

Panchayat representatives resolve to make NREGA effective

It was a unique event. The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) has always been in focus since the Act was adopted in 2006. There is all-round praise for the concept behind the employment generating programme, but nobody seems to be happy with its implementation. It was for the first time that an assembly of 1,245 sarpanches and other elected local government representatives sat for two days, on October 14 and 15, 2008, to review various aspects of NREGA and its working with the object of committing the panchayati raj system to its transparent and fruit-bearing implementation. The delegates came from as many as 24 states with their own experiences and suggestions and adopted a declaration that may go a long way to establish NREGA as the biggest experiment in history for eradication of rural poverty.

The event was organised by the Institute of Social Sciences in cooperation with the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and Embassy of Sweden-Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) at the Constitution Club in the heart of Delhi. While Union Minister for Panchayati Raj Mani Shankar Aiyar inaugurated the national conference, Union Minister for Rural Development Raghuvansh Prasad Singh spoke to the delegates on October 15. Swedish ambassador Lars-Olof Lindrgren, Annie Raja, Aruna Roy, B.N. Yugandhar, → ● *Contd. on p. 8*

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S.M. Vijayanand, Nikhil Dey, Soumya Kidambi, Amitabh Behr and Pamela Philipose were some of the eminent scholars and social activists who led the open sessions. In the session on international experience, Anna Backmann of SALA-IDA focused on the Swedish experience in local government, while Joy Elamon of SDC-CapDeck dwelt on the Swiss experience in India. Representatives from all parts of the country freely aired their views about the implementation of NREGA through panchayats.

After a brief analysis of the historic role that NREGA is poised to play in poverty alleviation in rural India and assertion of the long-felt demand for making democratic decentralisation through panchayats powerful and effective by devolving adequate responsibilities and powers to the rural local governments, the 16-point declaration adopted by 1,245 panchayat representatives enumerates various measures that must be taken immediately to turn NREGA into an effective instrument of rural transformation.

1. There is need to ensure that the NREGA is implemented through the panchayati raj system.
2. Right to work in rural areas has to be treated as a livelihood right and has to be operationalised through the panchayati raj institutions.
3. The states should ensure that the fund for NREGS is not diverted to any other purpose.
4. Works under NREGS have to be implemented as per a panchayat level development plan prepared by the panchayat and approved by the gram sabha.
5. The NREGS funds should be transferred to the zero balance bank accounts of panchayats.
6. While the Act says that the utilisation of 50 percent of NREGS funds has to be made through gram panchayats, it should also prescribe that the rest of the funds should be utilised in collaboration with the intermediate and district panchayats as per the district perspective plan.
7. The District Planning Committee should approve the NREGS district level perspective plan.
8. The panchayats should be mandated to ensure that the principle of equal wages for men and women in NREGA is adhered to.
9. The minimum wages need to be raised in view of the current economic situation.
10. Minimum wages differ from place to place within a state. The wages have to be proposed by the District Planning Committee in consultation with the panchayats.
11. The panchayats must ensure that the job cards issued under NREGA have the status of a voter ID card or a passport.
12. Each state must appoint a separate NREGA Commissioner to constantly monitor all aspects of NREGS throughout the year. In the districts, he/she should work under the leadership of the district panchayat president

and district panchayat. He/she must place the district level report before the district panchayat and the state level report before the state legislature.

13. While there is the ranking of districts based on NREGA performance, there should be ranking of district, intermediate and gram panchayats as well.

14. Training of panchayat presidents and elected representatives on various aspects of NREGA must be mandatory; it should be ensured that a percentage of the budget is utilised for this purpose.

15. The panchayats will ensure regular and effective meeting of gram sabhas so as to eradicate corruption and thus prevent allegations which tarnish the image of panchayats and NREGA in the country.

16. Considering the increased responsibilities, the panchayat presidents and elected members of the panchayats be paid reasonable honorarium.

After observing the implementation of NREGA, we consider that NREGA is an important tool for the development and growth of the rural population of the country. We, the presidents and other elected representatives from the panchayats from all parts of India who participated in this National Conference on NREGA and Panchayats resolve that we will work for a clean, efficient, people-oriented NREGA to achieve the Millennium Development Goals.

SELECT READING

Nilika Mehrotra, S.M. Patnaik: Culture versus coercion: Other Side of Nirmal Grama Yojana, *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 25, 2008

Sthitapragyan Ray: Alleviating Poverty through Micro-finance: SGSY Experience in Orissa, *Sociological Bulletin*, May 2008

Institute of Social Sciences: *NREGA and Panchayats*

The Hunger Project: *Thus Spoke the Press*

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PANCHAYATI RAJ UPDATE

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