

Loot For Work Programme

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The National Food For Work Programme (NFFWP) was launched in November 2004 in the country's poorest 150 districts. It is supposed to be an interim arrangement, to be phased out once the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act comes into force in the same districts. As the NFFWP guidelines put it, the programme "is an experiment, which if successfully carried out, will give the government the necessary confidence to take responsibility for providing wage employment guarantee". How is this "experiment" doing?

It is a little early to draw firm conclusions, but some interesting insights emerge from a recent survey conducted by a team of students from Delhi University and Jawaharlal Nehru University. The survey was undertaken in six districts: Badwani (Madhya Pradesh), Dungarpur (Rajasthan), Palamau (Jharkhand), Purulia (West Bengal), Sonbhadra (Uttar Pradesh) and Surguja (Chhattisgarh). In each district, a team of investigators surveyed 10 randomly-selected worksites in one block. In addition, they attempted to perform a verification of muster rolls in one worksite.

The picture emerging from this survey is alarming. The NFFWP guidelines, weak as they are in the first place, are simply not being enforced. The problem may be illustrated with reference to the maintenance of "muster rolls". These muster rolls are crucial documents, which contain (or are supposed to contain) detailed information on the number of days of work performed by, and wages paid to, each labourer. The NFFWP guidelines clearly state that muster rolls should be available for public scrutiny. This is very important since fudging of muster rolls is the principal method through which funds are siphoned off from public employment programmes.

However, muster rolls are virtually impossible to obtain. Even with a letter of introduction from NC Saxena, commissioner of the Supreme Court, the investigators faced difficulties in obtaining sample muster rolls for verification. And the verifications they were able to carry out showed that much of the information contained in muster rolls was fake.

In Sonbhadra district, it was found that there were two sets of muster rolls: "Kutchra" muster rolls, scribbled in a cheap notebook and kept at the worksite, and "pucca" muster rolls, maintained on the prescribed forms and hidden from public scrutiny. Actual wage payments are based on kutchra muster rolls which have authentic information on the number of days of work done by each labourer. But the financial allocations are based on pucca muster rolls. Pucca muster rolls are freely "manufactured", and bear no relation to kutchra muster rolls. Any amount of money can be siphoned off this way.

The situation was not very different in other districts. In Surguja, the investigators were made to run from pillar to post in search of muster rolls. It is only after the Rozgar Adhikar Yatra stormed the district headquarters of the irrigation department that a sample

of muster rolls was obtained. A public verification uncovered massive discrepancies: Some labourers had worked for three days only, but 60 days of work had been entered against their names in the muster rolls. Out of 60 days of wages paid, three went to the labourers and the rest must have been siphoned off.

In Palamau, muster rolls were fudged with some sophistication. Some had names of labourers on the left-hand side, and their signatures (or thumbprints) on the right-hand side. The middle columns, with details of work done and wages due, were left blank, presumably to be filled at an appropriate time by enterprising officials.

The lack of transparency of muster rolls is only one illustration, among many, of the systematic failure to enforce the NFFWP guidelines. Another important example is the failure to pay minimum wages. The investigators did not find a single worksite where legal minimum wages had been paid as prescribed in the guidelines. Labourers are routinely paid as little as Rs 25 or Rs 30 per day—less than half the minimum wage. At some worksites in Badwani, labourers were told that if they asked for the minimum wage they would be dismissed. In Purulia, one poor woman who had worked for three days with her son and daughter earned as little as 13 kg of rice for these nine person-days of work.

In short, the NFFWP has been launched in haste, without much political will. Not only have the guidelines failed to build on insights that had emerged in the process of drafting the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, the government is not even making a serious attempt to enforce these guidelines.

The only place where the programme emerged in a positive light was Rajasthan: Muster rolls were authentic, contractors had been kept out, wages were quite close to the legal minimum, and labourers had a favourable view of the assets created under the programme. This shows that the programme can work — but only if basic safeguards are in place, starting with strong provisions for transparency and accountability.

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File. No: M-13050/9/2005-SP.IDA
Planning Commission
Government of India
(State Plans Division)

Yojana Bhavan, Sansad Marg,
New Delhi, Dated 21st June, 2006.

ORDER

Subject: Sub-Group of Experts on issues pertaining the Jarawa Tribe in Andaman & Nicobar Islands.

In partial modification of Planning Commission Orders of even number dated 23rd February, 2nd May, 8th May and 1st June 2006 on the above subject, the tenure of the Sub Group of Experts is extended by one more month i.e. upto 23rd July, 2006.

The other terms and conditions of the Sub Group will remain unchanged.


(R. Sridharan)
Joint Secretary (Admn.)

To
All Members of the Sub-Group.

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Chief Secretary, Andaman & Nicobar Administration
Standard Distribution, Planning Commission.


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Joint Secretary (Admn.)