

INDIAS MGNREGA AND CLIMATE CHANGE- A CONCEPTUAL EXPLORATION

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Abstract:

The poster which I plan to present deals with the exploration of the ‘climate dimension’ of a Public Works Programme in India, the MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act).

Born out of the need to address livelihood issues and poverty in rural India, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA, 2005) was passed in late 2005 and has emerged as India’s premier rural development scheme. Since 2008 every rural household is unconditionally entitled to 100 days of paid employment per year at a statutory minimum wage. Local bodies, in consultation with communities, direct the labour power preferably towards rural asset creation (ponds, irrigation channels), eco-restoration (afforestation¹) and other productive infrastructure enhancements that can potentially reap in short as well as long term benefits. Vulnerable social groups and women are especially encouraged to join the scheme (Dreze and Khera, 2009). At present it is the largest Public Work Programme in the world.

Literature and discussions related to climate change have in recent years seen a perceptible shift towards paying more attention to climate change adaptation. This in light of evidence that global temperatures are going to increase to a certain point regardless of what mitigation measures will be undertaken in the near future (Pittock, 2009) and secondly there is growing scepticism about even achieving existing mitigation targets that are set to contain global warming to acceptable limits (Anderson and Bows, 2011). Adaptation to climate change is more and more seen as an imperative to prepare societies for the predicted, increasingly severe impacts of climate change.

One part in these theoretical discussions focuses on policies, particularly in a developing country context, that are referred to as ‘mainstreaming of development’, ‘no regrets’ or ‘win-win’ policies (Klein et al. 2005). . These (normative) policies can ideally be set up in the near term, deliver immediate benefits, be converged with national development programs and deliver ecological, economic and social co-benefits while keeping in mind the ‘climate change aspect’² .

Sustainable asset creation, natural capital enhancement, social inclusion and empowerment can form part of such a strategy and are central constituents of the MGNREGA (UNDP, 2010). These chart a pathway to rural economic rejuvenation that addresses some of the underlying vulnerabilities present, and simultaneously enhance adaptive capacities for the future.

Drawing on a framework of policy analysis, literature review and data inputs on the functioning of the MGNREGA I plan to present the scheme as a conceptually capable ‘no regrets’ policy tool that follows a ‘soft adaptation pathway’ (Sovacool, 2011) which draws on low impact technology, existing resources, local community expertise and bridging different scales of implementation (local to national³).

References:

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Notes

1. All afforestation projects in the country are going to be executed by MGNREGA labour
2. In here dealing more specifically with the management of future climate change
3. The scheme is central and financed by it but executed primarily by local bodies (panchayats).