

Social Protection, Public Works, Livelihoods: India's Policy Gaps in Times of Covid-19

Public Works Programmes (PWP) and Social Protection as vital “safety nets” are discussed commonly for lessening the burden of poverty. Yet, these have not been adequately integrated in aspects of socio-economic development. India is testimony to the fact that in times of a pandemic, the impact triggered by a severed economy can colossally impair human development and thrust those vulnerable to the margins. When predicaments are recurrent and poverty is cyclical, it is imperative to remodel the idea of safety nets. A paradigm shift is required to reassess how these can facilitate improving livelihoods and mitigate the multidimensional impacts of poverty.

The adoption of Public Works Programmes (PWP) to promote social protection through employment in countries of the Global South was one of the high points of the Millennium Development Goals. PWP gained particular momentum in countering the impact of mounting poverty due to structural inequalities, and featured prominently in development policies across South Asia. India's social protection policies — often called “anti-poverty” programmes, such as the [Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme \(MGNREGS\)](#) — is deemed one of the [world's largest rights-based safety net](#) for securing livelihoods. Despite this, past and current statistics and scenarios reveal the growing incongruities of social protection. Deeply embedded, and still rising, poverty has intensified vulnerabilities for an entire generation of disadvantaged groups — from wage workers to farm labourers and those engaged in land-based or other natural resource-reliant livelihoods. Moreover, the 2021 budget has reconsolidated the inequity gaps. The [MGNREGS budget allocation](#) has been cut down by a staggering ₹9,500 crore — a 13% drop on the myopic premise of “meeting demand as it comes” with a “post-pandemic business as usual” slant, at a time when a redistributive safety net through social protection with a 150-day work scheme was imperative to effectively counter the impacts from the “pandemic poverty” distress. Additionally, social sector allocations, i.e., public health, food security and nutrition for rural and vulnerable populations have been largely overlooked.

The COVID-19 crisis in developing countries has disrupted the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which raises the question: why are vulnerable populations trapped in incessant poverty, and how an emergent crisis cannot be countered unless historic lapses are rectified? In India, the struggle against endemic poverty has intensified: the pandemic-induced upheavals on poor, marginal and disadvantaged groups have multiplied with critical long-term impacts. To confront prevalent cyclical and chronic poverty, the progress and functionality of social transfers and PWP needs a new direction that can bolster regional and local development prospects. However, a GDP-oriented thought, theory, and action, or interim employment arrangements cannot tackle the multidimensional aspects of poverty and vulnerabilities. Moreover, as the current challenge is increasingly one beyond the problem of disproportionate burden of poverty on the poorest, it concentrates on those already in entrenched poverty, and those falling in and out of it.

In light of this, MGNREGS, hinged on an integrated approach of sustainable, holistic poverty reduction and embedded in the value of social equity, has had mixed and occasionally ambiguous outcomes. Post-pandemic conditions have slowed current public works but that may not be the most pressing problem yet. The disconcerting “fend for yourself” approach of the states and Centre has made basic sustenance elusive to low-income groups, and in doing so has additionally jeopardised the potential of MGNREGS and such safety support mechanisms as recovery strategies. Over the last decade, policies already embedded in inequity and deficient prior to the pandemic have now been repackaged as *Atmanirbhar Abhiyan* (Self-reliance Movement) for the poor. With an estimated [55% of households](#) across 24 states surviving on two meals, the deliverables of a “post-COVID stimulus package” stand on shaky grounds. A monumental backlog awaits clearance as pending wages amounting to ₹4,431 crore are yet to be disbursed under MGNREGS, a repeat from 2015-16 when wages were delayed in [drought-hit states](#).

PWP have a twofold pressure, particularly in its objective of wider dissemination of social protection for rural workers and those in the informal sector. The benefits of economic growth have not been equitable nor equally distributive, with rising poverty in rural regions. Not only is there an urgent need to reconfigure the MGNREGS policy in implementation and upscaling, but also in context-specific public services of opportunities. Wage structures are grounded on an unfounded logic which, over the years, has been noticeably [disparate within states](#), and the imbalance in incomes make hidden poverty more pronounced and resolute.

The predicaments are not new or unfamiliar, but perturbingly chronic. The [World Bank Report 2015](#) found that between 2010-14, despite a budget of US\$329 billion on safety net programmes in nearly 120 developing countries, the well-implemented ones accounted for only 1.5%–1.9% of the GDP (such as in India). Further, where minimum daily wages continue to be abysmally low, the current 11% rise in wages – from ₹182 to ₹202 a day is not only an all-new low, it falls 40–50% lower than the minimum wages paid to (agricultural/non-agricultural) workers. A [National Sample Survey](#) report estimates a decline in rural consumption across India between 2011–12 and 2017–18 despite MGNREGS. [The National Statistical Office \(NSO\)](#) data shows that rural poverty has risen by 30% more than urban poverty since 2011, pushing many more millions below the poverty line. The growth curve trends recurrently indicate that the wage equality factors for the same kind of work has increased in developed or high-income countries, whereas it has declined steadily in developing countries, and consistently so in India's rural sectors. In what was essentially designed as a demand-driven programme for livelihood security, the determinants of MGNREGS is yet again complex; in that, the demand for work on account of loss of livelihoods is inevitable, but meeting that demand with adequate distribution of work is a greater challenge to be addressed. Incidentally, districts in the country that have seen the largest share of out-migrants during the Pandemic were also the ones that required a greater share of MGNREGS work, yet the gulf between the demand and upsurge of work versus tangible jobs stands at 26 per cent. In comparison, districts where the public works in the past was already fairly implemented appears to have created more work opportunities in the current conditions. These aspects of PWP's corroborate the fact that the running of public works must rectify the prolonged problem-spots to meet short- and long-term situation-driven specifics (other than being need-based and demand-driven). Additionally, employment generation efforts must correspond with taking stock of internal lapses: wage gaps, faulty Management Information Systems (MIS) and payment, and intra-country inequity, attributes that otherwise determine the effectiveness of public works.

Recurrent climate vulnerabilities have already acutely distressed the agriculture sector and daily farm labourers. The narrowing [labour force participation rate \(LFPR\)](#) between 2015–16 was at 50.3%, and the rate of rural employment was at 7.15%, with overall unemployment rate at 7.97%. Past trends indicate that most states are yet to recover from droughts of 2015, with 42% of India's land areas severely impacted. The immediate trigger is a disruptive food production, in the long-term aggravating food insecurity. With reverse migration and of returnee migrants to their workplace cities/towns, the post-Pandemic conditions will determine the extent to which rural-urban or urban-rural migration will have escalated. Furthermore, policy appears to favour widening the reach of safety net programmes with an increase in the number of work days from the stipulated 100 to 200 days. In the wider scheme of things, this is only a short-term solution to secure livelihoods because the already low wages continue to hinder the purchasing power of the economically vulnerable with no concurrent increase in disposable income. In addition, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to ensure that all households have in fact received or will continue to receive work under MGNREGS is often difficult to pursue.

The Impact on Women

The intertwining burdens of the pandemic, protracted gaps in the closure of inequalities, and climate change/climate-induced vulnerabilities have reinforced the burdens of both horizontal inequalities (i.e., communities and status groups) and vertical inequalities (i.e., based on gender and individual capabilities). The inter-related outcomes are intensified, gender-based, deep-set poverty and wider inequity as women's workforce participation has been lower than before. For instance, longstanding concerns over gender division of labour and inequitable access to assets and resources are typically perpetuated, and with the pandemic, are on an upsurge. With women in [roughly 4.1 times more work than men in Asia and the Pacific](#) on unpaid and unremunerated labour and care work ([ILO 2018](#); UN Women 2018), the burden of "invisible" work contributes at least US\$10.8 trillion a year to the global economy and [remains low compared to male labour force participation](#). Ninety-four per cent of women in India counted as being in the workforce remain concentrated in the informal sector, whereas in non-farm sectors, women are usually in domestic labour, construction and factories. A [PLFS 2018-19](#) report found 47% women were engaged in wage labour, of which 25% are in casual labour and 22% are in regular employment. In India, the consequences of social protection, i.e., MGNREGS has led to employment opportunities for women, yet in the process has shaped little for women's empowerment. Primarily, as gender equity was not central to the objective of public works and social protection, going forward, there has been no formal blueprint on how empowerment and socio-economic growth for and by women can complement public works and social equity-security models.

Women's labour work participation in public works has not found worthy mention as a distinct policy framework. Small-scale/non-profit women-led self-help groups (SHGs) are difficult to sustain, whereas government-led SHGs are constrained by bureaucratic irregularities or rarely envision support mechanisms as essential not only during the pandemic but in continuous climate disasters. Women agricultural labourers often receive full minimum wages irregularly. Broadly perceived as secondary earners for the purpose of "supplementary" incomes, nearly 31% of all women workers are engaged as unpaid helpers in households, and 19% have their own-account enterprises (OAEs). With a segment of small businesses closing, most women will turn to wage labour for supporting households, rather than for economic independence. A considerable step in strengthening social protection is in designing policies to secure women engaged in wage labour and those who are sharecroppers without land rights as men tend to be primary farmers. Gender-inequitable policies make credit access without interest or collateral a greater impediment for women, and on account of the pandemic the negative impacts is likely to exacerbate conditions.

Two public policy frameworks central to lessening the burdens of livelihoods dependent on natural resources are the combined power of social protection and climate change resilience strategies. MGNREGS or similar social protection mechanisms have been sparsely integrated into sustainable programmes for those impinged by socio-economic and climate vulnerabilities, and to strengthen adaptive capacities for marginal and other economically disadvantaged groups on the principles of empowerment and equity. Effective cash transfers or universal one-off payments are support systems that can offer tentative reprieve from pandemic- and climate-induced poverty, Further, cash relief and basic income systems, if effectively disseminated, can pull people out of dire conditions though over a longer period, these run the risk of masking the chasms that sustain poverty, and can tend to homogenise vulnerabilities. Responses to local conditions and specific need-based cases may be more appropriate. For instance, diversification of livelihoods and earmarking and "pumping" MGNREGS funds into agriculture, fisheries, etc. would be an effective means to decentralise allocation of funds and resources.

Conclusion

At present, in South Asia and in countries of the Global South, there is little evidence-based literature on the efficiency and qualitative outcomes of social protection, welfare initiatives and safety nets as separate operatives or in their combined synergies. A 2017 study by the [International Labour Organization \(ILO\)](#) has cautioned that wide gaps in social protection coverage is the highest in Asia and the Pacific (61%) and in Africa (82.2%). In India, sound and (institutionalised) social audits are inadequate in social protection implementation mechanisms in India, and resultantly underutilised. Past, and more than ever in the present contexts, there is a need to reassess the long-standing debates: must social protection mechanisms be growth-inclined, or should they reinforce the tenet of rights-based approach – the axis on which it was conceptualised? Against this background, the international poverty line of \$1.90/day and ₹200 in India are discernibly problematic.

Social protection and PWP were meant to build resilience but, with its present limitations, they are not lasting measures for mitigating poverty and multi-dimensional vulnerabilities. Safety nets, meant to facilitate vulnerable sections to "bounce back" from tentative catastrophes, should not inadvertently relegate them to irrevocably lifelong conditions that are far worse. Being the "largest" public works programme is commendable, yet inclusivity and equity are the pivots of social protection support mechanisms to foster transformative human development.

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