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Syncing rural livelihoods with forest rights

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There is great scope for aligning MGNREGA and forest projects for generating jobs and creating assets

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Projects related to soil and water conservation indirectly contribute to forest conservation efforts, with MGNREGA's and Forest Rights Act's objectives. | Photo Credit: KIRAN BAKALE



Indi  a complex web of challenges and opportunities. In this context, two prominent government initiatives, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and the Forest Rights Act (FRA), emerge as crucial tools for improving the lives of rural communities.

While these programmes operate independently, a strategic confluence between MGNREGA and FRA leads to synergistic impact, fostering socio-economic upliftment and environmental conservation.

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MGNREGA & FRA

MGNREGA, as a social welfare programme, reflects a Keynesian approach to the 'State's role' in providing employment and building essential rural infrastructure.

Ensuring 100 days of wage employment for rural households, its primary goal is to guarantee livelihood security through labour-intensive projects in rural development, spanning road construction, water conservation, land reclamation and more. This ambitious programme has significantly contributed to poverty alleviation in rural areas, serving as a safety net for millions of vulnerable households.

In contrast, the Scheduled Tribes And Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition Of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 recognises the rights of the forest-dwelling tribal communities and other traditional forest dwellers to forest resources, on which these communities were

dependent for a variety of needs, including livelihood, habitation and different socio-cultural needs.

Aimed at securing their livelihoods and ensuring rights over forest resources, FRA empowers marginalised communities while recognising their vital role in forest conservation.

MGNREGA and FRA initiatives have complementarity and convergence in their objectives. This synergy can empower local communities, creating a multiplier effect that generates positive outcomes for rural livelihoods and environmental conservation.

The Ministry of Rural Development offers 150 days of wage employment to Forest Rights Act (FRA) beneficiaries per household in a financial year, benefitting approximately 22.3 lakh individuals with 47.96 lakhs acres of individual land titles in States such as Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh etc; for example, the State of Chhattisgarh records 3,42,955 beneficiaries spread across 33 districts, with FRA beneficiaries collectively owning 1,10,978,802.02 acres of private land.

In the current fiscal year (2023-24), MGNREGA has seen 17,752 households accomplishing 100 days of employment, with 4,47,825 persondays exceeding 100 days. Similarly, MGNREGA enables various projects like afforestation, water conservation, and agricultural improvements in 1.3 lakhs Community Forest Rights (CFR) covering 1.32 crore acres of land. The Gram Sabha is a highly empowered body under both Acts, enabling the tribal population to have a decisive say in determining local policies and schemes impacting them.

It leads to increased employment and agricultural yields and underscores the significance of aligning

conservation efforts with rural employment programmes.

Aligning with the Forest Rights Act, MGNREGA strategically engages its workforce in activities centred on non-timber forest products (NTFPs). Thus, it attempts to provide empowerment to communities residing in forests. This cooperative strategy can strengthen community bonds and champion sustainable resource management, showcasing the benefits of integrating these two initiatives.

Environmental benefits

The significant environmental benefits are a substantial success of MGNREGA through water conservation and afforestation initiatives. These activities have improved groundwater levels and drinking water availability and contributed to enhanced forest cover.

Projects related to soil and water conservation indirectly contribute to forest conservation efforts, aligning with MGNREGA's and FRA's objectives. MGNREGA activities, such as building check dams and percolation tanks, enhance water availability and prevent soil erosion, benefiting both ecosystems and communities and proving to be a strategic imperative for empowering tribal populations and a powerful catalyst for environmental conservation.

Policy Recommendations

(i) **Integrated Planning:** Formulate comprehensive development plans aligning MGNREGA projects with recognised forest rights areas for synergistic utilisation. This ensures maximum positive outcomes for forest-dependent communities. Possible areas of exploration include diversifying livelihoods through non-farm activities like nursery management and watershed

development linked with sustainable land use practices. Encouraging collaborative planning at local levels, involving Gram Sabhas and forest management committees to align MGNREGA projects with FRA objectives, is critical.

(ii) **Gender-Inclusive Empowerment:** Emphasise integration to recognise and grant land rights to women, actively involving them in MGNREGA projects for gender-equitable development. Highlight successful examples include the involvement of Self-Help groups.

(iii) **Rural-Urban Migration Control:** Leverage FRA's secure land tenure and MGNREGA's employment opportunities to deter rural-urban migration. Focus on projects creating local employment and retaining skilled workers in rural areas for community development.

(iv) **Skilled Workforce Development:** Prioritise training and deploying skilled personnel at the grassroots level for efficient implementation. This can be done by converging with other departments, including skill development, higher education, etc.

(v) **Civil Society Partnership:** Foster partnerships with civil society organisations, particularly NGOs, as intermediaries. NGOs can facilitate seamless integration by educating communities about FRA rights, aiding in MGNREGA project identification, and promoting sustainable practices.

(vi) **Linkage with Other Schemes:** Strengthen connections with schemes such as Skill Development, Forest Department initiatives, and Food Processing for a more comprehensive and cohesive approach. Collaborative efforts have proven successful in food processing, such as various millet-based products, bamboo plantations, etc.

Therefore, the expected outcomes for forests and forest-dependent communities suggest a compelling case for implementing MGNREGA and FRA in forest areas. The collaboration allows for holistic development, addressing the needs of communities and nurturing the ecosystems they depend upon.

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