

Mgnrega and Sustainable Development: A Synergistic Approach To Poverty Alleviation

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ABSTRACT

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is a revolutionary move to terminate poverty and unemployment in rural areas. The implementation of the scheme is successful in terms of large-scale employment, women empowerment, asset creation, watershed development, prevention of draught and reduction in large scale migration. The present investigation is a modest attempt to investigate into the potential of MGNREGS in attaining the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) using the available secondary data sources. The NITI Aayog entrusts the Ministry of Rural Development as the nodal agency for implementing SDG 1 and mentions MGNREGA as a 'core of the core' scheme integral to achieve the goal, since the MGNREGA features as a flagship scheme for ensuring social protection in rural India. The study is initiated with the hypothesis that there are many other potential links of MGNREGS of its contribution in achieving SDGs, given its unique design of creating employment opportunities, and creating infrastructure and economic utilities for better livelihoods.

Keywords: MGNREGA, asset creation, poverty, employment, economic utilities

Introduction

The year 2015 witnessed the adoption of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by the world leaders at the 70th United Nations (UN) Summit held at UN headquarters which aims for securing economic development, social equity and justice, along with environmental protection. These SDGs are an intergovernmental set of 17 goals with 169 targets and 244 global indicators committed by the 193 member states of the UN to guide the countries towards sustainable development. These goals are precisely drafted in such a way so as to ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity by the year 2030. It is framed in such a way that ending poverty must go with the approaches that build economic growth along with a range of other social needs,

including education, health, social protection and job opportunities, while tackling environmental protection and climate change. The sustainable development Agenda also provides an opportunity to renew and integrate efforts in order to meet, to a significant degree, national and global aspirations for sustainable living in a defined time frame.

Since India is also one of the signatories to the UN SDGs, we too need to work forward for the accomplishment of SDGs, for its successful implementation and international review of the progress of SDGs on a regular basis. The sustainable development agenda, for the country hosting one-sixth of the global human population, is very challenging. It is estimated that 39% of the Indian population are undernourished and not able to meet minimum dietary energy requirements. The gender gap ranking is much below the international peers and many of the neighbouring countries. The declining economic growth rate in India since the financial year (FY) 2016–17 has contributed to the most pertinent problems of the nation and basic needs of the people (Gupta et.al (2021). Thus, the creation of employment opportunity is the key driver for achieving the sustained growth in the country. In order to solve all the key issues pertaining to sustainable development agenda, our government has been organising and implementing diverse development programmes. Government has also been taking policies to synergise several programmes for attaining sustainable development. One such initiative taken is to align Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) with SDGs.

Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) aims to enhance the livelihood security of households in rural areas by providing at least one hundred days of guaranteed wage employment in a financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work. The MGNREGA has become a powerful instrument for inclusive growth in rural India through its impact on social protection, livelihood security and democratic governance. MGNREGA is the ever law internationally that guarantees wage employment at an unprecedented scale. The Act also emphasises the need to build enduring assets in rural regions, such as roads, canals, ponds, and wells. Within 5 kilometres of the applicant's home, employment must be available, and the minimum wage must be paid. The candidates are entitled to unemployment benefits if employment is not given within 15 days. Gram Panchayats are in charge of implementing it. The importance is placed on labour-intensive tasks, including building infrastructure for water harvesting, drought relief, and flood control. Protecting the environment, empowering rural women, limiting rural-urban migration, and promoting social security among the poor are other areas on which this programme focuses (Deb,2017).

The NITI Aayog entrusts the Ministry of Rural Development as the nodal agency for implementing SDG 1 (No poverty), and mentions MGNREGA as a 'core of the core' scheme integral to achieve the goal, since the MGNREGA features as a flagship scheme for ensuring

social protection in rural India (Faridi et.al, 2017). The present study is a modest attempt to explore the scope and effectiveness of the synergy between MGNREGS of its contribution in achieving SDGs, given its unique design of creating employment opportunities, and creating infrastructure and economic utilities for better livelihoods.

Objectives of the study

The paper seeks to analyse

1. The role of MGNREGS in effective implementation of SDGs.
2. Practical difficulties in synergising MGNREGS with SDGs.

Research Problem

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) has been a key program for poverty alleviation, rural development, and the enhancement of livelihoods in rural India. While the program has shown success in addressing issues such as unemployment, income inequality, and infrastructure deficits, its potential for contributing to the broader Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) remains underexplored to an extent. This research aims to investigate the synergy between MGNREGA and SDGs, focusing on how the program's goals and outcomes align with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Literature Review

MGNREGA's primary aim is poverty alleviation through employment generation. Several studies have demonstrated that the program has directly impacted rural poverty by providing stable, albeit temporary, income to low-income households. According to a report by the Ministry of Rural Development (2018), the program has lifted millions out of extreme poverty by reducing dependency on distressed migration and unorganized labor markets.

Although not explicitly focused on nutrition, MGNREGA contributes indirectly to food security by increasing household income, which in turn allows families to purchase food. Additionally, many of the works undertaken under MGNREGA, such as irrigation, water conservation, and watershed management, can enhance agricultural productivity, which contributes to improved food security in rural areas (Drèze & Khera, 2017).

Gender empowerment is one of the key social impacts of MGNREGA. Studies show that MGNREGA has increased female labor force participation, with women making up about 50% of the total workforce under the scheme. This not only provides women with an income but also challenges traditional gender roles by enhancing their decision-making power within households

(NREGA, 2019). However, challenges such as unequal wage distribution and gender-based violence persist and require further policy interventions (Agarwal, 2014).

MGNREGA projects have made significant contributions to improving rural water infrastructure. Water conservation projects like check dams, ponds, and groundwater recharge structures have been funded under MGNREGA, which aligns with SDG 6's objective of improving water accessibility and quality in rural areas (Sharma & Singh, 2020). These initiatives contribute to a sustainable supply of water, which is essential for both agriculture and daily consumption.

MGNREGA plays a crucial role in providing rural employment, especially in regions with limited access to organized labor markets. While the program has faced criticism for its implementation challenges, research by scholars such as Kumar and Ravindra (2019) points to its role in creating economic opportunities for marginalized communities. Furthermore, it contributes to improving the infrastructure, which is critical for long-term rural economic growth.

Several MGNREGA projects have directly supported environmental sustainability, such as afforestation, soil and water conservation, and the construction of sustainable infrastructure. A study by Agarwal (2021) found that MGNREGA's focus on green works and eco-friendly infrastructure has contributed to improving environmental resilience in rural areas, which is aligned with SDG 13. Projects focusing on water conservation, drought mitigation, and the restoration of degraded land directly address climate change impacts in rural areas.

MGNREGA is seen as an important instrument for reducing rural-urban income inequality and addressing regional disparities. By focusing on rural areas, where unemployment and poverty are more prevalent, it has helped uplift the most marginalized groups, including Dalits, Adivasis, and women. However, some studies have highlighted that implementation disparities across states may lead to unequal outcomes for different social groups (Patel & Dholakia, 2020).

Analysis and Interpretation

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) has been a cornerstone of rural development in India since its inception in 2005. Its objectives are multifaceted, including poverty alleviation, livelihood enhancement, and infrastructure development. The program aligns with several United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), addressing both immediate and long-term developmental needs in rural areas. The synergy between MGNREGA and SDGs provides a platform for integrating economic, social, and environmental goals, but it also faces challenges in terms of implementation and sustainability.

The Synergy

SDG 1: No Poverty

- **MGNREGA's Contribution:** The program's primary aim is to provide wage employment to rural households, reducing poverty by creating income-generating opportunities in underdeveloped regions. By guaranteeing 100 days of employment, MGNREGA helps reduce the vulnerability of rural households to poverty.
- **Synergy:** MGNREGA directly contributes to reducing income inequality and poverty, ensuring that even the most marginalized populations have access to work opportunities. This links directly with SDG 1, which aims to eradicate extreme poverty.

SDG 2: Zero Hunger

- **MGNREGA's Contribution:** While MGNREGA does not directly focus on food security, it creates a stable income stream, enabling families to purchase food. Additionally, some MGNREGA projects involve agricultural support such as irrigation, soil conservation, and water management, which can enhance food security by improving agricultural productivity.
- **Synergy:** By increasing household income and supporting agricultural infrastructure, MGNREGA indirectly contributes to achieving SDG 2's goal of ending hunger and improving food security in rural areas.

SDG 5: Gender Equality

- **MGNREGA's Contribution:** MGNREGA has made significant strides in improving gender equality, with women making up around 50% of the workforce. It provides women with the opportunity to earn an income, boosting their financial independence and empowering them within households and communities.
- **Synergy:** MGNREGA contributes to SDG 5 by enhancing women's participation in the workforce, promoting gender equality in decision-making, and challenging traditional gender roles. However, challenges such as unequal wage distribution and gender-based discrimination remain and require further policy action to ensure full gender equality.

SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation

- **MGNREGA's Contribution:** Many MGNREGA projects focus on environmental sustainability, including water conservation, groundwater recharge, and the construction of water storage structures such as ponds and check dams. These efforts directly contribute to improving rural water supply and sanitation infrastructure.

- **Synergy:** The environmental and water conservation projects under MGNREGA align closely with SDG 6, which aims to ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all. These initiatives enhance water access and promote sustainable water use in rural areas.

SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth

- **MGNREGA's Contribution:** MGNREGA provides wage employment opportunities to rural households, which helps reduce unemployment in regions with limited access to formal jobs. The program also supports the creation of rural infrastructure, stimulating local economies and contributing to economic growth.
- **Synergy:** MGNREGA plays a critical role in promoting decent work (SDG 8) by providing guaranteed employment and promoting local economic development. It also addresses issues of informal labor by offering workers legal rights, such as minimum wages and social security benefits, thus contributing to the reduction of informal employment.

SDG 13: Climate Action

- **MGNREGA's Contribution:** MGNREGA projects include a variety of environmental conservation initiatives such as afforestation, soil erosion control, and water harvesting, which can help mitigate the impacts of climate change. These activities contribute to building climate resilience in rural areas.
- **Synergy:** MGNREGA aligns with SDG 13 by contributing to climate adaptation and mitigation through projects that enhance environmental sustainability. For example, water conservation and reforestation projects can reduce the impact of droughts, floods, and soil degradation, all of which are exacerbated by climate change.

SDG 10: Reduced Inequality

- **MGNREGA's Contribution:** By focusing on rural areas and marginalized communities (such as Dalits, Adivasis, and women), MGNREGA helps reduce income inequality by providing access to employment and income for populations that are often excluded from mainstream labor markets.
- **Synergy:** MGNREGA contributes to SDG 10 by addressing income disparities between urban and rural areas and by promoting economic equality among different social groups. However, regional disparities in the implementation of MGNREGA may affect the extent to which these inequalities are reduced.

SDG 15: Life on Land

- **MGNREGA’s Contribution:** The program supports eco-friendly projects like afforestation, watershed development, and soil conservation, which contribute to sustainable land management. These initiatives help improve land fertility, prevent soil erosion, and restore degraded land.
- **Synergy:** MGNREGA’s focus on land restoration and environmental sustainability directly supports SDG 15, which aims to protect, restore, and promote the sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems.

The table given below portrays the synergy between MGNREGS and SDGs and the ways to extract the best possible outcome through this.

SDGs	Global/National indicators	MGNREGS contribution
<p>GOAL 1: End poverty in all its forms everywhere</p> <p>By 2030, eradicate extreme poverty for all people everywhere, currently measured as people living on less than \$1.25 a day</p>	<p>Proportion of population below the international poverty line, by sex, age, employment status and geographical location</p> <p>Percentage of resource allocated by the government directly to poverty reduction programme</p>	<p>MGNREGS is part of the resources allocated by government directly to poverty reduction</p>
<p>GOAL 2: End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture</p> <p>By 2030, end hunger and ensure access by all people, in particular the poor and people in vulnerable situations, including infants, to safe, nutritious and sufficient food all year round</p>	<p>Prevalence of undernourishment 2.1.2</p> <p>Prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity in the population, based on the Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES)</p>	<p>Higher income due to wage employment can translate into better dietary choices</p>
<p>GOAL 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all</p>	<p>Mortality rate attributed to household and ambient air</p>	<p>Water and sanitation facilities</p>

<p>at all ages</p> <p>By 2030, substantially reduce the number of deaths and illnesses from hazardous chemicals and air, water and soil pollution and contamination</p>	<p>pollution</p> <p>Mortality rate attributed to unsafe water, unsafe sanitation and lack of hygiene (exposure to unsafe Water, Sanitation and Hygiene for All (WASH) services) Mortality rate attributed to unintentional poisoning</p>	<p>constructed</p> <p>under</p> <p>MGNREGS enable access to sanitation, thus impacting mortality rate</p>
<p>GOAL 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all</p> <p>By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes</p>	<p>Proportion of children and young people (a) in grades 2/3; (b) at the end of primary; and (c) at the end of lower secondary achieving at least a minimum proficiency level in (i)reading and (ii) mathematics, by sex</p>	<p>Wage employment through MGNREGS may allow parents to send their children to school</p>
<p>GOAL 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls</p> <p>End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere</p>	<p>Whether or not legal frameworks are in place to promote, enforce and monitor equality and non-discrimination on the basis of sex</p>	<p>MGNREGS mandates 1/3 of the work to be given to women</p>
<p>GOAL 6: Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all</p> <p>By 2030, achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for al</p>	<p>Proportion of population using safely managed drinking water services</p>	<p>MGNREGS builds drinking water facilities in convergence with other rural development schemes as a part of its goal</p>
<p>GOAL 8: Promote sustained,</p>	<p>Average hourly earnings of</p>	<p>MGNREGS impact the wage</p>

<p>inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all</p> <p>By 2030, achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including for young people and persons with disabilities, and equal pay for work of equal value</p>	<p>female and male employees, by occupation, age and persons with disabilities</p> <p>8.5.2 Unemployment rate, by sex, age, persons with disabilities</p>	<p>rates in the region, gender differentiation in wage rates and access to wages by the most vulnerable in the region.</p>
<p>GOAL 9: Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialisation and foster innovation</p> <p>Develop quality, reliable, sustainable and resilient infrastructure, to support economic development and human well-being, with a focus on affordable and equitable access for all.</p>	<p>Proportion of the rural population who live within 2 km of an all- season road</p> <p>9.1.2 Passenger and freight volumes, by mode of transport</p>	<p>Under Goal 4, Road and infrastructure is developed under MGNREGS</p>
<p>GOAL 10: Reduce inequality within and among countries</p> <p>By 2030, progressively achieve and sustain income growth of the bottom 40 per cent of the population at a rate higher than the national average</p>	<p>Growth rates of household expenditure or income per capita among the bottom 40 per cent of the population and the total population</p>	<p>MGNREGS wage benefits and self- employment activities contribute in HH income</p>
<p>GOAL 13: Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts</p>	<p>Number of states with strategies for enhancing adaptive capacity and dealing</p>	<p>MGNREGS focuses on building resilient infrastructure, providing</p>

	with climate extreme weather events.	secure, extra wage employment post disasters and reconstruction of structures required post disasters.
GOAL 14: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development	Proportion of national exclusive economic zones managed using ecosystem-based approaches Percentage change in area under mangroves	Managing coastal ecosystem is one of the work categories under MGNREGS
GOAL 15: Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation, and halt biodiversity loss ensure the conservation, restoration and sustainable use of terrestrial and inland freshwater ecosystems and their services, in particular forests, wetlands, mountains and dry lands, in line with obligations under international agreements	Forest area as a proportion of total land area Percentage of Tree outside forest (TOF) in total forest cover. Proportion of important sites for terrestrial and freshwater biodiversity that are covered by protected areas, by ecosystem type	Afforestation and roadside tree plantations are identified work categories for achieving one of the goals of MGNREGS
GOAL 16: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels	primary government expenditures as a proportion of original approved budget, by sector (or by budget codes or similar) 16.6.2 Proportion of population satisfied with their	Degree of transparency and accountability of MGNREGS Decentralisation and inclusive nature of decision making under MGNREGS

Develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels	last experience of public services	
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Source: Faridi et.al, 2017

Conclusion

The literature consistently demonstrates that MGNREGS aligns well with multiple SDGs, particularly those addressing poverty alleviation, gender equality, environmental sustainability, and decent work. However, its potential remains underutilized due to challenges in implementation and governance. Addressing these gaps, while fostering innovation and integration with other policies, can enhance MGNREGS' role in achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

1. Direct Impact on SDGs:

- MGNREGS contributes significantly to SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) by providing wage employment to rural households, reducing income inequality, and stabilizing rural labor markets.
- Its focus on natural resource management and climate-resilient infrastructure aligns well with SDG 13 (Climate Action) and SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), fostering environmental sustainability and resilience against climate variability.
- By mandating the inclusion of women and marginalized communities, the scheme advances SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), promoting social inclusion and empowerment.

2. Indirect Benefits:

- MGNREGS enhances food security (SDG 2) by improving agricultural productivity through the creation of rural assets like irrigation facilities and farm ponds.
- The scheme indirectly contributes to education and health outcomes by providing families with financial stability, enabling them to invest in their children's education and healthcare.

3. Challenges and Opportunities

- While MGNREGS has achieved notable success, its full potential is hindered by implementation challenges such as wage delays, fund leakages, and regional disparities in effectiveness.
- Greater integration with other development programs, technological innovation for transparency, and stronger governance mechanisms can amplify its impact on SDG outcomes.

4. Transformative Potential

- MGNREGS exemplifies how a rights-based approach to rural development can act as a lever for achieving multiple SDGs simultaneously. By addressing immediate economic needs and fostering long-term sustainability through asset creation, the scheme serves as a model for integrating social protection with sustainable development goals.

In conclusion, MGNREGS is not merely a tool for poverty alleviation but a catalyst for holistic rural development, aligned with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Strengthening its implementation and addressing existing gaps will be key to realizing its transformative potential in contributing to a sustainable and equitable future.

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