

## **District-Level Strategic Planning for Rights-Based Employment Programmes under MGNREGA in Haryana**

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DOI: 10.46609/IJSSER.2023.v08i12.025 URL: <https://doi.org/10.46609/IJSSER.2023.v08i12.025>

Received: 6 October 2023 / Accepted: 20 December 2023 / Published: 5 January 2024

### **ABSTRACT**

*Rights-based employment programmes represent a significant shift in welfare policy by transforming discretionary social assistance into enforceable state obligations. In India, this approach is institutionalised through the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), which mandates a legal guarantee of wage employment implemented through a decentralised governance framework. While a substantial literature evaluates the labour market and welfare impacts of MGNREGA, comparatively limited attention has been paid to the institutional planning mechanisms that translate statutory guarantees into operational outcomes. This study examines district-level perspective planning as a critical yet under-analysed governance instrument within MGNREGA. Adopting a qualitative institutional-policy analysis, the paper draws on statutory provisions, operational guidelines, policy documents, audit reports, and multilateral evaluations to analyse the design, role, and constraints of five-year District Perspective Plans. The analysis focuses on how medium-term planning is intended to integrate employment generation, fiscal provisioning, and asset creation within a decentralized rights-based employment system. The findings suggest that although perspective plans are formally positioned as strategic planning instruments, their practical influence is often limited by administrative capacity constraints, weak integration with annual budgeting processes, and misaligned institutional incentives. As a result, planning frequently functions as a procedural requirement rather than a strategic tool, undermining the credibility and sustainability of employment guarantees. By foregrounding planning quality as an institutional mediator between legal entitlements and programme outcomes, the study contributes to the literature on rights-based welfare, decentralised governance, and public finance. The findings underscore the need to strengthen district-level planning capacity and better align medium-term planning with fiscal processes to enhance the effectiveness of employment guarantee programmes.*

**Keywords:** Rights-Based Employment, MGNREGA, District Perspective Planning, Decentralized Governance, Medium-Term Planning, Institutional Capacity, Strategic Planning.

### **1. Statement of Problem:**

Rights-based employment programmes are designed to move beyond discretionary welfare by creating legally enforceable entitlements to work, thereby strengthening income security and social protection in vulnerable labour markets. In India, this paradigm is institutionalised through the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), which guarantees wage employment to rural households within a decentralised governance framework. While the programme is among the largest rights-based employment initiatives globally, its effectiveness depends not only on statutory provisions and budgetary allocations but also on the institutional mechanisms through which employment guarantees are planned and operationalized. Existing research on MGNREGA has largely concentrated on ex-post outcomes, such as employment generation, wage effects, consumption smoothing, and poverty reduction. Although this literature provides valuable insights into programme impacts, it offers limited understanding of the ex-ante planning processes that structure these outcomes. In particular, district-level perspective planning—conceived as a five-year strategic instrument to integrate employment demand, fiscal provisioning, and asset creation—has received minimal systematic academic attention. As a result, the governance of logic, functional role, and effectiveness of medium-term planning mechanisms under MGNREGA remain inadequately understood. Policy documents and audit reports suggest that district perspective plans are frequently treated as procedural requirements rather than as strategic tools for guiding implementation. Weak administrative capacity, fragmented fiscal coordination, and short-term budgeting practices further constrain the ability of planning mechanisms to translate legal employment guarantees into credible and predictable commitments. This disconnect between the rights-based intent of the programme and the institutional realities of planning and governance constitutes a critical problem in the design and implementation of decentralized employment programmes. Addressing this problem requires shifting analytical focus from programme outcomes to the institutional planning mechanisms that operationalize rights-based employment guarantees. Without a systematic examination of how district-level perspective planning is designed, integrated, and constrained within decentralised governance structures, efforts to strengthen the effectiveness and sustainability of employment guarantee programmes risk remaining incomplete.

### **2. Introduction:**

Rights-based employment programmes have increasingly been recognised as an effective policy instrument for addressing chronic rural poverty, employment insecurity, and structural labour

market imperfections in developing economies. Unlike conventional welfare interventions, rights-based programmes create a legal entitlement to employment, thereby shifting social protection from discretionary relief to enforceable state responsibility (Dreze, 2007; Sen, 2009; Ravallion, 2019). In the Indian context, this paradigm shift was institutionalised through the enactment of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in 2005, which came into operational effect across districts in a phased manner beginning in 2006–07. Early evaluations of MGNREGA highlighted its potential as a landmark intervention in rural labour markets by providing a floor to wages, enhancing the bargaining power of rural workers, and offering protection against seasonal and distress-driven unemployment (Dreze & Oldiges, 2007; Ministry of Rural Development, 2008; Ambasta, Shankar & Shah, 2008). By legally guaranteeing up to 100 days of wage employment per rural household, the programme sought not only to supplement rural incomes but also to stimulate local economic activity through increased consumption and multiplier effects in rural areas (Dreze, 2007; Planning Commission, 2009). These early studies also emphasised that MGNREGA marked a departure from earlier public works programmes by embedding transparency provisions, social audits, and decentralised planning within its institutional design. Beyond short-term employment effects, MGNREGA was conceptualised as a mechanism for durable asset creation and sustainable rural development. Policy guidelines issued during the late 2000s stressed the prioritisation of works related to water conservation, drought proofing, land development, and rural connectivity, to strengthen the productive base of the rural economy (Government of India, 2008). Empirical assessments during 2008–2010 observed that where implementation capacity was strong, the programme contributed to improved asset quality and enhanced livelihood resilience, though outcomes varied considerably across states and districts (Ambasta et al., 2008; Chopra, 2009; World Bank, 2010).

Subsequent research during the 2011–2015 period deepened understanding of MGNREGA's labour market and welfare impacts. Studies documented its role in raising rural wages and altering labour supply decisions, particularly in regions with stronger administrative capacity (Imbert & Papp, 2015; Zimmermann, 2012). At the same time, scholars highlighted persistent implementation challenges, including planning weaknesses, delays in wage payments, and uneven administrative capability across districts (Khera, 2011; Dreze & Khera, 2013; Planning Commission, 2014). These studies increasingly pointed to governance and planning capacity, rather than programme design, as key determinants of performance. A critical feature underpinning the effectiveness of MGNREGA is its decentralised planning framework, which places village institutions at the centre of programme design and implementation. The Act mandates that employment demand and work identification originate at the village level and are progressively consolidated at the block and district levels. Within this framework, the district perspective plan serves as a medium-term planning instrument outlining, over a five-year

horizon, the nature of works to be undertaken, projected employment generation in terms of person-days, and estimated financial requirements. Policy documents and evaluations consistently recognised that the success of MGNREGA depended heavily on the quality of such planning processes rather than merely on financial allocations (Planning Commission, 2009; Government of India, 2013).

More recent literature from 2016 onwards further reinforces this insight. While advances in payment systems and transparency mechanisms improved programme delivery in several states (Muralidharan, Niehaus & Sukhtankar, 2016; Niehaus & Sukhtankar, 2020), significant inter-district variation in employment outcomes persisted. Scholars increasingly attribute this variation to differences in local planning capacity, administrative coordination, and strategic prioritisation within decentralised governance structures (Berg et al., 2018; World Bank, 2018; Ravallion, 2019). Despite this recognition, empirical research continues to focus predominantly on realised outcomes, with limited systematic examination of medium-term district-level planning instruments. Evidence from policy reviews and academic studies suggests that while annual action plans are routinely prepared, five-year district perspective planning often remains procedural, limiting the programme's ability to deliver sustained employment and durable assets aligned with local development needs (World Bank, 2014; NITI Aayog, 2017; MoRD, 2021). This persistent gap between the programme's rights-based intent and its operational planning mechanisms underscores the need for closer analytical attention to district-level planning processes.

In this context, the present study examines five-year district perspective plans prepared under MGNREGA in selected districts of Haryana. By analysing the structure, projections, and planning logic of these documents, the study contributes to the literature on rights-based employment programmes by shifting attention from ex post outcome evaluation to ex ante strategic planning. Such an approach is particularly relevant for understanding how decentralised planning frameworks can translate statutory employment guarantees into effective and sustainable rural development outcomes in practice.

### **3. Literature Review**

**3.1 Rights-Based Employment and Welfare State Theory:** The conceptual foundations of rights-based employment programmes are rooted in the broader literature on social protection, labour market failures, and welfare state theory. Early theoretical contributions in the mid-2000s framed rights-based interventions as a normative and institutional shift away from discretionary safety-net programmes toward justiciable social entitlements, redefining the relationship between the state and citizens (Dreze, 2007). This shift aligns with capability-based perspectives on justice and welfare, which emphasise enforceable rights as essential to substantive freedom and social

inclusion (Sen, 2009). From a labour market perspective, rights-based employment guarantees are theorised to address both demand-side vulnerabilities—by stabilising incomes during periods of labour surplus—and supply-side distortions, particularly monopsonistic rural labour markets, seasonal unemployment, and unequal bargaining power (Ravallion, 2019). Early analytical work during 2006–2010 situated employment guarantees within a broader critique of residual welfare models, arguing that employment-based entitlements could function as automatic stabilisers in low-income economies (Dreze, 2007; Planning Commission, 2009).

Within this theoretical framework, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) has been widely analysed as a paradigmatic case of rights-based social policy. Initial assessments highlighted how the programme's legal guarantee differentiated it from earlier public works schemes by embedding transparency, accountability, and grievance redressal within its institutional design (Dreze & Oldiges, 2007). However, welfare state theory also cautions that legal entitlements alone are insufficient to ensure effective delivery. Comparative scholarship on welfare regimes emphasises that institutional capacity, administrative coordination, and fiscal governance are decisive in translating rights into outcomes (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Barr, 2012).

This insight gained renewed relevance in the post-2010 literature, which increasingly framed rights-based programmes as institutionally contingent rather than self-executing. Studies during 2011–2015 highlighted that variations in state capacity and decentralised governance structures could mediate the effectiveness of legal guarantees (Khera, 2011; Dreze & Khera, 2013). More recent contributions (2016–2021) further integrate rights-based employment into broader debates on social protection systems, fiscal sustainability, and state capacity in developing economies (Ravallion, 2019; World Bank, 2018). Collectively, this body of work establishes a strong theoretical foundation while simultaneously underscoring the importance of institutional mechanisms—particularly planning and coordination—in realising rights-based entitlements.

**3.2 Labour Market and Welfare Impacts of MGNREGA:** A substantial empirical literature evaluates the labour market and welfare impacts of MGNREGA since its inception. Early descriptive and evaluative studies (2006–2010) documented improvements in employment availability, wage stabilisation, and reduced distress migration, particularly among marginalised rural households (Ambasta, Shankar, & Shah, 2008; Dreze & Khera, 2009). These studies emphasised MGNREGA's role in providing a wage floor and enhancing workers' bargaining power in local labour markets. During the subsequent phase (2011–2015), empirical research increasingly employed quasi-experimental and econometric techniques to identify causal effects. Studies using difference-in-differences and instrumental variable approaches found that MGNREGA raised rural wages and altered labour supply decisions, with stronger effects in districts exhibiting higher programme intensity and better administrative capacity (Zimmermann,

2012; Imbert & Papp, 2015). These findings reinforced the view that employment guarantees could meaningfully influence equilibrium labour market outcomes.

From 2016 onwards, the literature shifted toward implementation quality and governance mechanisms. Research demonstrated that administrative reforms—such as electronic wage payments, biometric authentication, and improved monitoring systems—significantly affected programme effectiveness by reducing leakages and payment delays (Muralidharan, Niehaus, & Sukhtankar, 2016). Later studies further examined corruption dynamics and incentive structures, highlighting how governance reforms could reshape local political economy outcomes under MGNREGA (Niehaus & Sukhtankar, 2020).

Despite these advances, a consistent limitation across this literature is its outcome-centric orientation. Employment, wages, and consumption effects are treated as primary objects of analysis, while planning processes are largely assumed to be exogenous. As a result, the mechanisms through which planning decisions influence employment generation, asset composition, and sustainability remain weakly theorised and empirically under-examined. This gap persists even in the most recent studies (2018–2021), which acknowledge inter-district heterogeneity but rarely interrogate the planning instruments that structure such variation (Berg et al., 2018; MoRD, 2021).

**3.3 Decentralisation, Governance, and Planning under MGNREGA:** Decentralised governance constitutes a central pillar of MGNREGA's institutional architecture. Drawing on classical theories of fiscal decentralisation and participatory governance, early scholarship argues that devolving planning authority to local governments can improve allocative efficiency by leveraging local information and preferences (Oates, 1999; Bardhan & Mookherjee, 2006). In the Indian context, decentralisation was expected to enhance community participation and accountability in public works implementation. However, empirical studies consistently caution that decentralisation outcomes are conditional on administrative capacity, inter-governmental coordination, and political incentives (Bardhan, 2002). Early evaluations of MGNREGA (2008–2010) observed wide variation in planning quality across districts, suggesting that decentralisation alone does not guarantee effective outcomes (Chopra, 2009; World Bank, 2010). Within the MGNREGA framework, the District Perspective Plan (DPP) occupies a strategically important position. Policy guidelines conceptualise the DPP as a five-year planning instrument intended to integrate village-level development needs with medium-term employment projections and fiscal requirements (Government of India, 2008; Planning Commission, 2009). Despite this formal importance, academic engagement with DPPs remains limited. Studies during the 2011–2015 period frequently mention district planning in passing but treat perspective plans as procedural artefacts rather than substantive planning tools. More recent policy reviews and governance-focused studies (2016–2021) reiterate that weak district-level planning capacity

contributes to fragmented implementation and uneven employment outcomes (World Bank, 2014; NITI Aayog, 2017; World Bank, 2018). Yet, systematic academic analysis of how DPPs are structured, prioritised, and operationalised remains scarce. Consequently, the role of district-level planning as a governance mechanism shaping programme coherence and sustainability is insufficiently understood.

**3.4 Medium-Term Planning, Public Finance, and Employment Programmes:** The public finance literature underscores the importance of medium-term expenditure and planning frameworks in ensuring fiscal discipline, strategic prioritisation, and credibility of large-scale public programmes. Early contributions emphasised that annual budgeting alone is inadequate for managing programmes with fluctuating demand and long-term development objectives (Schick, 2010). Medium-term planning frameworks are therefore seen as essential institutional complements to rights-based entitlements. In the context of employment guarantee schemes, medium-term planning plays a dual role: reconciling uncertain employment demand with predictable fiscal provisioning, and aligning short-term employment generation with long-term asset creation. However, empirical research on employment programmes—both globally and in India—has largely focused on annual expenditures and realised outputs, leaving medium-term planning frameworks under-analysed (Allen, Hemming, & Potter, 2015). This gap is particularly significant in the Indian context given the scale and fiscal implications of MGNREGA. While national-level studies from 2010 onwards analyse aggregate expenditure trends and inter-state fiscal variations (Planning Commission, 2014; RBI, 2019), few studies examine how district-level medium-term plans are constructed or how they align employment projections with local infrastructure deficits. Recent policy documents (2017–2021) explicitly acknowledge that weak perspective planning undermines the strategic potential of MGNREGA, yet academic research has not kept pace with this policy concern (NITI Aayog, 2017; MoRD, 2021).

**Research Gap:**

While the theoretical literature firmly establishes rights-based employment as a transformative shift in welfare state design (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act; Dreze, 2007; Sen, 2009), empirical research has largely treated such programmes as self-executing legal entitlements. Welfare state theory consistently emphasises that institutional capacity, administrative coordination, and governance quality are critical to translating rights into outcomes (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Barr, 2012); however, these insights have not been adequately operationalised in empirical studies of MGNREGA, leaving the institutional mechanisms through which statutory guarantees are converted into credible employment commitments under-theorised (Khera, 2011; Dreze & Khera, 2013). Moreover, the extensive empirical literature on MGNREGA remains overwhelmingly outcome-centric, focusing on realised employment, wages, consumption, and migration effects (Ambasta et al., 2008; Imbert

& Papp, 2015; Berg et al., 2018), while implicitly assuming planning processes to be uniform or exogenous. Even governance-oriented studies that acknowledge substantial inter-district heterogeneity rarely examine how ex-ante planning decisions shape employment projections, asset composition, or sustainability (World Bank, 2014; Niehaus & Sukhtankar, 2020). Despite the centrality of decentralised governance in MGNREGA’s institutional architecture (Oates, 1999; Bardhan & Mookherjee, 2006), systematic academic analysis of district-level medium-term planning instruments—particularly the five-year District Perspective Plan—remains notably absent. Although policy guidelines conceptualise the District Perspective Plan as a strategic tool integrating employment demand, fiscal provisioning, and local development priorities (Government of India, 2008; Planning Commission, 2009), existing studies largely treat it as a procedural requirement rather than an analytical object (Chopra, 2009; World Bank, 2014). Finally, while the public finance literature underscores the importance of medium-term planning frameworks for fiscal credibility and strategic prioritisation (Schick, 2010; Allen et al., 2015), this perspective has not been meaningfully integrated into analyses of employment guarantee schemes, which continue to privilege annual budgets and realised expenditures (Planning Commission, 2014; RBI, 2019; MoRD, 2021). Taken together, these gaps highlight the need to shift analytical attention from ex post programme outcomes to ex ante planning mechanisms; addressing this need, the present study examines five-year District Perspective Plans under MGNREGA.

**Figure 1. Conceptual framework linking rights-based employment guarantees to programme outcomes**



*This figure illustrates the conceptual framework of the study, highlighting district-level perspective planning as the institutional mechanism through which statutory employment guarantees under MGNREGA are translated into credible and sustainable programme outcomes.*

**4. Research Objectives:**

1. To examine the governance logic of district-level perspective planning under MGNREGA.
2. To analyze the role of medium-term planning in operationalizing rights-based employment guarantees.
3. To assess institutional constraints affecting planning effectiveness in decentralized employment programmes.

**5. Methodology:**

**Figure 2. District perspective planning within MGNREGA’s decentralised governance framework**

District Perspective Planning within Decentralised Governance



*This figure depicts the placement of the District Perspective Plan within the decentralised planning architecture of MGNREGA, showing the flow from village-level demand identification to district-level planning and subsequent implementation.*

This study adopts a qualitative institutional and policy analysis approach to examine district-level perspective planning under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). The research focuses on ex ante planning mechanisms, governance design, and institutional capacity, rather than ex post programme outcomes such as employment generation or income effects. This methodological choice is appropriate given the study's objective of understanding how statutory employment guarantees are operationalised through decentralised planning frameworks. The analysis relies exclusively on secondary documentary evidence, including statutory provisions of the MGNREGA Act, operational and planning guidelines issued by the Ministry of Rural Development, reports of the Planning Commission and NITI Aayog, audit observations of the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG), and evaluation studies by multilateral institutions such as the World Bank. These sources are treated as authoritative institutional data for analysing planning intent, governance architecture, and administrative constraints.

A thematic institutional framework is employed to guide analysis across three dimensions: (i) the formal design and intended role of district-level perspective planning, (ii) the conceptual integration of employment generation, fiscal provisioning, and asset creation over a medium-term horizon, and (iii) systemic institutional and administrative factors influencing planning effectiveness. This approach enables structured synthesis of policy intent and governance realities without relying on primary surveys or district-specific planning documents.

## **6. Discussion**

This study examined district-level perspective planning under the **Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)** through an institutional and policy lens, focusing on how medium-term planning mechanisms are designed, conceptualised, and constrained within a decentralised rights-based employment framework. The discussion below situates the findings within existing theoretical and policy debates, extending beyond descriptive assessment to interpret broader governance implications.

### ***6.1 Perspective Planning as an Institutional Mechanism:***

The analysis indicates that district-level perspective planning under MGNREGA is explicitly designed as a strategic institutional mechanism intended to operationalise statutory employment guarantees over a medium-term horizon. Policy guidelines conceptualise the District Perspective Plan (DPP) as a bridge between village-level employment demand and district-level fiscal and

asset planning, thereby translating legal entitlements into predictable employment commitments. This design reflects core insights from welfare state theory, which emphasise that rights-based interventions require institutional scaffolding to ensure credibility and continuity. However, evidence from policy reviews and audit reports suggests a persistent disconnect between formal design and functional practice. While the DPP occupies a central place in official planning architecture, it is frequently overshadowed by annual planning instruments such as labour budgets and action plans. This dynamic points to a broader pattern of “procedural compliance without strategic use,” wherein planning instruments exist formally but exert limited influence on implementation decisions. Such outcomes are consistent with decentralisation literature, which cautions that devolved planning authority does not automatically yield strategic governance unless supported by adequate capacity and incentives.

### ***6.2 Planning Coherence and the Employment–Fiscal Interface:***

A key insight emerging from the discussion concerns the weak integration between employment planning and fiscal provisioning. Although policy frameworks envisage medium-term alignment between projected employment demand and financial resources, the continued dominance of annual budgeting practices constrains the operational relevance of prospective planning. This tension reflects a structural mismatch between the rights-based logic of employment guarantees, which implies demand-driven and counter-cyclical provisioning, and conventional public finance practices oriented toward annual expenditure control. From a public finance perspective, this misalignment undermines the stabilising potential of MGNREGA as an employment guarantee programme. Medium-term planning is intended to provide predictability and strategic prioritisation; however, when fiscal flows remain uncertain or delayed, district planners face strong incentives to focus on short-term implementation rather than medium-term planning coherence. The findings therefore, suggest that planning effectiveness under MGNREGA is inseparable from broader fiscal governance reforms, including improved predictability of fund releases and closer integration between planning and budgeting processes.

### ***6.3 Administrative Capacity and Governance Constraints:***

The discussion further highlights institutional and administrative capacity constraints as critical determinants of planning effectiveness. Audit findings and evaluation studies consistently point to shortages of technical personnel, limited planning expertise, and inadequate data systems at district and block levels. These constraints reduce the analytical depth of perspective plans and limit their ability to guide employment and asset prioritization meaningfully. Importantly, the decentralized governance framework amplifies these capacity gaps. District administrations are expected to integrate village-level demands, technical feasibility, and fiscal considerations, yet often lack the institutional support required to perform this role effectively. This reinforces

theoretical arguments that decentralisation without capacity-building can produce uneven governance outcomes and may even exacerbate inter-district disparities. In this context, planning quality emerges as a plausible institutional explanation for the heterogeneity in employment and asset outcomes observed across districts in outcome-focused studies, even though such studies rarely examine planning mechanisms directly.

#### ***6.4 Planning, Incentives, and Administrative Behaviour:***

Beyond capacity constraints, the discussion also points to the role of administrative incentives and behavioural dynamics. Medium-term planning competes with short-term administrative pressures related to fund utilisation targets, reporting requirements, and political visibility. These pressures can crowd out strategic planning, encouraging a focus on immediate execution rather than long-term coherence. This insight aligns with governance scholarship emphasising that institutional design must account for incentive structures if planning instruments are to be used strategically rather than symbolically.

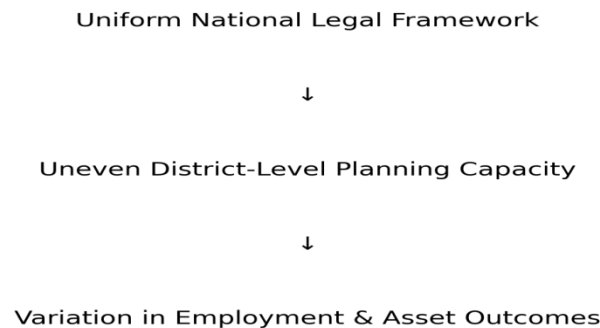
The treatment of perspective planning as a procedural requirement rather than a strategic tool thus reflects not only technical limitations but also institutional incentive misalignment. Addressing this challenge requires policy attention not merely to planning formats or guidelines, but to the broader governance environment in which planning decisions are made.

#### ***6.5 Implications for Rights-Based Employment Governance:***

Taken together, the extended discussion reinforces the argument that the effectiveness of rights-based employment guarantees depends critically on planning quality as an institutional mediator. Legal entitlements and budgetary allocations, while necessary, are insufficient in the absence of robust planning mechanisms capable of integrating employment demand, fiscal resources, and development priorities over time. By foregrounding district-level perspective planning, the study complements outcome-focused evaluations and contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how rights-based programmes function in practice. More broadly, the findings suggest that MGNREGA should be understood not merely as a large-scale public works programme, but as a planning-dependent governance intervention whose success hinges on institutional design, administrative capacity, and fiscal coordination. This perspective has relevance beyond the Indian context, offering insights for other developing economies experimenting with rights-based employment or public works programmes under decentralised governance arrangements.

**Figure 3. Explaining variation in programme outcomes under a uniform legal framework**

Explaining Outcome Variation under a Uniform Legal Framework



*This figure explains how differences in district-level planning capacity can generate variation in employment and asset outcomes despite a uniform national legal framework governing MGNREGA.*

**7. Policy Implications**

The findings of this study yield several policy-relevant insights for strengthening the effectiveness of rights-based employment programmes, particularly within decentralised governance frameworks such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA).

***7.1 Reposition District Perspective Plans as Strategic Instruments:***

First, policy frameworks should explicitly reposition district-level perspective plans from procedural compliance documents to strategic planning instruments. This requires moving beyond standardized formats toward analytical planning tools that meaningfully inform employment projections, asset prioritization, and convergence with district development objectives. Periodic review of perspective plans—linked implementation feedback rather than mere submission timelines—could enhance their relevance and operational influence.

***7.2 Strengthen District-Level Planning Capacity:***

Second, the effectiveness of medium-term planning depends critically on institutional and technical capacity at the district level. Dedicated planning units within district administrations,

supported by trained technical staff and planning specialists, would improve the analytical quality of perspective plans. Capacity-building initiatives should focus not only on procedural training but also on skills related to data analysis, medium-term forecasting, and integration of employment planning with sectoral development priorities.

### ***7.3 Integrate Medium-Term Planning with Budgeting Processes:***

Third, greater alignment between **perspective planning and annual budgeting** is essential for enhancing the credibility of employment guarantees. Medium-term employment projections should inform labour budgets and fund release mechanisms, reducing the uncertainty that undermines planning effectiveness. From a public finance perspective, this calls for closer coordination between planning authorities and finance departments to ensure that budgetary practices support, rather than constrain, medium-term planning objectives.

### ***7.4 Address Governance Incentives and Administrative Behaviour:***

Fourth, policy reforms must account for **administrative incentives** that currently prioritise short-term fund utilisation and reporting compliance over strategic planning. Introducing performance-linked incentives tied to planning coherence, asset sustainability, and convergence outcomes could encourage more meaningful engagement with perspective planning. Without addressing incentive structures, improvements in planning formats or guidelines are unlikely to yield substantive change.

### ***7.5 Reinforce Planning as a Core Pillar of Rights-Based Employment:***

Finally, the findings suggest that rights-based employment programmes require planning to be treated as a core governance function, rather than a subsidiary administrative task. Strengthening perspective planning under MGNREGA would enhance not only employment predictability but also the programme's contribution to durable asset creation and rural development. This has broader relevance for other countries pursuing employment guarantees or large-scale public works programmes under decentralised governance arrangements.

## **8. Conclusion and Contribution**

This study contributes to the literature on rights-based employment and decentralised governance by shifting analytical attention from ex post programme outcomes to ex ante institutional planning mechanisms. By examining district-level perspective planning as a governance instrument, the paper integrates welfare state theory, decentralisation theory, and public finance perspectives into the analysis of MGNREGA. The key contribution lies in conceptualising planning quality as a critical mediating mechanism between statutory employment guarantees

and observed programme performance. In doing so, the study reframes MGNREGA not merely as a large-scale public works programme but as a planning-dependent social policy whose effectiveness hinges on institutional design and administrative capacity. Beyond the Indian context, the findings offer broader insights for developing economies implementing rights-based employment or public works programmes under decentralised governance structures.

## **9. Limitations and Future Research**

The study is subject to certain limitations. First, the analysis relies on secondary documentary evidence and does not examine the content of individual district perspective plans or primary perceptions of implementing officials. Second, the institutional focus precludes direct assessment of causal relationships between planning quality and employment outcomes.

These limitations point to promising avenues for future research. Subsequent studies may empirically analyse district perspective plan documents, conduct surveys or interviews with implementing officials, or link planning indicators with administrative outcome data. Such extensions would complement the institutional framework developed in this study and deepen understanding of how planning mechanisms shape the effectiveness of rights-based employment programmes.

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