rehabilitation services calls for the involvement of citizens who are the primary stake holders. They need to be informed about all the decisions and programme transaction in a transparent and direct manner. It brings to fore a local people's forum to demand accountability. In the case of MGNREGA, Gram Sabha plays as a constitutional body for peoples' participation for accountability. Therefore, it is very important to create an empowered public forum to conduct social audit.

The basic requisite for facilitating Social Audit should be largely based on the following principles:

- A people's forum like Gram Sabha should own the process and organize it;
- It should be very simple so that people should able to facilitate it;

- It should be non-threatening but at the same time empowering for the people; and
- The outcome shall have a binding to redress grievances and make corrective measures.

People's Forum should own the process: In MGNREGA, Social Audit Forum / Committee / Gram Sabha is mandated to undertake the process of Social Audits. All the members of the Social Audit Forum / Committee are selected by Gram Sabha having mandatory representation of women and the workers who have worked in current/previous work under MGNREGS of the same Gram Panchayats. The Gram Panchayat / implementing agency has the obligation to fully support and provide required help to the Social Audit Forum/Committee. Legitimacy of the people's forum created in a transparent manner form among the people for whom the programme is designed is critical. The implementing agency, in our case the agency implementing the disaster recovery or risk reduction programme shall be responsible to form a public forum as well as provide all project information and decisions to the forum for scrutiny. In MGNREGA it is termed as making Management Information System (MIS) into People's/Janata Information System (JIS).

Process should be very simple: Social Audit at the village/Gram Panchayats level is to be facilitated by the members of Social Audit Committee (SAC) with the involvement of the people. As literacy level of some members of Social Audit Committee might not be adequate to understand the technicality involved in the process, the process of Social Audit needs to be very simple and easy so that the members can carry out the process without any difficulty. Orientation for the members of Social Audit Committee could go a long way in building their confidence and improving the effectiveness of Social Audits. An independent group of Social Audit facilitators can be created to support the social audit. Some key decisions and transactions shall be handed over to the social audit forum for scrutiny. In case of MGNREGS the Muster Roll and material procurement vouchers are considered the most important documents for scrutiny. If the DRR project related decisions and transactions are provided as it is utilized in the local context, people can scrutinize about the relevance of the decision, targeting of the services, quality of the products and services and their prices. People do not require the project level data, they can understand if the data is related to their own context.

Focus should be on the empowerment of people: Another important aspect is that the focus should be on the empowerment of people so that they are able to voice their concerns and problems. This primarily requires raising awareness of rights, entitlements and obligations under the scheme, specifically about the right to participate in a social audit. This might be possible through a large-scale awareness campaign focused on these aspects as well as demonstration by the implementing agency about the seriousness and commitment over the process. Public transparency and accountability has to be a policy of the implementing agency, which need to be backed by other support organisations involved in the programme. The issues identified in the social audit, must be redressed in a stipulated time frame. Without this people lose faith in the process.

Potential for wide scale impact: Social audit brings not only the issues of leakages and corruptions but also brings out gaps in the programme implementation as experienced by the people. The outcome of the social audit is a direct citizen feedback to the implementing agency and in some cases provides insights to the government administrative regime and policies. Social

audit generates systematic peoples feed back for overall programme formulation and implementation strategies. Hence, outside agencies should be invited to observe and learn from the process.

Facilitating environment and strategies for Social Audits

User-friendly forms and documents for collecting data with regard to the implementation of the programme are most important. The formats shall be such that the villagers can fill the information on different components of the programme. Some of the important information about implementation needs to be displayed proactively. A format for proactive disclosure can be developed and the information can be painted on the wall of a public building so that people can read, check and scrutinize. In case of a disaster related programme, information on the list of people received support, types of support, actual value of those services against the estimated/budget value, can be displayed so that issues of targeting, cost of the support, reason of arriving the nature of support can be made public.

All relevant information needs to be made accessible to the people. Public announcement of the social audit through area-specific traditional means like beating of drums, display of notices in common places needs to be undertaken one month in advance. However, proactive information sharing during the project progress on a regular basis can build people's faith on the social audit. Social audit shall not be a project end activity; it shall be done in a periodic interval. In case of MGNREGA an open work regime has been articulated where by allocation orders, work completion details, payments details are displayed at the worksites. In the social audit all information is read out aloud to ensure that illiterate people are also informed. If programmes are to be made transparent and accountable, people must be encouraged to monitor, question and identify loopholes in the execution of the programme meant for them. Questioning by people (Social Audit) ensures awareness building, participation and accountability. It enables the administrative machinery to take corrective action.

Notification for Social Audit

In the MGNREGA, office of the DPC issues notification for the Gram Sabha 30 days in advance. In this notification, Programme Officers are made responsible to finalize the dates and time of the Gram Sabhas of their respective blocks and the same information is also made available to all the Gram Panchayats as well as concerned office of the DPC. GPs are made responsible for organizing Gram Sabhas for Social Audits while the responsibility of conducting the audit should be vested in the Social Audit Committee. SAC is a group of 9 members of the local community to monitor the progress of works undertaken under MGNREGS. It has representation of women, SC/ST and the workers.

In a project like DRM, social audit must be done in each village so that it is uniform across the project areas. It cannot be done in a sample villages as holding the implementing agency accountable is a right of the people. Who shall be in-charge of the social audit needs to be clarified.

Activation of Social Audit Committee (SAC)

It is mandatory to form the Social Audit Committee at local level. It should have representation of women and SC/ST and project users. As social accountability is a new dimension of public programme management, in most of the cases it is observed that the SAC members are not active. Therefore, capacity building of the SAC shall be a part of the project activity. It shall not be left to the end of the project activity.

SAC members should be appraised about their roles and responsibility and their involvement in conducting Social Audit. The project staff **is not eligible to hold Social Audit**. In case the SAC members are illiterate, in such a situation, an educated person from the community who can truly represent the interest of the poor and marginalised can be nominated as Member Secretary of the committee. This person will also provide support in collecting data and to finalise the report of the findings to be read in the Gram Sabha. The minutes of this meeting should be sent to the top project management for corrective action.

Collection, Verification and Analysis of Data for Social Audits

In MGNREGA Social Audit Committee is authorized to collect all the information related to sanctioning of the work, muster roll, work measurement, pay order and all other transactions. This data is analyzed, presented to the people in a very simple format and people's feedback sought. What type of information has to be made available to the Social Audit Committee has to be proactively announced. Besides this, the project management shall provide all information that is demanded by the SAC.

The Social Audit Committee shall be enabled to analyse and verify all the information. All information should be presented in a simple way to the people as Janata Information System (JIS). The presentation of JIS provides the basis for scrutiny. The Social Audit Committee can acquire the list of project beneficiaries and ask them about the quality of the programme, and problems in availing those benefits, check the rate of the materials, examine the estimates and actual expenses etc. They should also note down any complaints made by the people. Some of the members of the Social Audit Committee should also visit the site to verify the quality of work undertaken. They should check whether daily materials register is kept at the worksite and whether it is verified. They should also report on whether measurement records are available for inspection.

MGNREGA gives a clear direction that transparency has to be part of the project implementation process. Hence, the DRM projects need to adopt the transparency mechanisms, which need to be examined in the social audit. Display of information board at the project site informing details as defined under JIS shall be part of the scrutiny. They will also check if the completion data is made public in a people friendly format.

Social Audit Committee will visit all completed works and judge the quality of work done by checking whether it complies with the specifications in the work order before the start the of work. The implementing agency should provide photographs of the site before and after the works. These photographs can help the SAC to assess the work completed at the various sites.

The photocopy of the records and their analysis should be displayed in a public place or Panchayat office at least 15 days before the Social Audit Gram Sabha. Analyzed data of the Social Audit Committee will also be displayed at some other public places (village square 'chaura', water stand points, provision store, primary school, outside anganwadi, cooperative milk society and at worksite/s), at least five days before the scheduled date of the Gram Sabha so that people have the chance to read and understand it.

Social Audit Committee should conduct meetings with the project beneficiaries at project sites and falia/hamlet (locality) levels to generate awareness about the objective and key outcomes of the project. It will clarify the expectations and questions of people. This is a very important requirement for improving the participation of people in the Gram Sabha.

In these meetings, Social Audit Committee should also explain to the people the exercise undertaken by them and their findings in brief. They should also note down views and their concerns with regard to progress of implementation of MGNREGS and encourage them to raise these concerns and ask question in the Gram Sabha that is being held. The date, time and venue should also be communicated to the community very clearly so that they can be present.

Gram Sabha for Social Audits

The day of the Gram Sabha should be marked by enthusiasm and interest among the community. There will be a banner proclaiming the importance of Gram Sabha. The day before the Gram Sabha there should be a meeting with Sarpanch, Panchayat members and Panchayat Secretary to finalise the proceeding and the sequence of facilitation of the Gram Sabha.

All important documents related to the implementation of the project should be placed at the location of the Gram Sabha for the scrutiny of the people. Project staff along with one member from the Social Audit Committee should also sit with the documents for the scrutiny by the people at the location of the Gram Sabha to help them to find their find their information to the queries.

The analyzed data should also be written in enlarged and simple format and displayed at the site of the Gram Sabha.

Data regarding the work, sanctioned budget, approved works, families provided support, etc. should be displayed on charts at the venue of the Gram Sabha.

A complaints/ suggestion/ box should be placed at the venue of the Gram Sabha. This would go a long way in motivating people who are not able to speak out to put their grievances/ concerns, s in writing. The box should also be emptied during the Gram Sabha meeting by a Social Audit Committee member and all issues read out and responded.

Representative of implementing agency or agencies should be present in the Gram Sabha.

Gram Sabha for Social Audit (Social Audit Forum) should be chaired by the president of the Social Audit Committee.

Gram Sabha should start by reviewing the progress (action taken) on the major issues rose in the last Social Audit Gram Sabha and the major decisions taken. People can give comments or ask questions and further decisions could also be made on its basis, which should be duly noted down by the person taking minutes of the meeting.

Social Audit Committee should then present a report card of the implementation of the project i.e., they should present the information that has been analyzed, verified and presented.

The Social Audit Committee members may take the help of school teachers or other community member willing provide support to summaries the findings to presented in the Gram Sabha.

If any discrepancy is found during the verification it should be noted down and it should be responded immediately by concerned authority present in the Gram Sabha. If needed, it can be reported for further enquiry. This should be included in the final action taken report.

Independent Jury to Ensure Action on the Findings of the Social Audit

In MGNREGA, higher government authority has the mandate to take action on the findings of the social audit. However, in a project of the Civil Society Organisation, there is a need to create an independent jury who will oversee the implementation of the actions emerged from the social audit. The Jury must set a time frame for the redressal of the issues.

Challenges in Institutionalizing the Process of Social Audit

Facilitating Social Audit requires great deal of effort and willingness at all levels. Social Audits, if institutionalized, can help build transparency and accountability. However, experience show that there are several challenges in institutionalizing the process. Some of them are outlined here.

Culture of silence: In facilitating Social Audit, culture of silence is one of the important bottlenecks. People do not speak up even if they see something wrong is happening. This is because they are either not aware of appropriate forums or have developed a sense of apathy that there will be no change in existing situation. Also, most of the families directly affected are poor and from marginalized sections of society and fear to raise their voices, as they are afraid of possible repercussions.

To deal with this challenge, the administration should ensure prompt action on issues raised during the Gram Sabha and the action taken should be communicated again to the people in the subsequent Gram Sabha. This will assure the people that their voices are heard. It will make the community remain engaged and raise their confidence to voice issues.

Low participation in Gram Sabha: Low people's participation in Gram Sabha is another bottleneck. Style of facilitation, non-response to past resolutions, domination by the powerful and lack of meaningful discussion are some of the causes why people think attending Gram Sabha is a waste of time.

Social Audit needs lots of facilitation and mobilization and hence involvement of local CSOs makes it more effective. As they are not associated with execution of works, it enhances the

objectivity and credibility of the process. Also, as mentioned earlier, timely actions by competent authorities on findings have impact on Social Audit for next round. Since Social Audit is to be done in periodic intervals, timely actions on earlier Social Audit encourage people. In the contrary if this does not happen, people get disappointed and this will result in lack of participation in the future.

Social Audit has spin-off benefits like increased awareness and participation. During the process of data collection, verification and Gram Sabha mobilization, committee and volunteers interact with people personally and share the provisions of the project, their entitlements and procedures to get them. Interested households are encouraged to interact with project officials. This not only improves the quality of implementation of programme, it also facilitates involvement of people.

Social Audit has negative connotations and conflicting socio-economic interests: Social Audit evokes fear and resentment among the implementing agency. Also, rural Indian society is not homogenous and there are conflicting interests based on caste, class and gender lines. Process of Social Audit takes into account interests of weaker sections such as poor, dalits, women and minorities and empowers them. Hence powerful groups also resist such process.

To combat this challenge, if at initial stages, Social Audit is promoted more as learning process to inculcate culture of transparency and accountability rather than faultfinding. Small but incremental success will boost the confidence and morale of people, specially poor and marginalized.

Unverifiable records: Many a times the implementing agency does not maintain up to date records. It hinders the transparency process. If at the beginning of the project the MIS and JIS are clearly defined it will not create problems in verification of records.