

# **Participatory Processes under MGNREGA: Strengthening Grass-roots Democracy**

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*Moving from the policies of a welfare state to the participatory processes of MGNREGA and other poverty alleviation programmes has inspired greater ownership and a more vibrant involvement of the poor and the marginalized in the development of their own villages*

India is known as the largest democracy in the world. When we consider its demographic and socio-economic composition, we find that the rural population still accounts for more than 70 per cent of the total population. And, so far, the effective means of governance has been to serve the poor and the marginalized with policies of a welfare state. However, there is a visible change in approach in the past decade or so. Emphasis has been placed on 'inclusion' of larger sets of people in the decision-making, monitoring and reviewing processes, and making them responsible and accountable.

This article focusses on the democratic participatory approach adopted in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and the visible changes brought about by it in the tribal district of Betul in Madhya Pradesh, where PRADAN is active.

MGNREGA came into existence when it was notified as an Act of Parliament on 7 September 2005. The objective of MGNREGA is, "to enhance livelihood security in rural areas by providing at least 100 days of statutory guarantee of wage employment in a financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto."

It also aims at providing employment near their place of habitat. It is for the first time that wage employment has been guaranteed and an attempt is being made to safeguard the interests of the rural poor.

This paper focusses on the movement in this regard in the past two years, in two blocks of Betul district. It also analyses the shift in the qualitative and the quantitative measures, assesses the present situation and the past trends with a futuristic viewpoint.

MGNREGA, in its later stages (that is, from FY 2013–14), has become a programme focussed on livelihoods and continuous efforts have been made to bring about utmost transparency in the systems and processes. Participatory processes<sup>1</sup> and public disclosures are now essential when identifying potential beneficiaries, planning for activities under the Scheme, reviewing of progress in the *gram sabha*, monitoring through the

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Management Information System (MIS) that is available in the public domain and, most important, having a post-completion scrutiny through a social audit.

Indeed, it took long before action was taken on the anomalies noticed. The trend, however, suggests that the people's verdict is being considered and there is among them 'a sense of being counted'. Participatory approaches will contribute greatly in the performance appraisal of MGNREGA and will eventually lead to the

establishment of an ever-strengthening grass-roots democracy<sup>2</sup> in rural India.

Around 2010, PRADAN motivated the women in Betul to participate in the *gram sabha* and, at the same time, prepared an integrated micro project (IMP) for 26 villages of Ghora Dongri and Shahpur blocks of the district. During the planning process (which eventually did not get implemented due to certain hurdles that

### Envisaged goals

- ◆ Providing a strong social safety net for vulnerable groups through a fall-back employment source.
- ◆ Providing a growth engine for the sustainable development of an agricultural economy.
- ◆ Providing employment with works that address causes of chronic poverty such as drought, deforestation and soil erosion.
- ◆ Empowering the rural poor through the process of a rights-based law.
- ◆ Encouraging new ways of doing business as a model of governance reform anchored on the principles of transparency and grass-roots democracy.

<sup>1</sup>Specific methods employed to achieve active participation by all members of a group in a decision-making process. The primary goal is to create productive discussions to develop positive solutions.

<sup>2</sup>A tendency towards designing political processes in which as much decision-making authority as is practical is shifted to the organization's lowest geographic or social level of organization.

### Movement over the Years

Movement	Introducing Year
Act came into existence	September 2005
Phase 1: Introduced in 200 most-backward districts	February 2006
Phase 2: In 130 districts	April 2007
Phase 3: In the remaining 274 districts	April 2008
Provision of irrigation facility, horticulture plantation and land development facilities on land owned by Scheduled Caste (SC), Scheduled Tribe (ST), Below Poverty Line (BPL), Beneficiaries of land reforms & Beneficiaries under the Indira Awaas Yojana (IAY) households	March 2007
Notification to maintain labour-material ratio as 60:40	June 2008
Amendment to include small farmers or marginal farmers for work on individual land	July 2009
Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD's) instructions to take up works on the lands of SC/ST households (HHs) on a priority basis	September 2009
MoRD's decision to prepare the labour budget under MGNREGS through the Intensive Participatory Planning Exercise (IPPE) I	2014
MoRD's decision to further prepare the convergence plan for five schemes together through IPPE-II	2015

Source: NREGA guidelines issued by MoRD

The above-mentioned data suggest that the provisions to include and prioritize work on individual lands (especially of SC/ST HHs) came to light after three years of the initiation of this Scheme and it took another two years, that is, by 2009, to focus upon the target group of SC/ST.

came up after the completion of the planning process), we, at PRADAN, had the following observations:

- ♦ The women as well as the *panchayat* representatives had significantly little knowledge about MGNREGS and its rights-based approach.
- ♦ The *panchayat* representatives doubted the intention of the women's collectives as well as of PRADAN and showed reluctance in engaging with both.
- ♦ The village community had lost trust and did not wish to work under MGNREGS due to delayed payments and transparency concerns.

- ♦ Developing a village plan through a participatory process was not in the comfort zone of the *panchayat* representatives.

The situation became even worse when the plan didn't actually get implemented. People's expectations were high and there was a lot of excitement in developing a village as per their liking, which eventually did not get actualized. Although some of the *panchayats* included the plans in their Shelf of Projects (SoP) later and gradually took up implementation of these projects, the execution of the plans was not as per the priority or the preference of the villagers, as discussed during the planning process.

However, that the district administration, the block and the *panchayat* functionaries had accepted the fact that the process had helped in organizing the larger village community around the village infrastructure creation, and governance was a ray of hope. The role of the women's collectives especially was the topic of discussion. We took it as a first step towards the desire to strengthen local governance and to capacitate women's collectives to take a lead role in exploring the prospects of improving villages.

These attempts continued from 2012 to 2014 before we found IPPE as an opportunity to cash in and create a positive tide towards a community-led planning process under MGNREGS.

IPPE-1 was aimed at preparing the labour budget under MGNREGS for FY 2015–16 through the participatory approach using PRA tools. Madhya Pradesh took a conscious and opportune approach not to have a test trial of this process in the selected areas but to introduce this process of planning state-wide in all of its 182 backward areas, comprising 12,382 *gram panchayats*. PRADAN, being a Civil Society Organization (CSO), familiar with using this process of planning in the

watershed programme, was identified as the CSO partner in the district to build capacity of the planning teams at the district and the block levels, as well as to provide the necessary on-field support to Block Planning Teams (BPTs) in conducting community-led planning process in the villages.

In the initial stages itself, it was observed that the challenge would be on two fronts. On the one hand, it was essential to engage with the district and block functionaries, and BPTs to help them realize and experience the process of participatory planning, methodologies and the process of facilitating community-led planning. On the other hand, it was important to fill the trust deficit between the village community and the *panchayat* functionaries.

The situation was so grim that in one village people explicitly stated that they would engage in the planning process with PRADAN but would not sit together with their *panchayat* Secretary or the Gram Rozgar Sahayak (GRS). The villagers complained that whenever they approached the *panchayat* office for any help, the officials ran away. It was essential that this attempt be led in a focussed manner so that a confident resource pool (rural youth who have been identified and deployed as BPTs)

Planning Process under IPPE-1 during FY 2014–15		
No.	Particulars	District/Block/ <i>Panchayats</i> /Villages
1	Capacity building of DRTs	Betul
2	Training of BRTs	Ghora Dongri
3	Training of BPTs	Ghora Dongri
4	Demonstrating the planning process in the villages	3 villages of Ghora Dongri block
5	Hand-holding support to BPTs in the field	9 villages of Ghora Dongri block
6	Capacity building of village women to make them familiar with the planning process using PRA tools	7 villages of Ghora Dongri block

could be created and that the people begin to have a sense of ownership of the development of their village and their immediate surroundings. This was the aim for the next few years.

Therefore, in a strategic manner after the training of the District Resource Team (DRT) and the Block Resource Team (BRT), it was decided to work together with the BPTs of the *gram panchayats* of Ghora Dongri block, where PRADAN had its intervention and social mobilization base. The planning phase of IPPE-1 was conducted during September 2014–January 2015. The DRTs were trained by trainers, who had themselves undergone a Training of Trainers (ToT) at the state level earlier. The DRTs, then, trained the BRTs and BPTs at the block level. In all these trainings, PRADAN participated in building the capacity of the trainers and of the members involved in the planning.

Orientation was also conducted for the women's collectives and they were motivated to work together with the BPTs so that a proper planning process could take place. Professionals were engaged in facilitating the process of planning with the BPTs and the village women, and as the process moved forward, most of the BPTs got into their roles and found it easier to relate with the process and understand the significance of the community-led planning process.

Even though the process of planning was time-consuming, the village women and SHG members and many of the motivated village youth invested their time, energy and experience to develop a concrete village plan. The planning process found active involvement of more than 50 per cent of the women in 10 villages. This was, indeed, a promising trend.

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The earlier trend where the *panchayat* representatives and a few influential people in the village planned the interventions under the programme was now on the decline. From 2014–15 onwards, the planning process was carried out, using the

Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) tool. PRA is an extensive process of planning in which the entire resources and social composition of a village is mapped by the residents of the village.

The idea behind performing a PRA exercise was so that the villagers would have a better understanding and knowledge regarding their village and its developmental prospects, and that they are a part of the planning process. The PRA tool has helped in organizing the village community and has helped the villagers to realize that their voices, ideas and experiences are worthy. Jagota Bai from Kuhi village happily states, "Earlier, I used *rangoli* for my house decoration, whereas now I am using *rangoli* for decorating my village."

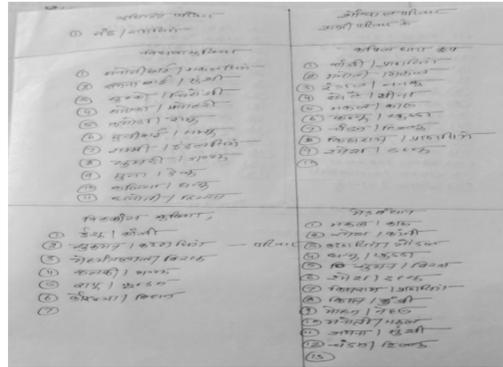
The focus was also on planning for those activities under MGNREGS that would contribute to livelihoods augmentation as well as provide employment for the vulnerable sections, viz., widows, separated women, the disabled, etc. The process was facilitated in a way that after the resource and social mapping, a brief overview of the livelihoods prospect was placed before the villagers and they were encouraged to plan for assets that would last for a long duration and eventually lead to livelihoods augmentation. The villagers, therefore, planned more land development activities this time as compared to structures that require huge investments and contribute comparatively less in livelihoods development.

Over the last few years, the *gram sabha* has been strengthened. A large number of women have started attending the *gram sabha* and have been placing their demands before the assembly. The agenda and the discussions have become more about reviewing of plans for the creation of assets in the village.

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rain water storage but we never expected that our views would be useful or that the government would ask us for ideas and seek our suggestions in this regard."

An insight that the planning team had was that the community had some preferences about the timing of their employment and,



IPPE has taken it further and, for the first time, the residents of the village (especially women) have observed that their opinions for the next financial year have been solicited, and their choices considered and incorporated in the planning for activities under MGNREGS.

Sanno Bai from Dulhara explains this change in her own words, "I have been residing in the village for many years. The other SHG women and I used to discuss about how to improve our agriculture practices and how to work on

up until then, there was a mis-match in the demand for wage employment and the period when this was provided by the *panchayats*. In almost all the villages, the people have stated that plenty of work is on offer during the beginning of the year and that overlaps with the crop intensive or festival season. Therefore, they found it difficult to prioritize. The GRS of Mahendrawadi *panchayat* says, "Earlier there was unnecessary pressure on us to deploy labour at the worksites, but now I feel confident that if the plan is implemented in the

Ratanpur, a village in the Ghora Dongri block, is situated about 25 km from Betul district. During the IPPE planning, the women of the SHGs wanted to include their men in the discussions. They became further motivated after watching a movie on MGNREGA; they asked the men to join them. At first, the men were a little aloof and kept their distance as they watched the women begin to draw the resource map. Although they were invited to join the women, the men did not participate; the women then decided to draw the map and asked their GRS to guide them in marking the points. Later on, some of the men got interested and joined the exercise. They spent three days in helping the women. When the planning exercise was over, the panchayati raj institution (PRI) members applauded the village women for their determination.

manner that my villagers have decided, there will be more cohesiveness and accountability among them.”

Here was the drawback in IPPE-1. The planning process was successfully completed in 22 of the 56 *panchayats* of Ghora Dongri block in 2014, including the six villages that PRADAN was engaged in. But because of the lack of clarity about the flow of funds among the district and block officials, the block officials were unable to consolidate the plan and eventually have not been able to freeze it in the MIS of MGNREGA. The block had utilized their contingency reserves in completing the planning process in an effective manner, but due to the communication gap in the state-to-district and district-to-block officials and the lack of formal intimation, it was not consolidated properly, for which the block Programme Officer (PO) is still regretful. He said, “It was one of the most fascinating processes of planning I have seen happening under MGNREGS in my tenure, and I was pleased to see the efforts put in by the planning teams and the women SHGs in this process. But I feel incapable that I haven’t been able to convince my block and district functionaries.”

Even though the IPPE plans made in 2014 have not been entered in the MIS entirely, there is a positive aspect to the situation. A majority of the individual assets creation plans has been incorporated in the SoP of the respective *panchayats*. In FY 2015–16, the focus of the state government was on taking up the incomplete works on a priority basis before taking on new works. Therefore, most of the plans are still there in the SoP of the *panchayats*. In many *panchayats*, work has been initiated but only 15–20 per cent of it has been completed because the focus has been on closure of the already initiated works.

Gradually, the pendulum has swung towards the favourable in 2015. MoRD has moved a step closer and introduced IPPE-II, incorporating a convergence approach in the planning process. Now, IPPE is no longer a labour budget preparation exercise but has turned into a process to plan for each of the village HHs, especially the vulnerable ones, identified through the Socio-Economic Caste Census (SECC) data, 2011.

Based upon the SECC data, a livelihoods plan has been chalked out for each of the vulnerable HHs in a village. In this process, a conscious attempt has been made to bring together all the five schemes {that is, MGNREGS, National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP), National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM), IAY and Deen Dayal Upadhyay Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDU-GKY)} so that livelihoods of families can be strengthened. The attempt was to conduct the entire planning process and have it entered in the MIS. The critical factor was the fact that the district, this time around, planned things on time and also did not face any financial challenges at any stage.

Considering the challenges of the past, PRADAN was selected to facilitate the planning process in 16 villages of Ghora Dongri and Betul blocks and to also keep an eye on the process in the other regions.

As PRADAN was the district-level CSO engaged as a resource organization, I (Executive–Projects) interacted with the block personnel as well. Also, because I was the master trainer for the region of Betul and Chhindwara districts, I reached out to a larger area and was kept constantly updated with the progress in these regions. I guided and assisted BPT members. I attended the State Resource Team (SRT) training in Raipur in September 2015, where the pre-planning preparatory process kicked off.

I was engaged in the capacity building of the BRTs in Betul, Hoshangabad, Chhindwara and Raisen districts. The participants had already gained insights from their year-long

- ♦ MR Mandloi, Sub Engineer of Ghora Dongri block, says, "I like this process of planning because it helps me understand the challenges in the lives of the villagers. Initially, I felt uneasy and wondered whether I would be able to carry out such an exercise but the village women helped me in gaining confidence. I wish, from now on, all plans are prepared in this manner only."
- ♦ Mr. Saxena, APO Technical, Betul district says, "This process has taken me back to my early days in this Rural Development sector when I used to interact for long hours with the rural people. I must say the village people have much to contribute in educating us. All they need is some affection and a sensitive atmosphere; people will come together and then the feeling of moving together is just joyful."
- ♦ Mr. Dongre, PO, Betul district, shares his experience. "What I found and learned is that we should respect the people living in the villages. Our sensitivity should be high. The villagers have a lot of self-pride and only if one is aware of one's own behaviour towards them, can a person facilitate this process of planning, which is so exciting."
- ♦ Mr. Agrawal, PO, Betul district, shares his point of view, "The villagers, especially the SHG women, have the competence to plan for their village but we need to keep on creating a space for them and also to acknowledge and

praise their efforts. We need to come out of our 'knowledge-expert' mind-sets and start thinking from their point of view. Only then can we relate to their thought processes."

engagement in the IPPE-1 and, therefore, understood the approach much better.

In Ghora Dongri, almost 60 per cent of the participants were those who had engaged in the planning process the previous year. For the first time, there was the involvement of

Dulhara village in Ghora Dongri block is situated around 35 km from Betul district. The village community had carried out the planning process in 2011 and had placed their demand in the *gram sabha* but the *panchayat* had not incorporated their plans. During IPPE-1, however, the villagers again got together and conducted the same process of planning and put forward their demands. The plan was approved by the *gram sabha* and included in its SoP. However, work did not begin because pending works needed to be completed first, on a priority basis.

Had the village community expressed its reluctance to engage, it would not have been surprising. The heartening part, however, was when the women and the men in the village said that the feeling of being counted was good in itself. They were appreciative of the fact that their *panchayat* representatives were including them in the process. One of the residents of the village stated, "We have the perseverance even though we have problems in motivating ourselves time and again. We are waiting for the day when our plans will be implemented. It will surely add value to our lives."

women SHG members in BPTs because it was essential to have women members facilitate the plans around schemes such as NSAP and NRLM that have direct impact on women.

These BPTs involved themselves regularly in the planning phase; the State Council organized timely trainings of BPTs and BRTs and had the State Nodal Officer provide supervision for them. The BPTs also tracked the movement of the process online and continuously reviewed the progress at almost all levels so that the process was facilitated in a time-bound manner.

A livelihoods plan for vulnerable HHs has been made in all the *panchayats* of Ghora Dongri block. PRADAN was engaged in eight villages from four *panchayats* of Ghora Dongri, and five villages of five *panchayats* of Betul block, with the specific objective of facilitating an ideal process and also developing some model villages, where PRADAN has a strong social mobilization base. The demarcations under this process have been clear and, therefore, very visible. The village community and the

BPT members have been able to measure the challenges, the opportunities and, most critically, the vulnerabilities. The demarcations were as follows:

- ◆ Housing
- ◆ Caste-wise settlement
- ◆ BPL/APL/*Antyodaya* HHs
- ◆ Landless/Landholding HHs
- ◆ Women-headed/Physically challenged/Elderly/Destitute HHs
- ◆ HHs with literate/semi-literate members
- ◆ HHs with electricity connection, toilets, cattle sheds
- ◆ HHs in which women are a part of SHGs
  - Type of land and soil—the present state
  - Undulation
  - Land and water treatment that took place in the past and the possibilities
  - Water resources and its condition
  - Present usage of resources

**The steps of the process are as follows**

Planning Process under IPPE-II during FY 2015–16			
No.	Process	Desired outcomes	Conducted in
1	Movie show on planning through the PRA process	People will get familiar with the process of planning	November 2015
2	Executing the planning process	A three-day process for PRA, and option generation and prioritization of work.	November 2015
3	Approval from the <i>gram sabha</i>	Getting the Administrative Sanction (AS) for the plan	December 2015
4	Livelihoods planning for vulnerable HHs	To get the livelihoods plan prepared for each of the vulnerable HHs in the village.	December–January 2016
5	Entry of plan in MIS	To get the plan mapped in the MIS for further course of action	January–February 2016

The planning process eventually led to a proper conclusion; in almost all the *panchayats*, the plans are on the verge of getting fed into the MIS. Trends suggest that the planning process under IPPE-II has been effective and impactful. Some observations are:

- ◆ People's involvement in the planning process was higher when deliberations were taking place, based upon the maps drawn. The community was able to explicitly state the best possible means for livelihoods augmentation and self-sustained assets creation for themselves. The village group was more in agreement and helpful to each other when prioritizing work.
- ◆ The identification of vulnerable HHs through PRA and SECC data helped in reaching the targeted set of beneficiaries, which, in earlier times, used to become complex due to the many parameters of identification.
- ◆ Women's SHGs in each of the villages were actively engaged in mapping and planning.
- ◆ The demands of different sets of people, namely, youth, elderly, women, farmers, etc., were being voiced explicitly.
- ◆ It was relatively easier for women to express their vulnerabilities in this process and to be confident to seek the support of the village community in dealing with the situation.
- ◆ There were SHGs that wished to converge with NRLM and other schemes to collectively undertake livelihood plans and implement them. In almost all the villages, people stated that, in earlier times, MGNREGS work used to take place during the intensive farming periods and, therefore, they were unable to take

up work. The villagers have voiced their preference to engage as labour during the lean periods in the year.

Dharakhoh is a beautiful forest village, gifted with natural resources. It is situated in Betul block of Betul district. During the planning process, the villagers explicitly stated that it is for the first time that they are seeing their PRI members, the GRS and the Sub-engineer sitting together for such long hours and helping them think, plan and articulate their desires.

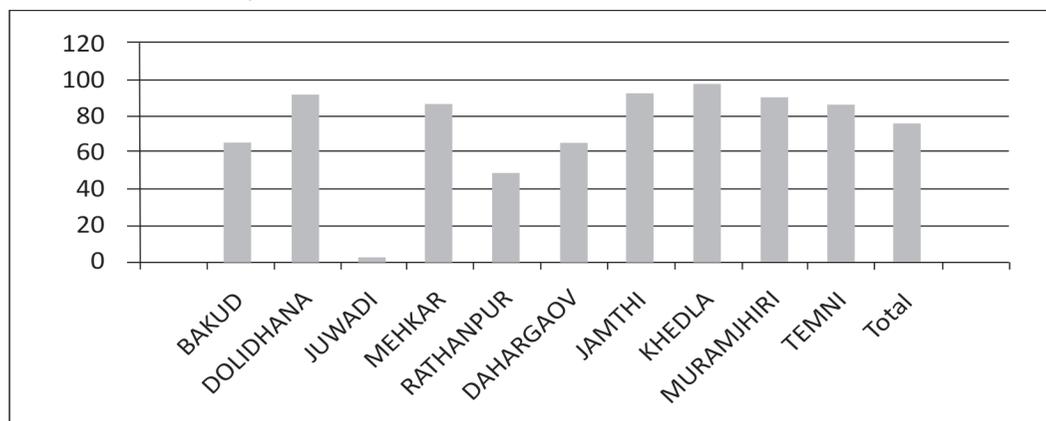
As the planning process evolved further, the GRS, the Sub-engineers and other BPT members sat, chatted and took action together.

During the finalization phase, many villagers were noticed standing a little away from the *gram sabha*. When questioned why, they said, "We wonder if the PRI and BRT members are here because of some pressure. If this practice were to continue, we can together develop our village in four to five years and there will be no one who is poor amongst us." Having said this, they again expressed their apprehensions about whether the trend would continue in the long run.

Case studies of Dharakhoh, Ratanpur and Dulhara villages suggest that the villagers are very involved in this programme and are filled with a sense of satisfaction. They are hopeful that this kind of approach will help them develop their villages as per their choice, and also help in identifying and allocating work to the vulnerable sections.

As far as tangible outcomes are concerned, a significant number of demands of the vulnerable HHs have been incorporated in the total demands made by the *panchayats* that PRADAN engaged with.

**Figure 1: Percentage of Estimated Demand by Vulnerable Jobcard Holders to Total Demand (Person Days)**



Source: nrega.nic.in

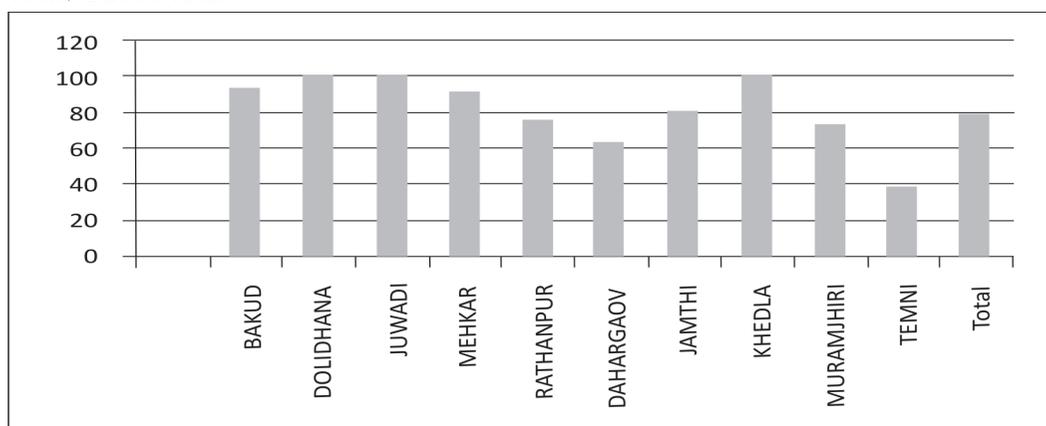
This shows that concerted efforts have been made to attend to the needs of vulnerable HHs. There has been a significant increase in the demands by vulnerable sections during the planning process and, if these get actualized, it will enhance their livelihoods prospects and gradually bring them into the mainstream.

Also, interestingly, the proportion of planned agriculture-related work is witnessing a significant rise, implying that the livelihoods propelling plan has reached a break-even stage.

Data is still in the process of being evaluated; further analysis will only strengthen these observations.

These trends suggest a movement of MGNREGS from a wage-employment generating scheme to a focussed and process-driven programme wherein there is scope to build upon the effectiveness of established participatory processes at the planning, execution, monitoring, review and evaluation stages. As the democratic processes start settling into a motion, trends suggest that

**Figure 2: Percentage of Estimated Person Days from Agriculture related Work Out of Total**



Source: nrega.nic.in

the ownership and outreach of this scheme will enrich the rural economy and take it to the next level. To move in that direction, the following need to be attended to:

- ♦ Villagers need to be educated on the rights-perspective of this programme and their entitlements under this.
- ♦ A large number of rural youth and women need to be informed of the various provisions of the Act and be encouraged to actively engage in the role of Village Social Auditors (VSAs), Mates and GRSs so that the inclusion is led in a self-sustained manner.
- ♦ These processes need to be envisioned for a long term, and efforts need to be made to make these free from time and fund-flow constraints.
- ♦ Information needs to be passed on to rural HHs in a simplistic and timely manner.
- ♦ In Betul district, because land distribution did not take place, many villagers were unable to take up work on their individual land under the scheme. The selection criteria can be reviewed further to put in place a community-led, potential-beneficiary identification process.
- ♦ Efforts need to be made for PRA for all the rural development schemes. This will bring in unanimity in operations and establish a culture.

- ♦ Focussed attempts are needed to create more opportunities to establish communication between the village community and PRI functionaries. This will contribute to reducing the trust deficit to a great extent.
- ♦ Women's SHGs and CBOs need to work towards ensuring greater participation and creating social mobilization in the villages.

To create convergence of all the schemes has been a struggle all through the planning process. This was especially so in planning for convergence under NRLM because Ghora Dongri block is a non-intensive block under NRLM. There were openings that will keep increasing for convergence in the other schemes. The changed perception of BPT members, block officials, district officials and the village community suggests that, in the years to come, continuing with these participatory processes will contribute greatly to integrated village development. The increased confidence of the villagers will inspire the involvement of a larger number of people which, in turn, will lead to mass awareness. It will allow an increasingly strong grass-roots democracy to flourish. This will bring all the people together for a common cause, create a healthy governance system and contribute to eradicating poverty.