

Social Audit of MGNREGS

(A Case Study: Rajasthan)

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Abstract- *The Government of Rajasthan has spent millions of rupees on poverty alleviation programs through its various development schemes. Most schemes are hijacked by contractors and middle-men or they fall prey to corruption. The impact of these schemes is not visible and the poor face many hardships and struggle to gain access to the benefits offered by such schemes. In Governance, transparency and accountability are often desired. But to ensure the same designing appropriate systems and institutionalizing them has always been a challenge and many a times neglected. The beneficiaries (poor) are rarely made aware of the objectives, their rights and entitlements under the schemes. Hence streamlining service delivery systems and ensuring that transparency and accountability are intrinsic part of governance is very important. In this paper Social Audits have been introduced in the MGNREGS – Rajasthan, wherein the primary stake holders (laborers) actively participate in the social audit. The process of the social audit starts with the filing of applications for information of relevant official records pertaining to the program, by trained civil society activists who then identify literate youth. The youth are trained in the processes and go into the villages and cross check official records through a door to door verification of muster rolls and physical identification of the works. The labourer's should be aware regarding the rights and entitlements through focus group discussions is an integral part of the social audit process. And on a pre-notified date the reports along with the findings of the social audit are readout in public meetings attended by the labors, Officers politicians and the media. The officials respond to the issues which are read out in public and take corrective action.*

Key Word: *MGNREGS, Social audit, Implementation, Transparency, Accountability.*

I. INTRODUCTION

A social audit is a process by which the people, the beneficiaries, programme, policies, or laws, are empowered to social audit. A social audit is an ongoing process by which the potential beneficiaries and other stakeholders of an activity or project are involved from the planning to the monitoring and evaluation of the programmes. The activity or project is designed and implemented in a manner that is

most suited for the prevailing conditions reflects the priorities and preferences of those affected and most effectively serves public interest.

To put it in a simpler way, social audit can be described as checking and verification of a programme/ scheme implementation and its results by the community with the active involvement of the primary stakeholders. Social audit covers the quantity and quality of works in relation to the expenses incurred, number of works/ materials used and also selection of works and location of works. The aim is effective implementation and control of irregularities. Administrative machinery should extend full support in carrying out a social audit by the community.

Salient Features

The foremost principle of Social Audit is to achieve continuously improved performances in relation to the chosen social objectives. The principles have been identified from Social Auditing practices around the world. They are:

1. Multi-Perspective/Polyvocal. Aims to reflect the views (voices) of all those people (stakeholders) involved with or affected by the organisation/department/programme.
2. Comprehensive. Aims to (eventually) report on all aspects of the organisation's work and performance.
3. Participatory. Encourages participation of stakeholders and sharing of their values.
4. Multidirectional. Stakeholders share and give feedback on multiple aspects.
5. Regular. Aims to produce social accounts on a regular basis so that the concept and the practice become embedded in the culture of the organisation covering all the activities.
6. Comparative. It's a way from which the organisation can compare own performance each year and against appropriate external norms or benchmarks; and provide

for comparisons with organisation's doing similar work and reporting in similar fashion.

7. Verification. Ensures that the social accounts are audited by a suitably experienced person or agency with no vested interest in the organisation.

8. Disclosure. Ensures that the audited accounts are disclosed to stakeholders and the wider community in the interests of accountability and transparency.

PRINCIPLES OF SOCIAL AUDIT AND UNIVERSAL VALUES

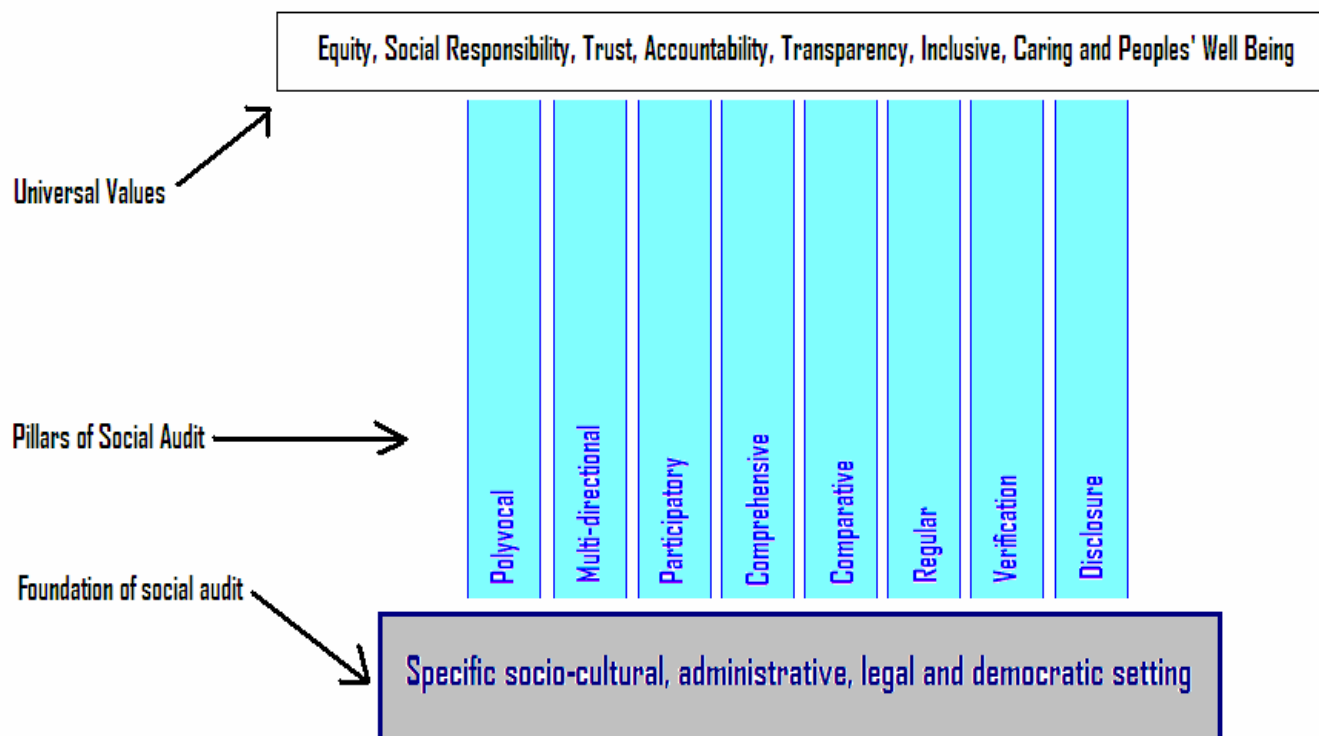


Figure: 1 Principles of social audit and universal values (Source: Social Audit – Kurian Thomas- Retrieved May, 2005)

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Freer Spreckley (1981) would suggest that when implementing social audit techniques groups allow themselves perhaps three years before deciding on any form of legal definition. At Beachwood College have developed a legal constitution which includes social audit clauses that can be used in any co-operative constitution.

According to Kurian Thomas (2005) The Social Audit report and the receptiveness of the departments/organisations to adopt the recommendations in the Social Audit report. The social auditors should suggest modalities for improving its performance based on the feedback received from different stakeholders. The detailed

work plan needs to be identified by the social auditors and the same should be implemented at the earliest.

Jhilam Roy Chowdhury (2010) Social audit has been more successful in state like Rajasthan where civil societies' involvement in much extensive starting from implantation to monitoring and evaluation of employment guarantee act. Their participation has resulted in higher rate of pro active disclosure which in turn raised the level of accountability in implementation.

Social Audit of NREGS (AP) in Andhra Pradesh (2009). This is a historic step in the direction of institutionalising social audit that civil society must take forward. Even more mystifying is the unwillingness or inability of the Congress

party to showcase its great work in Andhra Pradesh and push other States to move in this direction (Mihir Shah & Pramathesh Ambasta, 2008).

NREGA audit_ Bhilwara shows the way - The Hindu. As Ms Roy explained, "Yes, there are irregularities but I would think these form a small proportion of NREGA work. More to the point, through years of struggle we have institutionalised a system of transparency in Rajasthan which ensures against big scams." Mr. Dey saw the audit as a prototype for NREGA assessment elsewhere in the country. "We have shown that given political will, resistance can be beaten down."

Institutional Arrangements Capacity Building

The effective implementation of social audit in Rajasthan was primarily achieved through capacity building of all stakeholders from top management to those working in the grassroots through a series of activities and training programmes. A number of training manuals and guides were created to achieve this and put in place a robust institutional structure for undertaking social audits across the state.

1. *State Level Social Audit Unit:* The Rural Development Department, Government of Rajasthan put together a team of people who were from different work backgrounds but who all invariably had experience of working at the grass root level on rights of the poor people. People from administration worked closely with those from non-government groups. Expertise was drawn from other places where social Audits had been carried out previously. The team was kept small and manageable.

2. *State Level Resource Persons (SRPs):* Around 25 State-level Resource Persons were trained through a Training of Trainers (ToT) programme in social audit methodology. The resource persons were selected from civil society groups with not less than 10 years of grassroots experience.

3. *District Level Resource Persons (DRPs):* A cadre of trainers and resource persons were developed at the district level to further undertake trainings at mandal and village level. Around 260 District Resource Persons were trained who now coordinating social audit activities at the district level.

4. *Village Level Social Auditors (VSAs):* To undertake the actual social audits at the village level and also to educate

the community on the benefits and entitlements of the scheme a large number of village social auditors were trained. Interested candidate's form each village was selected to operate as village social auditors. Using Village Social Auditors who are literate youth from wage seekers families was arrived at after much brain storming and trials as to who would actually undertake social audits in the village.

5. *Training of Officials:* The training these officials of the state machinery like Mandal Parishad Development Officers (MPDO), Village Administrative Officers (VAOs), officers of the District Water Management Agencies (DWMAs), Engineers of the Panchayat Raj Department, were trained in social audit to get them on board and support and cooperate with the community in undertaking the social audits.

6. *Training of Political Executive:* Political representatives like the elected members of the Panchayat, Mandal Parishad Territorial Constituency (MPTC) Members and Zilla Parishad Territorial Constituency (ZPTC) Members etc., were provided training to actively participate in social audits.

III. MAINSTREAMING SOCIAL AUDITS

One of the major challenges faced by the department of Rural Development Department, Government of Rajasthan was mainstreaming and sustaining social audits. This challenge was overcome with a number of activities; policy level as well as ground level activities initiated to institutionalise social audits.

1. *Separate Social Audit Unit:* The Government of Rajasthan has set up a separate unit exclusively for social audit - Rajasthan Society for Social Accountability & Transparency with autonomy and freedom of action. This unit supports the social audit initiatives through technical and knowledge inputs, training and capacity building inputs and administrative inputs to control and manage hundreds of social audits undertaken in the state.

2. *Adoption of Standard Social Audit rules and guidelines:* Social Audit rules/guidelines have been recently passed by the Rajasthan Cabinet that will go a long way in institutionalizing social audit. These rules are made by the experience of the last two years. The social audit rules passed by the cabinet also perpetuate the Right to Information regime by stipulating all the concerned officials

to provide the information requested pertaining to the MGNREGS without fail within seven days of the receipt of the application.

3. *Scaling & Deepening Social Audit Process:* Social Audit of works under MGNREGS – Rajasthan initially started in all districts. Further deepening of social audits was taken up by extending the knowledge on social audits to civil society, citizens group and politician through training programmes.

Social audit appraisals are also undertaken to assess the impact of each social audit every 15 days/monthly.

4. *Capacity Building:* In addition to the initial capacity building activity that helped create a cadre of trainers and social auditors, regular training programmes are undertaken on a monthly basis where 20 to 40 people are trained at the mandal level on social audit.

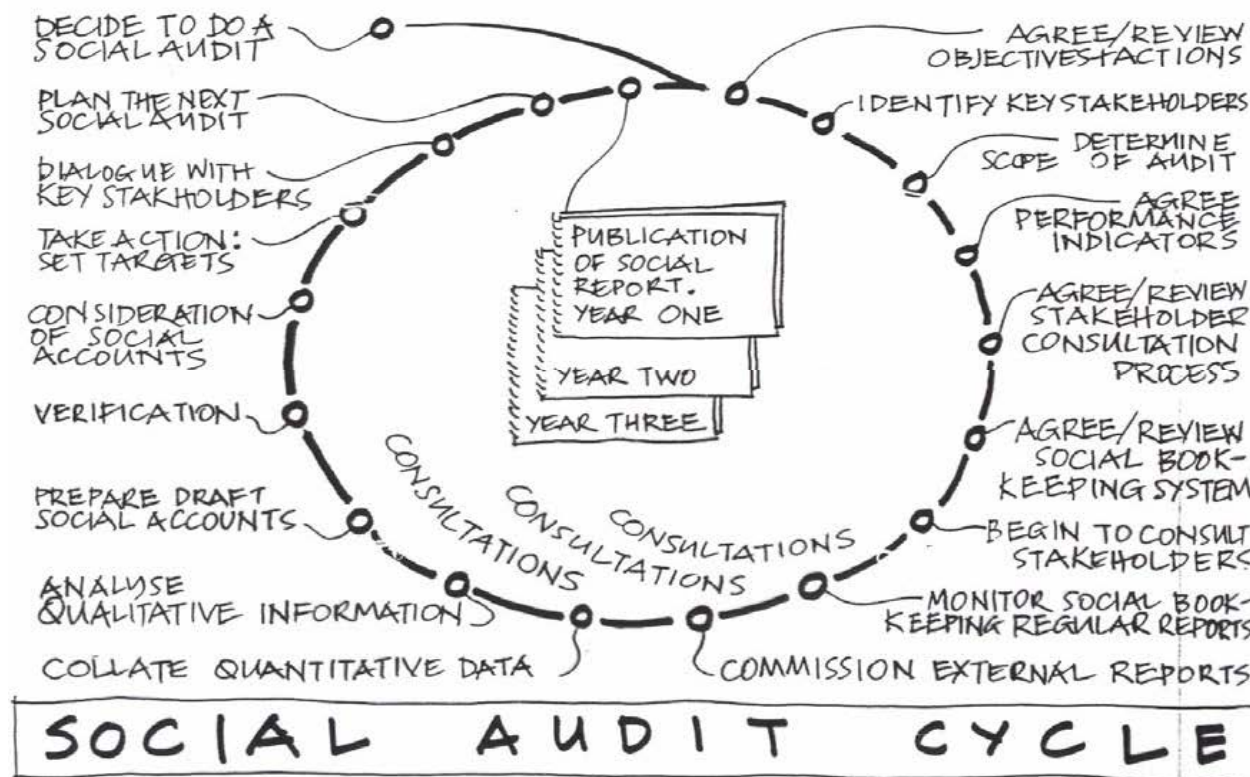


Figure: 2 Social audit cycles (Source: Social Audit – Kurian Thomas- Retrieved May, 2005)

5. *Computerization of the MGNREGS Process:* Creating a website to implement and monitor the works at all stages of the programme and also hosting all the information in the public domain has brought in transparency and accountability in implementation. The impact of this is reduction in corruption. All stages of the programme – from registration of workers to issue of job cards, work estimation, muster rolls and payment to workers - have been fully computerized.

6. *Formal Banking Introduced:* In a bid to prevent delay and ensuring transparency in wage payment, all payments made to the wage seeker under the MGNREGS are done through post office accounts or accounts opened in banks.

This has helped the government to contain corruption to a great level.

7. *Civil Society Organization's (CSOs):* Involvement of Civil society Organizations has been one of the key success factors for social audit. More than 40 Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) are directly involved in undertaking social audit. These organizations helped in creating awareness among the laborers and ensuring their support to the social audit initiative.

IV. IMPACT OF SOCIAL AUDIT IN RAJASTHAN

1. A State-level Social Audit Unity created with senior offices and experts to spearhead social audit initiative.

2. 33 District-Level Resource Persons (Trainers) created
3. 7,796 Village Social Auditors working at the grassroots created
4. More than 1000 Mandals (Blocks) were covered all social audits
5. Works in more than 7671 Gram Panchayats and around 9196 habitations have been audited
6. More than 1 million people were covered under the social audits

Strategy for Success

Social audit would be opposed by those perpetuating corruption, steps were taken to ensure that social audit is consolidated and scaled up with considerable speed and authority.

1. Continuous monitoring of the processes at the grassroots and ensuring that no co-option of the process takes place has yielded positive results.
2. Ensuring that the Administration is brought on board and accepts the social audit process as a tool to improve the implementation of the scheme has been a critical factor.
3. Commitment to the process at the top levels of administration ensured that down the line every official took it seriously and supported it as has been communicated to them through Government Orders and Memos.
4. A 15 day appraisal to ensure that decisions taken at public meetings are complied with, for which a group of Village Social Auditors and two District Resource Persons go back every fifteen days with the reports of what action has been taken and what is yet to be taken.
5. Constant deepening and experimenting with new ideas to make the social audits more proactive and for it to strike root in the community has been a key focus.
6. A robust capacity building strategy which involved training of officials and the civil society from the grassroots to the top level management in government.

V. CHALLENGES

1. Resentment of administrative machinery at the public nature of social audit and also at being held accountable

publicly was clearly a hurdle. This was overcome with a combination of executive instructions from the top and a sensitisation and orientation of the administrative machinery in the social audit processes. The program officers have been trained in social audit processes (including class room and actual social audit of one civil work and reading reports in the public meeting).

2. The political class also posed constant problems to social audit process because of the inherent nexus between them and the middleman. This problem was a strategy design where the social audit processes were spread very quickly horizontally across the state before anyone could realise it in a few months time they were being done everywhere in all districts and critical mass of opposition was not allowed to build by tackling opposition immediately as the situation arose.

3. Initial response from CSOs was poor. However in time response of the labourers helped the social audits to continue on a regular basis. People participated actively in the verification process and attended in large numbers in the social audit public meeting. Also the administration, the media found and political class that the findings (the gaps, leakages, corruption issues, differences in measurement as per record and actually who worked and who didn't etc) in a social audit process were true and could not be disputed and so in a short time the credibility of the social audit process was established.

4. The gap between the government, the community and the civil society was the key for sustaining social audits. The bridge building exercises between the CSOs who undertake social audits and the administration helped in bringing both these key stakeholders onto a single platform.

5. Information pertaining to the works was not freely available and at times withheld by the government organisation. This was overcome by filing information requests and applications under Right to information. Using RTI for seeking information on works undertaken was made an integral part of the social audit process.

VI. CONCLUSION

Social Audits in Rajasthan have proved beyond doubt that if an administration has the will to put in transparency safeguards and the intent to be accountable to its people, they can adopt the process and work at a much larger scale. The initiative that has been undertaken in Rajasthan will require

hand holding initially to trigger the process of questioning on the part of the beneficiaries and the process of responding to the queries by the administration. The fact is “social audit” no longer sends shock waves resulting in resistance from the administration showcases the fact that the same is possible in not just other departments but in other states too.

Taking the queue from the Rural Development Department, Department of School Education and the Department of Backward Class Welfare, Government of Rajasthan have piloted social audit. The School Education Department conducted the social audit of the “Mid-Day Meal Programme” and the Department of Backward Class Welfare undertook the audit of “Post-matric Scholarships and Reimbursement of Tuition Fee programmes”.

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