

From Employment Guarantee to Empowerment: A Decadal Review of MGNREGS in Kerala

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Abstract:

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) in Kerala, which has been in operation since 2006, is one of India's most ambitious social protection and rural employment schemes. The paper analyses a decade of MGNREGS in Kerala, focusing on its role in generating employment, promoting gender inclusion, and supporting local government development. By examining secondary data collected from the Ministry of Rural Development, Government of Kerala's evaluation reports, the paper finds that Kerala has been extraordinarily successful in social inclusion—especially women's participation—but has struggled to build durable assets and fully realise the 100-day employment guarantee. This experience illustrates the crucial significance of decentralised governance and social mobilisation for inclusive rural development.

Keywords: MGNREGS, Kerala economy, rural employment, decentralisation, women empowerment, inclusive growth.

1. Introduction

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), enacted in 2005 and implemented in Kerala in February 2006, guarantees legal wage employment for rural households that are willing to undertake unskilled manual work for up to 100 days. It is more than just employment creation and constitutes a new norm of rights-based social protection and participatory rural development (Dreze & Khera, 2009).

Kerala presents a unique case study in the context of MGNREGS in India. The state's strong human development indicators, decentralised governance, and women's networks via Kudumbashree have created favourable institutional conditions. Besides high wage levels, labour shortages, and reliance on remittances, Kerala had its struggles, which forced it to adjust MGNREGS to its socio-economic circumstances (Kannan & Varghese, 2012). This article surveys a decade of MGNREGS in Kerala (2006–2016), looking at performance patterns, socio-economic impacts, and policy implications of sustainable rural employment.

2. Literature Review

The literature on MGNREGS in India which emphasises that it functions in a dual role—as an employment guarantee and also a social empowerment mechanism (Hirway, 2011). Research has also focused on how the scheme has helped to stabilize incomes, reduce poverty and engage women in all states (Dev, 2011).

Studies conducted in Kerala indicated that transparency and community participation were consistently high (Thomas & Jayesh, 2015). The integration of the Kudumbashree mission with MGNREGS makes it one of the most gender-inclusive public employment programmes globally, and women make up over 90% of the workforce (Devika & Thampi, 2012).

However, detractors point out that while the programme increased social equity, it did not significantly enhance productive rural assets or livelihood sustainability (State Institute of Rural Development [SIRD], 2016). Few studies systematically discuss the first decade of performance of MGNREGS in Kerala, which this study aims to address.

3. Objectives

The present study intends to:

1. Analyse trends in employment generation under MGNREGS in Kerala over a decade (2006-2016).
2. Assess the impact on women's empowerment and rural livelihoods.
3. Evaluate the scheme's convergence using decentralised planning mechanisms.
4. Identify key challenges and policy directions for strengthening future programmes.

4. Data and Methodology

This study is entirely based on secondary data from diverse sources like the Kerala Economic Review (various issues), the MGNREGA dashboard and annual reports released by the Ministry of Rural Development, Govt. of India, and the evaluation studies by the Centre for Development Studies (CDS) and State Institute of Rural Development (SIRD). Descriptive statistics and trend analysis were applied for the quantitative data of persons'-days, household participation and gender composition. Qualitative information on governance and implementation in institutional reports was used to assess all aspects.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1 Employment Generation

MGNREGS in Kerala rose from 0.5 crore person-days of employment in 2006–07 to more than 8 crore in 2013–14. This was followed by a reduction to 5.89 crore person days in 2014-15. The scheme's employment generation then showed a recovery, rising to 6.85 crore in 2015 -16 and 7.42 crore in 2016-17. The number of households provided employment stabilised between 6 to 7 lakh per year. However, the average days of employment in every household were still approximately 50 days, lower than the statutory guarantee of 100 days (Government of Kerala, 2017).

5.2 Gender Participation

Kerala boasts among the highest levels of women's participation in the country — over 90% on average throughout the state. Kudumbashree networks were instrumental in facilitating women's entry, worksite management, and wage monitoring. As a result of this, the scheme was a women-led social security approach that improved household income and community visibility.

5.3 Wage and Income Security

Wages under MGNREGS rose from ₹125 back in 2008–09 to ₹250 in 2016. Studies demonstrate (Centre for Development Studies [CDS], 2015) that MGNREGS made up 7%–9% of all household incomes for lower decile rural families, thus reducing their vulnerability to income shocks.

5.4 Asset Creation and Convergence

Kerala's MGNREGS concentrated on water conservation, soil improvement, and rural connectivity projects. Asset durability and technological quality issues were severely limited, as the projects were small-scale and there was a dearth of technical staff. Convergence with local development plans showed a noticeable increase post 2012, but there are still discrepancies among the districts.

5.5 Institutional Innovations

The implementation of the role of Gram Panchayats as implementing agencies, together with social audits and participatory planning, also contributed to increased transparency. Kerala's social audit model with a community monitoring group, became a model reference for other states in India (Thomas & Jayesh, 2015).

6. Challenges

The programme, however, struggled in Kerala in its first decade.

6.1 Administrative and Financial Hurdles

One of the most common criticisms of the scheme over the years was the longer delay of payments of wages (Ministry of Rural Development, 2013). These delays, sometimes lasting weeks to months, contradicted the Act's initial thrust of immediate income support and led to poverty for recipients. Despite the gradual implementation of administrative reforms, this issue persisted for a long time.

6.2 Quality and Durability of Assets

The quality, maintenance, and long-term durability of the resulting assets were often concerns. Critics say a prioritisation of "unskilled manual labour" paved the way for the development of assets (for example, kutchra roads) that failed to last, resulting in low returns on public investment. To create long-lasting critical assets, efforts should be made to incorporate the semi-skilled workers along with unskilled manual labourers. (Harilal & Joseph, 2014).

6.3 Mismatch with Local Labour Market

The requirements for "unskilled manual labour" in the Act were regarded as a contradiction against Kerala's higher level of education and aspiration (which are not the same as the national average). This subsequently led to social stigma towards the work, and there was an enduring pressure to reduce the scope of acceptable work to comprise more skilled tasks such as clerical support for local offices and social service works (Devika & Thampi, 2011).

7. Socio-Economic Impact

MGNREGS has contributed considerably to poverty reduction, women's empowerment, and community involvement in rural Kerala. The scheme facilitated the establishment of a framework for women's collective action, improved environmental conditions in rural areas, and reduced seasonal distress migration. The extent to which the programme has institutionalised transparency and inclusiveness is well acknowledged (Devika & Thampi, 2012; CDS, 2015).

8. Policy Recommendations

1. Enhance alignment between MGNREGS and agriculture, watershed management, and local development plans.
2. Develop skills and productive work assets focused on skill acquisition to create sustainable livelihood opportunities.
3. Digitise fund flows and wage disbursement to reduce delays.
4. Employ young people to promote participation by incentivising their involvement through green jobs and digital rural works.
5. Institutionalise Kudumbashree linkages for constant community-driven planning.

9. Lessons for Inclusive Rural Development

The decadal experience of MGNREGS in Kerala offers valuable advice for designing and implementing social security programmes.

First and foremost, we cannot ignore the strength of community institutions. The MGNREGS effectively reaches women and marginalised populations in the rural regions of Kerala mainly because it integrates with the Kudumbashree network. This "social mobilisation" model shows that an already existing, trusted community-based framework is required to translate a scheme from being a simple government handout to a real tool for promoting social and economic empowerment.

Second, social protection policies should be flexible and tailor-made to local needs. In Kerala, the scheme's "one-size-fits-all" nature (i.e., unskilled manual labour) proved problematic. The decade's experience taught a lesson in flexibility to help states localise the programme to their own labour market and human capital profiles to improve the value of an asset and the programme as a whole.

Third, gender-based implementation has powerful results. By designing and implementing the scheme through a women-centric network, Kerala has turned the MGNREGS initiative into one of the largest women's empowerment schemes in the country, which is vital to the inclusive growth.

10. Conclusion

MGNREGS in Kerala (2006–2016) over a decade shows that rights-based employment schemes are successful when closely woven together with decentralised governance and women's collectives. The Kerala model shows that community involvement can offer transparency and inclusion. Yet, future strategies should focus on productivity, developing capabilities, and creating durable assets to sustain

the relevance of the scheme. The Kerala MGNREGS demonstrates social success, but it has yet to fully realise its economic potential.

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