

Brief Note on Social Audit in Andhra Pradesh

Introduction

With the passing of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) by the parliament in the year 2005, a safety net for the poor was ensured by way of a constitutional provision to ensure the right to work. The Act also provided for many safeguards to ensure the rights enshrined in the Act actually reached the poor labourers and provided a platform for the same through various transparency and accountability measures. One of the measures incorporated in the Act is the provision to conduct regular social audits.

As has been mandated by the MGNREGA Act, Social Audits are being carried out in Andhra Pradesh (AP) on an ongoing basis in 22 districts of the state where the scheme is being implemented. Beginning with a pilot in February 2006, a step by step process has been designed to train State and District Resource Persons who identify literate youth from the wage seekers families and train them as Village social auditors to carry out the Social Audit process.

In an extension of the government's intent to ensure full transparency and accountability in the implementation of the MGNREGS in AP, the Society for Social Audit, Accountability and Transparency (SSAAT) was set up by the Department of Rural Development, Government of Andhra Pradesh, in 2009 through G.O Ms .No. 155, PR&RD (RDII) Department issued on May 13, 2009. SSAAT was subsequently registered as an independent society under the Societies Registration Act on May 15, 2009.

Brief History

The system of social audits in Andhra Pradesh has become a very unique model for the rest of the country in monitoring and evaluation of the MGNREGS, making it the only State Government in the country to have developed an institutional framework to ensure that social audits of the MGNREGS are conducted once every six months. It has resulted in a paradigm shift in administration as well as governance with a pro-poor thrust.

The Department of Rural Development initiated work on social audits under the MGNREGS-AP under its Reform Action Plan in the year 2006 as a project of the Strategies Performance Innovations Unit (SPIU-RD). Since Andhra Pradesh did not have a previous history or understanding of the Social Audits prior to 2006, it initiated a partnership with ActionAid India International and MKSS to help conduct the first training to understand the process. The SPIU-RD trained 35 persons drawn from unions and NGOs (having 10-15 years grassroots level experience of working on rights-based issues) as State Resource Persons in the process of Social Audit. The pilot Social Audit was conducted in Nakrekal Mandal of Nalgonda District in three *gram panchayats* (Tatikal, Chendupatla and Kadaparthi) where the Food for Work Programme had been implemented. The insights gained from this pilot Social Audit led to the Rural Development

Department accepting whole-heartedly the process of Social Audit of the MGNREGS.

The strategy and planning adopted post the pilot Social Audit to take forward the social audit began with building a pool of resource persons/facilitators at the state, district and village levels on one hand and by creating a knowledge base (through trainings, workshops, films and other communication material) across the various stake holders NGOs, CSOs, PRIs, CBOs and most importantly the labourers for whom the Scheme was meant.

Based on the varied experiences of the Mass Social Audits, a *padyatra* cum Mass Social Audit was conducted during August 30 to September 08, 2006. There was subsequently a realisation that the Village Social Auditor Model piloted in Nalgonda seemed to be more feasible considering the need to scale up the process and take it to all MGNREGS-AP districts. What began as a pilot in three districts has subsequently been scaled up to cover all 22 districts.

The current structure that SSAAT has evolved into is based on the various permutations and combinations of various stakeholders and multiple pilots that were carried out initially in the districts of Nalgonda, Medak, Mahbubnagar and Ananthapur.

Since the inception of the MGNREGS in February 2006, three rounds of social audits have taken place across all the 1085 *mandals* where

the Scheme is being implemented in a staggered method. Lakhs of wage seekers have been encouraged to step out and speak about their rights and entitlements and through this process the State has been successful in reaching out to them to understand their perspective about the implementation of the Scheme.

After many concerted efforts over the last five years to streamline the process, SSAAT will in 2011 be in a strong position to carry out two rounds of social audits in a six-monthly manner as has been mandated in the Act. The process has, in fact, already begun.

There are many new dimensions to the process that have been added, some from a purely management perspective and others to keep in mind the changing aspects in the implementation of the Scheme as well as the needs voiced by the people.

Social Audit Process in Andhra Pradesh

Social Audit has now evolved into a streamlined process to ensure a minimum level of standardisation across the State. This ensures that the most critical aspects of the process are not skipped, leading to a dilution that will adversely impact it.

Social audits are conducted for most part by literate youth (men and women) from the families of wage seekers who are called Village Social Auditors (VSAs). Over the years, SSAAT has been able to train more than 80,000 Village Social Auditors. Some of the VSAs have come back continuously, leading to a very strong base of Senior Village Social Auditors. The process of identification of the VSAs is facilitated by a State Resource Person and the District Resource Persons selected, trained and positioned by SSAAT.

➤ **Randomisation of Resource Persons:** In the initial stages of setting up Social Audits in the various districts of the State, the District Resource Persons were allotted to their own districts@20 members per district. The State Resource Persons were allotted to districts other than their own to oversee the process. However, owing to many issues of collusion and dilution of issues that cropped up due to the familiarity that grows when the same set of resource persons facilitate the Social Audit process in every round of audit it was decided to go in for a randomisation process. Through the process of randomisation, the DRPs are rotated across a

cluster of three districts and do not audit a *Mandal* that they have audited previously. The same process is being followed in the case of the State Resource Persons as well.

- ***Filing of Applications under the RTI – Intimating the PDs and MPDOs:*** Initially, during the Social Audit, the process would begin with the filing of application with the MPDO/Assistant Programme Officer by the District Resource Persons invoking the spirit of the Right to Information (RTI) quoting Section 17 of the MGNREGA and Guidelines of the Department of Rural Development where information is to be provided within 7 days for relevant records of the MGNREGS in the *Mandal*.

This was done mainly to ensure that the Programme Officers at the Block level get familiar with the RTI Act and the fact that anyone and everyone has a right to seek information.

However, in the last six months the process has been replaced by a system whereby the Action Plan is entered into a database that automatically generates an Intimation letter signed and issued by the Commissioner, RD to the Project Directors and the MPDO/PO a month in advance, giving instruction as part of the preparatory phase of the Social Audit.

This was done specifically because the administration at the Block level began to complain frequently that they were not informed in advance. Some also complained that seven days was not sufficient time for them to provide records. There

were some other instances where the block level administration claimed that the records were not ready because they had not received official communication. Keeping these frequent complaints in mind, it was decided to ensure that an official line of communication is issued to the *Mandal* Administration from the Commissioner, Rural Development, ensuring full compliance.

➤ ***Spearhead Team*** – Bearing in mind the fact that the resource persons must get adequate rest between each audit which gets strenuous when they have to travel across Districts, the process of using spear-head teams has been evolved.

The State Team Monitors identify a team of five members comprising of 2-3 District Resource Persons (DRPs) and 2 VSAs who are sent to the *Mandal* 3 days in advance. They are sent to the *Mandal* which is in the Action plan and where the Intimation letter has already been issued a month in advance.

The task of the Spearhead team is to ensure that all the records are in order and no data is missing. The team of 5 inform the APO to get the records in advance and in the meanwhile, go into the GPs to identify the VSAs and train them. The remaining DRPs and the SRP (after completing their rest period) join the spearhead team on the 2nd day of the training which is when the spear head team hands over charge of the records and the VSAs to the SRP and moves to the next *Mandal*. This ensures that all team members get adequate rest before the next round of Social Audit.

The challenge has been to try and implement this across all districts. The Spearhead team concept works best in the districts where accessing records is particularly difficult, which results in the team spending more time than anticipated and throwing the entire month's schedule off its track.

➤ ***Identification and Training of the Village Social Auditors:***

The spearhead team goes into the villages of the *Mandal* and identify active literate youth (3-4 per village), Village social auditors, from the labourers families. These youth are trained in Social Audit processes over a three-day period.

Training includes Rights and Entitlements of the labourers as enshrined in the MGNREGA, Right to Information and writing applications under the RTI Social Audits processes. It also includes the scrutiny of MGNREGS records pertaining to that *Mandal*. A training schedule/module for the same have been prepared.

➤ ***Formation of Teams:*** The DRPs and the VSAs are formed into teams of 5-10 members depending on various permutations and combinations – the expenditure, the number of works, habitations and the terrain. Usually, every team is anchored by a DRP or a Sr. VSA who in turn has a team of 5-8 VSAs with him. The VSAs are not sent to their own GP to conduct the audit. This is primarily to avoid collusion as well as retribution by the power structure within the village.

➤ ***Awareness Building of the Rights and Entitlements:***

Awareness building of the wage seekers is an important and integral part of the SA process. The same is done through slogans, songs and pamphlets as well as through village meetings. SSAAT has designed and recorded a songs CD as part of the cultural activities to be conducted during the Social Audit. Also, a separate cultural team has been formed to ensure that in the most complicated *mandal* people can be mobilised through songs and slogans. The cultural team goes into the *Mandal* three days in advance and announces the Social Audit and describes the process through songs and plays.

➤ ***The Social Audit Process:*** At the village level, the Social Audit teams carry out door to door verification of every muster roll by meeting the labourers and the villagers and sharing the details in the records with them. They cross-verify the Job card, passbooks of the labourers and also conduct focus group discussions, carry out Ward *Sabhas*. The teams stay in the villages throughout this period.

The Social Audit Teams also visit worksites and cross-verify the records with the measurements at the site and look at the quality issues. To further strengthen the process and ensure that the Quality and Quantity aspects of the works are fully looked into the Quality Control Teams are sent to assist the Social Audit teams.

In culmination of the process, all the reports are finally read out at a *Gram Sabha* in the *Gram Panchayat*. The Social Audit reports and evidences are read out at the *Gram Sabha* in the presence of an independent Observer. The evidences once recorded and finalized in front of the Observer are not to be re-opened even if the witness does not turn up to testify at the *Mandal* level Public Hearing. The dates of the *Gram Sabha* are communicated to the *sarpanches* through the MPDO once the DRPs assess the dates when the verification process will be completed.

➤ ***Independent Observers:*** Based on the feedback received from the Administration as well as the Social audit Team members, a decision was taken to introduce the presence of an independent observer during the Social Audit *Gram Sabha*. The Social Audit *gram sabhas* are held in the presence of the independent Observer of a cadre not less than that of a *Tehsildar* and not part of the MGNREGS implementing agency. The observers will ensure that the witness statement/evidence is recorded in an impartial, free and fair manner.



Suitable amendments have been made in the Social Audit Rules (G.O.Ms.98) through G.O. Ms. 52, PR&RD (RD.II)Dept., issued on 26/02/2011. Based on the G.O.Ms.52, a Circular (No.A/797/CVO/SA/2011, dated 20/04/2011) was issued to identify and appoint Observers and through Memo No.2525/RD.II/A1/2011, dated 13/05/2011, instructions to Observers have been issued.

➤ ***Social Audit Mandal Public Hearing:*** The Social Audit process culminates in a Public Hearing (*Praja Vedika*) at the *Mandal* level where all Social Audit reports are read out in the presence of the public, people's representatives, the concerned MGNREGS functionaries and senior officers of the government. The stakeholders with grievances get an opportunity to testify and seek relief. The persons against whom observations are made are given an opportunity to explain their case.

The Project Director, DWMA, presides over the Public Hearing and takes decisions on the findings then and there. The Ombudsman also attends the Public Hearing. A copy of the Decision Taken Format is handed over to the concerned District Vigilance Officer of the Vigilance Wing to process within 72 hours. Often the Ombudsman *suo moto* takes up cases where the decisions are not found to be satisfactory.

➤ ***Reversal of a Decision Taken at the Mandal Public Hearing:*** There have been some instances where the Social Audit Teams have felt that the decision taken by the Presiding Officer is not right and that he/she has taken a decision that is not in favour of the labourers. It has been decided that all such decisions can be reverted at the state level by appealing to the Chief Vigilance Officer, through Director, SSAAT, by presenting all the facts of the case and the supporting evidence.

- **Follow-Up Action** - The Independent Vigilance Wing in the RD Commissionerate headed by the Chief Vigilance Officer initiates action and ensures that follow-up is done on time. The CVO has representatives at the District level headed by District Vigilance Officers drawn mainly from the Revenue Department.

- **Review Meeting at the State Level** – The Principal Secretary, RD, conducts a review with the Social Audit SRPs and the DVOs on the 1st Saturday of every month to go through the progress as well as to get an insight into the kind of issues that have been identified. These Review Meetings are attended by the Commissioner, RD, Chief Vigilance Officer (CVO), Chief Quality Control Officer (CQCO) and Director, SSAAT. The meetings help the Administration take decisions at the policy level regarding the implementation of the Scheme.

- **Social Audit Reporting Formats:** The Social Audit Teams enter their findings in a Social Audit two formats. The first is a GP Abstract Report that gives all the details of the programme implementation and the findings – positive as well as problematic. They also fill a second format called the Decision Taken Format, which lists out the issues identified in the village (*Gram Panchayat* wise), the person responsible and the decision taken. The DTF is given to the Presiding Officer during the Public Hearing in which he/she records the action recommended. This format is handed over to the

District Vigilance Officer after the Public Hearing is completed for initiation of action within seven days. The DTF once handed over to the Vigilance Wing is called the Action Taken Report (ATR).

For a very long time, the SSAAT has found it difficult to quantify the percentage of labourers visited and establish a link between the data collected and collated at the field level during the Social Audit to the data on the MGNREGS portal. As a step forward to bridge this gap, a new system of formats has been evolved. The formats are now generated by Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), the IT firm that hosts and maintains all the information for the Department of Rural Development, based on the inputs given by SSAAT. SSAAT sends TCS the Monthly plan (based on the intimation letters) in advance to generate the formats.

The soft copies of these Formats are then handed over to Bhagyalaxmi Printers, who print and bind them into booklets that are delivered to the *Mandal*, where the Social Audit is to be conducted in advance. The spearhead team cross-verifies to check that all the data has been sent to them. The teams use these booklets to enter during the field verification. The Abstract Report and the Decision Taken Format (DTF) are prepared based on the information recorded in these formats.

- ***Data Entry of the Reports:*** The Social Audit Abstract Report and the DTF are then sent to a rural BPO E-Gram – IT where

they are scanned and entered into a database. The reports generated from the rural BPO are then sent to the SSAAT state office, from where they are formally sent to the government. The reports are available on the website by TCS.