



**RURAL EMPLOYMENT GUARANTEE SCHEMES AND
THEIR IMPACT ON CHILDREN IN SOUTH ASIA
WORKSHOP**

The Habitat Centre, New Delhi

25 January 2007

**Organised by
UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia and UNICEF India Country Office**

MEETING REPORT¹

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) is a policy intervention with potential for transforming the lives of socially excluded families and children. It is an intervention aimed at achieving economic inclusion through guaranteed waged employment at minimum wage levels, is self-targeting, and therefore implicitly designed to reach the socially excluded, most vulnerable and economically weakest groups.

Although under implementation for less than a year, NREGA has been subject to much scrutiny, and assessed, with mixed findings, in terms of its design and objectives as such, its impact on the socially disadvantaged, and notably on women, as well as its implementation problems and - unanticipated - side effects.

What seems to be finding less explicit research interest, however, is how rural employment guarantee schemes impact on children. Given this, the UNICEF India Country Office and UNICEF ROSA convened a meeting to review the NREGA for its merits as a special intervention aimed at overcoming social exclusion and contributing to achieving the MDGs. More specifically, the meeting's aim was to examine how this scheme impacts on children in terms of changes in child poverty, access and use of basic social services and benefits, children's empowerment through participation in political and social-economic development, and broader impact on family livelihoods.

41 participants from the Government of India, notably from the Ministry of Rural Development, the Ministry of Women and Child Development, and the Planning Commission, from research institutions and NGOs, and from UN agencies and the World Bank shared their experience, research findings, and policy ideas around the NREGA on both the *observed* and *potential* impact of the schemes on children and women.

Several broad themes emerged from the discussions. They include: impact on women's labour market participation, employment and wages; impact on child well-being, child labour, education and health care, and impact on social infrastructure. A summary of observations and findings from the research presented at the workshop, covering a range of NREGA state-level schemes, is presented below.

¹ This report is an informal and unedited record of the discussions. Please send amendments as required to UNICEF ROSA c/o Mariana Stirbu mstirbu@unicef.org

- **Observed impact of NREGA on women's labour participation, employment patterns, and wages:**
 - Preliminary research has found mixed impact, in the first phase, on female participation in rural employment guarantee schemes across states, since women's ability to take up work offered under the scheme is often influenced by local social norms that determine what work is appropriate for women to carry out, and by the availability of care facilities on NREGA sites or in the community. The type of work offered by the scheme is not always considered acceptable for women, or possible. This is due i.a. to the type of work offered, such as hard physical labour, digging earth for infrastructure repair, which has so far been the predominant type of work offered under NREGA-funded schemes.
 - In the poorer states, such as Bihar, women's participation has been found to be lower than, while in richer states it normally exceeds, the 30% minimum quota requirement.
 - Mixed impact is observed so far on wages for women, though a common theme is that women are paid lower wages than the norm. The issue of mode of payment has also been raised, with women often reported to prefer receiving payment in cash, or in kind, such as in grain, in order to avoid the exorbitant prices at the local market, and to ensure that they actually receive the payment. The choice would depend on the availability and accessibility of banking services, women's time and mobility etc.
 - Public works are considered a source of supplementary income for many women whose husbands migrate during the lean season.
 - Some women with children have been denied employment at the public works sites, as are women who are pregnant or appear physically weak.
 - Complaint and ombudsperson mechanisms to control, correct and compensate for irregularities and violations of provisions which affect women are missing.

- **Observed impact on children's wellbeing, child labour, education and healthcare:**
 - Research has found children to be present at worksites without the care of an adult and often unsheltered from the inclement climate (scorching sun, etc.), and without access to water or food, which has extremely negative implications for their safety, health and development;
 - Some children work along with their parents, given that the payment depends on meeting predetermined outputs, which often requires the involvement of whole families in completion of the work;
 - Many girl children have been found to remain at home to take care of younger siblings while their mothers are on working on the NREGA sites, and thus often missing out on educational opportunities.

- **Observed impact on social infrastructure:**
 - There is little or no investment in building social infrastructure which would directly benefit women and children. Prime examples would include repairing schools or health facilities, improving safety along public paths used by children, or creating or improving play areas, amongst others.

- **Areas of further research in relation to impacts on children and women:**
 - Possible suggestions for improving policy design and individual interventions:
 - Differentiated work tasks for women with children, pregnant women and disabled women; including work closer to their homes
 - Integrate provisions on crèches under NREGA with the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme, so as to universalise the ICDS services and help improve the care economy, so that women (especially in the poor states) could benefit from the schemes. This could entail i.a.

- that NREGA schemes offer employment for women to look after workers' children at a higher and more consistent rate than currently;
- More investment into social infrastructure, such as would benefit women and children, including hospitals, schools, playgrounds, sports grounds, etc.
 - Use NREGA as a way to generate additional employment in the care economy by offering employment as assistants in anganwadis, in schools – for example for preparing the constitutionally-guaranteed midday meals, in health centres etc.
- More research is needed, to back up policy suggestions or identify new policy areas, into:
- Patterns of supply and demand of work by women and its correlation with local facilities (basic social services, living patterns, crèches, etc.)
 - Whether women benefit from NREGA in terms of substantive improvements in their own and their children's' human development situation, quality of life, and empowerment;
 - Impact of the NREGA on Dalits, ethnic groups, language minorities and other socially excluded women and their families and whether they experience any (intended or unintended) forms of discrimination under NREGA
 - How NREGA impacts on long-term gender equality and access to economic opportunities and social inclusion for women and children
 - Whether NREGA produces significant changes in women's access to and control of economic resources, access to knowledge and decision making in the household and the community, motivation, access to public facilities; whether it results in changes in traditional social norms;
 - How it shapes the environment and time spent on productive, reproductive and community functions, as a potential way of ensuring a shift to comprehensive rights-based development
 - How public works impact on children in terms of changes in child labour patterns – by reducing child labour as a coping strategy of poor households or by – inadvertently – encouraging child labour
 - More specifically whether, and if so, how NREGA contributes to reducing child-poverty;
 - The extent to which the income earned on worksites has benefited indigenous households and the children living in those households
 - How the issues of being female, being a (girl) child of a woman working on NREGA sites, and belonging to a so-called low caste, landless family, etc. correlate and what the implications are in this case for children in these groups;
 - The impact of wages generated by NREGA on children's educational opportunities and outcomes and access to health services;
 - How NREGA affects distress and seasonal migration patterns and whether it produces changes in life, educational and health opportunities for the children of migrant families;
 - The extent to which employment and wages from NREGA have liberated women and men from bonded labour and how that has impacted on children's wellbeing;
 - Whether the creation of public assets and the other type of work offered on the worksites have empowered women and children and how;
 - How NREGA impacts on food security and nutrition;
 - How NREGA impacts on women's burden of work;

- How the issue of lack of information and low awareness among women about the employment opportunities under NREGA, and regarding its provisions for child care, can be addressed;
- Women's own wishes regarding wages – whether they prefer them to be workgroup based, family-based or individual, and what mode of payment is best for them in terms of assuring their direct control of wages earned – including by other family members.

SESSION 1: OPENING REMARKS, INTRODUCTIONS, AND OVERVIEW

a) Opening Remarks and Overview Presentation

Mr Cecilio Adorna, Representative UNICEF India Country Office, opened the meeting expressing enthusiasm at the number of distinguished government representatives and senior academics and NGO participants at a workshop, which was initially conceived to gather a small group of experts for an informal consultation. He expressed gratitude to the Government of India, represented by Ms. Amita Sharma, Joint Secretary, Ministry of Rural Development, for supporting this initiative, and to the participants and colleagues for their show of interest and participation despite competing demands.

Relating the topic of the workshop to a different country context, Mr. Adorna referred to rural employment guarantee schemes he was engaged in during his tenure in East Timor, when the country was transitioning from humanitarian assistance phase to nation building. At the time, ILO was running programmes in transitional employment, and all public works focused on benefits for children. The outcomes of public works programmes included:

- reproofing of schools, including repairing school buildings, so that children could return to school safely;
- rehabilitating sports grounds so that children could safely enjoy sports and games (soccer and badminton);
- clearing swamps so that children would not get exposed to malaria - largest mortality cause;
- clearing outgrowth of weeds in rural towns to prevent road accidents, especially of children walking to school or play.

This example illustrated UNICEF's interest in rural employment guarantee schemes: their potential to improve the lives of children through investment in social infrastructure, such as schools, hospitals etc., and therefore also contribute to MDG achievement, whose cornerstone are children. Mr Adorna acknowledged that the NREGA programme was recent, but that there was keen interest in public discourse, the media and among researchers and practitioners as to how the programme could bring benefits to children. He suggested that this type of consultation and exchange become a periodic event, so as to sharpen both policy, programmes and results and contribute to achieving the MDGs.

Ms Gabriele Köhler, Regional Advisor Social Policy, UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia, framed the interest in the topic of the consultation by reference to the "South Asian paradox":

- South Asia experiences very high GDP growth (at 7-9%), inserting itself into global production chains in energy, agricultural, ICT etc. and at the same time, showing laggard performance on social development and on MDGs.
- Given this, the question becomes: How can one explain this paradox, observed throughout South Asia? The UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia, in its social policy work, is teasing out what is hindering the transformation of economic performance into social development and reaching out to the situation of children. Almost half of the population in South Asia is represented by children and young people. At the same time, children face extreme problems of malnutrition, they miss out on educational opportunities, and face other multiple disparities.
- To explain the disconnect between economic and social development, UNICEF ROSA is focussing on social exclusion, as a key factor hindering MDG performance, and has identified at least 15 vectors of social exclusion, starting from gender, and including class, caste, religion, age, disability, location, physical terrain, sexual orientation etc. - a whole set of vectors that exclude large sectors of the population.
- Different forms of exclusion are transmitted in 4 key areas of life.

- The first is exclusion from political decision-making on resource distribution, government acts, policies, at union and local level.
 - The second area is exclusion from access to social services: low rates in educational attainment; poor performance on health and nutrition; religious and caste groups kept away from health centres and water and sanitation.
 - The third area where UNICEF needs to explore more is exclusion within the family and in communities, where children and women face systematic intra-household or intra-communal exclusion.
 - The fourth area is exclusion from sources of livelihoods: employment, income, assets, ways to reproduce the family. It is the most pernicious domain of social exclusion because it permeates all the others. If a family had access to social services, participated in decision-making and had access to resources, then MDG 1 – addressing poverty - could be achieved.
- Regarding the disconnect between social and economic performance, the question is: what can be done to overcome this? UNICEF ROSA considers South Asia to be a productive region for policy research, since there is strong government commitment to offer answers to economic and social exclusion. In South Asia, all government constitutions and many acts of legislation show government commitment to the principle of universalism – every citizen having a right to livelihoods and to public goods.
 - With regard to social policies and the MDGs, there is a commitment to universality, but given the strong presence of social exclusion, universalism of itself is not sufficient and there is a need for “special measures”² for the excluded to be empowered to claim their rights and become part of decision-making processes. If universalism with special measures were implemented more systematically, then South Asia would have outcomes of transformative policy and the next generation of children would be born into a better situation.
 - Thus, there could be affirmative action, as a special measure to have access to public service and benefits; behaviour change at community and household level; as well as economic inclusion measures - less typical for UNICEF’s immediate agenda. NREGA is therefore seen as one pillar for overcoming social exclusion.

UNICEF ROSA is looking at the Indian strategy as an example from which to derive lessons for the other countries in South Asia, and as a spark for more initiatives. The workshop is therefore a space to hear from government experts and researchers, and learn what is in the design of the programmes that lends itself to overcome exclusion, and which elements could benefit the children and enhance MDG performance in the region.

Dr NC Saxena, Member, National Advisory Committee of the Government of India and Advisor, UNICEF India, presented a preliminary analysis of the NREGA, noting that his comments were one-sided, because of a deliberate selective focus on the weaknesses of the Act. For an earlier meeting, he had been invited to present to the Government his observations regarding the implementation of the programme, so that the government could take note and corrective action. The main points addressed in the presentation, drawing on research studies, were:

- Poverty. In India, relative poverty continuously declined over the past decade, but absolute numbers of poor had increased. 300 million people remain below the poverty line. In absolute terms, there has been no decline. The situation is dire in the rural areas.
- Hunger. 20-30% of the population suffer from hunger. The recent report of the National Planning Commission showed that unemployment has gone up **to? By? 8.3%**. Unemployment among agricultural labour has gone up, and there was no growth in real wages. This is the context in which NREGA was launched.

² The term “special measures” is preferred to “targeting”, which implies selective delivery as services)

- NREGA was passed in 2005 and is being implemented in 260 districts. It offers 100 days of employment at the minimum wage level. People can choose the timing for demanding employment, which means that workers have a choice.
- The current status is as follows: in the 260 districts, 57 million households are eligible, comprising 40% of rural households. To date, 33 million applications have been made, 24 million job cards made, 1.5 million jobs demanded, and almost 1.5 million jobs provided. This was fewer than anticipated.
- Employment was for an average of 32 days, as opposed to the 100 days stipulated.
- While many states are doing well, the poor ones are not doing well. A recent report from Gujarat by Indira Hirway showed that of the 30% of villagers who ought to benefit from the programmes, only 6% of the workers got work.
- The average wage was low, lower especially for women, at average wages rates between Rs. 30 and Rs. 50 as against the Rs. 60 average minimum wage
- A problem of lack of awareness about the programme was observed. Information was inadequately circulated especially among poor households. Many did not know about the opportunity, or application procedures, or the unemployment allowance in case a work opportunity was requested but not made available.
- Corruption control procedures were not established.
- Work was denied to the disabled, women and poor people.
- The nature of the work was decided by officials. The provisions relating to women and children (provision of drinking water, crèche arrangements for young children, access to medicine, provisions for shade, etc.) were poorly implemented. The recent Government of India monitoring report showed that applications were received that did not bear a date; job cards did not bear numbers etc.
- Although most NREGA schemes posit that public works should be for afforestation, water management, drought proofing and similar works, most were related to earth works.
- Often land was taken away from marginal farmers, which was against the law.
- Others who studied the programme, such as Jean Dreze, had also identified similar problems. There seemed to be little difference between NREGA and earlier public schemes programmes. Proposals for improvement on earlier schemes had not been followed.
- In West Bengal, for instance, the unemployment allowance was denied. In Maharashtra, wages were to be paid within 15 days, but this did not materialise.
- The share of women in the rural employment schemes is around 39% overall; however in the poorer states, such as UP, Bihar, West Bengal, their participation is less than 15% in the total number of workdays offered.
- Overall the allocation is not enough. Expenditure is not satisfactory. The average
- There is insignificant participation of women in planning and implementation.
- One is not very sure if drought proofing could be achieved through these schemes, because such programmes would require engineering knowledge, quality completed works, funds for operations and maintenance, and links with other programmes. Moreover, the time horizon for drought proofing ought to be increased to 4-5 years.
- Administrative issues need to be clarified. More transparency is needed. There should be call centres with free-toll numbers.
- Also, the nature and definition of household needs amendment: A nuclear definition of household – comprising husband, wife, and children - should be accepted, as opposed to the joint household concept.
- Some findings suggested that wages need to be paid by check, so that all participants in a work team receive an equitable share, and that NGOs should monitor.
- In sum: 40-50 districts run well, in the others more needs to be done.

Dr. Saxena concluded by pointing out that implementation issues are related to the fact that the programme is a recent one and that possibly better results could be expected for next year

b) Presentations by Organisations and Researchers of Key Findings of Research on NREGA and Suggestions for Angles of Research on Children and Women

The session focused on findings from research on the implementation of the rural employment guarantee schemes, and especially research related to children and women, and/or issues arising in relation to women and children. The session was chaired by Ms. Gabriele Köhler.

Mr Ashok Pankaj, Institute for Human Development, New Delhi, presented research findings on the implementation of the rural employment guarantee scheme in Bihar:

- NREGA is important for Bihar, because of its high poverty, % share of rural population in the total population and high migration rates;
- The study conducted by the Institute for Human Development was sponsored by Ministry of Rural Development
- 3-4 pertinent areas of the study:
 - 1) evaluation the process of implementation: demand for employment, jobs cards, and how the state machinery works
 - 2) awareness level between demand and supply at panchayat level
 - 3) examination of the impact on livelihoods, conditions, employment, labour market, wages, committees
 - 4) difficulties: procedures, infrastructure, and suggestions and policy for state government and implementing agencies.
- 60 villages out of 6 district were examined with a total of 30,150 households
- The study looked comprehensively at 200 households – their socio-economic conditions, migration patterns, income levels
- Methodology: survey and focus group discussion, interviews with district officials and others NGOs
- The survey was conducted on 38 worksites, and complementary data collected through questionnaires and focus group discussions
- Focus of the presentation on 2-3 areas, with a special emphasis on beneficiaries, and implementation
 - Beneficiaries: most programmes reached the target for SC and ST, landlessness; migrant labours came to works, and these were the largest groups of beneficiaries.
 - Landless responded positively; 89% were landless, and other marginal landholders. 33.37% were casual labour in agriculture. Although female participation should be at least 30%, in 24% of households did women participate in the schemes
 - Among the female workers came from SC and ST, casual labour in agriculture and non-agricultural, most followed the same trends as in the general population.
 - Children, even girl children, were working along with the parents, and some parents insisted for job cards for their children. Parents wanted them to work on the sites. Some children were working because their families and groups were working. The pattern was of a whole family working on one site, whereas wages were paid depending on work accomplished and not the number of people working.
 - Important impact identified: the wage rate in Bihar was Rs. 62 on average, on the basis on the report received from the workers, whereas the prescribed rate was Rs. 68– the wage was close to the prescribed rate.
 - Important findings: convergence of caste, land and occupation.
 - Most workers would be casual labour in agriculture and non-agriculture
 - In terms of impact:
 - **income poverty** – the number of working days offered and the wages are not sufficient to alleviate poverty; therefore the scheme is not effective in alleviating poverty;

- **rural households indebtedness** - the indebtedness position would improve, as an average household would earn Rs. 6000 annually ; therefore, a massive impact on reducing debt indebtedness, especially for ST and SC
 - **migration** – workers preferred to work in the area than go outside the state. They would prefer to get the job and would on average be happy with NREGA implementation
 - **wage rate for migrant workers** - on average it would be Rs. 95, but migrants would prefer to work at home than migrate to another states, because of the associated high migration costs which would compensate for the lower wages.
 - **community life** - people from upper castes were working as well, and a communitarian feeling developed; it had positive spill-over effects on social life in the villages.
 - **impact on women and children**, especially migrant children – the impact was positive, as migrating children would lose many of their opportunities that exist at home.
 - **additional observations** – the schemes did not stop in Bihar during the panchayat elections, which usually affects other states, where the works stop for two months. The works did not stop even during the monsoon period.
 - **caveat** – possibly the findings are those from districts with better implementation results, and therefore the sample might be biased.
- A possible set of research questions arising from the survey in Bihar were shared:
 - 1) There is scope for improvement of the scheme to benefit children and women.
 - How far has the reservation rate of 30% led to higher participation of women?
 - To what extent NREGA has impacted on school drop and retention?
 - Has it lead to decreasing hunger?
 - If schools building is provided under the programme, how would this improve the programme?
 - What is the incidence of child workers, and the situation of children working on the worksites? How to link the scheme with ICDS anganwadi?
 - Indirect aspects to be studied: To what extent has the increase in income from work on the worksites benefited the indigenous households? How is it going to affect migration? If migration decreases, then does children's participation also increases or not? To what extent has NREGA liberated women and children from bonded labour? To what extent has it affected assets creation? Assets are a way of empowering households. Has community mobilisation been achieved in terms of inclusion of children and women? To what extent has the type of work offered on the public works sites empowered women and children?

Ms Indira Hirway, Centre for Development Alternatives, Ahmedabad, pointed out the high economic growth rates, but decelerating human development, as a feature of development in India. The link of human development with economic growth is weak. Rural employment guarantee schemes could be a major tool for inclusive economic development. This would lead to full employment, growth, and inclusive development. NREGA could be considered a good macro-strategy. However, India cannot afford this programme indefinitely; it has end at some time, at the point when the country has embarked on a more sustainable development path. The presentation focused on the situation of women in NREGA:

- Do women participate in large numbers?

- 2) In percentage terms, their participation is low. Widows and weak women are denied work and asked to return home.
 - 3) Crèches are not available. This shows that the kind of work that women who are caregivers can do is not taken into account.
 - 4) The issue of wages is not well addressed. Women spend considerable time on procuring their wages, and NREGA should address the issue of availability of basic services. Women do not get the wages; these are usually given to family heads. The male household member takes the wage. Wages are divided by the number of days. Women do not get cash, and therefore are not empowered. They could be empowered but they do not have an opportunity to participate sufficiently.
- Link between children and NREGA. Three major links need to be addressed: access, security and opportunity for children. Important issues are:
 - 1) **food security, nutrition** as prerequisite for growth
 - 2) **infrastructure** – schools, health centres etc. If health-related facilities are created then there is improved access to education, and migration is reduced so that the migration of women and children decreases. Women would stay in their home locations and have better access to education and the burden of work would be reduced.
 - 3) **burden of work** –opportunities for working and schooling would contribute to reducing the burden of work. Children are engaged in household work, such as the collection of water, picking fruit, harvesting garden crops, etc. so they miss school. If children are released from this type of work, they would attend school.
 - 4) if **household income** improves, then children benefit.
 - As far as the design is concerned, it has improved over previous schemes, but needs further changes.
 - Data collection on children should be used as benchmarks for planning and monitoring (health, food security and nutrition).
 - More information is required on economic and non-economic issues.
 - Small samples on children for surveys so that NREGA schemes' impacts could be evaluated and the programme improved.
 - Additional data on women is required. Additional data is also required on assets created, use and maintenance of assets (esp. on school, health infrastructure etc.)
 - Additional data is needed on the impact on children in economic and non-economic areas relating to children.
 - Lastly, NREGA has to have a long-term perspective, otherwise it will be ineffective. And if re-designed, children's perspective should be incorporated, which is a long-term perspective. And: multi-level planning is required.

Mr Rajesh Sinha, PRIA, New Delhi, presented findings from a recent study on the role of panchayats in NREGA implementation.

Administrative data were collected from panchayats and primary data from registered and unregistered households.

- Observations: registration rates were picking up. Still, confusion remained whether break-away households figuring in the list or should be registered or not. There is a time lag between registration and issue of job cards. In some panchayats, the panchayats keep the job cards and made the work day entry.
- There is high awareness about NREGA, about the jobs that it guarantees. However, people are not aware of the process. Marginalised groups are not aware of the scheme and its benefits. It comes across as a supply-driven system.
- Planning of work is not participatory. In many states, external consultants have been used. 50-70% of respondents were not aware of the grants, and did not participate in planning.

- There is no adequate training. Some orientation is needed. Currently, trainings are part of larger training. Specific assistance relating to the scheme is not available. Programme officers for NREGA are not available in most states. These are major findings.

In reference to women and children:

- A large percentage of women, roughly 80-90% of women in the households are included in the job cards, and getting employment (in Rajasthan), but in UP, Maharashtra, Bihar, women's participation rates are much lower.
- More than 90% of respondents said that there were no crèche available. But there is receptiveness among gram panchayats, and were open to the suggestions to open crèches. Strengthening of panchayat resource centres, engagement of youth and women, is required.

Dr Thaha, National Institute of Rural Development (NIRD), shared with the participants the NIRD's experience with NREGA:

- The institute's work on NREGA started with organising a number of workshops to discuss the operationalisation of the programme, which resulted additions for improvement.
- NIRD had programmes to ensure the right to information in the implementation of NREGA, and had developed guidelines for social audit, as well as training modules for social audit at different levels, including at the level of functionaries. NIRD has published booklets on the Right to Information Act and NREGA, for NREGA functionaries and for village communities, so that they are aware of the programme.
- In addition, for women specifically, national-level consultations on gender concerns on NREGA were organised. And before organising these consultations, quick studies were conducted in Maharashtra and AP to identify the existing gender issues. Some of the findings include:
 - In Maharashtra, a large number of women participated in the programme, and were in a position to do what is conventionally considered men's work. In AP, women were only collecting mud and shifting loads to other places. Women were not in a position to do the digging.
 - One issue that came up: if the woman couldn't do the job, then the couple would work together and jointly produce enough quantity of work and get paid.
 - If only the woman works, then the output and wage is less. In one case, the woman was there and brought her son and the child missed the classes. These are exceptional cases but they do occur.
 - As regards payment, in AP it is systematised and tabulated and it is convenient for the implementing agency. Another important feature in AP, 50% of supervisors are women. But there are deficiencies as well, as women cannot assert themselves, because there is pressure from the panchayat. In one case, the land belonged to an individual and development work was carried out on private land. The supervisor was not there or did not intervene.
 - It is generally the panchayat that makes the decision, and usually it is men who decide where to work and what to work on. Men look at it from a male angle. This also results in jobs difficult for women to undertake (example: desilting of tanks).
 - Wherever there is a selection of schemes, if women are represented and have a say, then beneficial schemes tend to be implemented, benefiting women and children. If tasks require child labour, such as collecting water, children will help their mothers, which is not empowering.
 - If the work burden on the woman is reduced, then the burden on the child is reduced. Wherever there is a poverty alleviation programme, the findings are that increasing income of the household is shared by increasing food intake, healthcare facilities, better facilities for children

- including schooling, then other items comes, such as households improvement.
- Most income available is spent rationally; it is the children who get the maximum if the income is in the hands of the women in the household. If the work gang leader collects and redistributes (as in Maharashtra), then women do not benefit. Solution: women should benefit through women's groups and leaders and then take better advantage.
- Transportation facilities are not available and women do not benefit. 30% of women are heads of households and are deprived of opportunities.

Ms Sukti Dasgupta, International Labour Organisation, Sub-Regional Office for South Asia, New Delhi welcomed the idea of the workshop, given that ILO, which espouses decent work for women and men, supports a rights-based approach in development, which is what NREGA is designed to provide. ILO had organised a roundtable when the Act was passed, in which the National Planning Commission, other UN agencies, NGOs, etc. participated. Background papers focused on productivity of assets, and on international experiences of public works. Some of the ideas that emerged at the round table include:

- The need to commission research on NREGA in terms of its relevance for women and impact on children, (if positive, it would discourage withdrawal of children from schools and increase educational participation, girl children going to school and not staying home taking care of younger siblings).
- How to organise work and make it productive?

Soon after the NREGA's launch in 2005, ILO began work in 3 areas:

- 1) women and NREGA and how to make women's work more productive (with the partner organisation ISST)
 - i. first phase is over: a report was published
 - ii. quick survey on work sites to evaluate women's participation and map existing organisational structure so that they can claim entitlements
 - iii. surveys on impact on livelihoods and decision to migration (these show that there are positive impacts on children)
- 2) adapting labour standards to NREGA public works (a work-in-progress)
- 3) In late 2005, elimination of child labour programmes in Karnataka were taking off. So an element of monitoring the impact of implementation on women and children and how they benefited was included.

Implementation challenges are there and they could compromise the programmes. ILO proposed that the discussion focus on using the methodology in hand and demonstrate impacts on women and children. Several modules were proposed, which would relate to capacity development, alternative livelihoods, resource conversion, etc. The project are to be finalised. The project would focus on indicators such as impact on children in relation to whether this will increase enrolment rates and what conditions are needed to ensure that this happens (alternative livelihoods training etc modules etc.)

Dr Ratna Sudarshan, Institute of Social Studies Trust, raised three issues in relation to children:

- 1) Crèches have not been provided; and there is little awareness that they should be provided. Women who come with young children are turned away; alternatively, girls stay home with younger brothers and sisters and school attendance is affected. Families look for private solutions (which is having elder siblings stay home and forego school). In some instances, the child care provision consisted of a swing, where children were meant to be kept "safe". There is a need to explore much more carefully whether women want to leave the children in crèches, and what arrangements they would like for the care of their children.

- 2) Not true all over the country that women would prefer partial payment in kind. However, some women suggest that receiving payment in grains is preferred because it would make an impact on children's food consumption. The reason for preferring food is to avoid the high prices at the market.
 - 3) The master roll name is mother's or father's but the child is usually substituting and sometimes the child's name is on the master roll. Job cards are issued in the name of families, resulting in - sometimes problematic - family strategies of how to maximise the benefits of the NREGA.
- The nature of child care that women want needs to be studied more carefully.

Ms Kiran Bhatti, Independent Researcher, shared experiences from two large social audit exercises, which confirm the findings found in the other studies:

- April 2006. Social audits looked at implementation and impact on women, particularly because in Rajasthan public works are food programmes. Most workers were women. High out-migration in the area.
- Rural employment guarantee schemes contributed to reducing migration with women and children staying behind and taking up NREGA work as a second source of income for the family.
- Income poverty has reduced. No huge impact on education, and there is not documentation.
- Food security is an issue in the districts. Indebtedness has reduced. Families eat better, clothe better. Families do not take up large debts.
- Neglected aspects on the NREGA works - Men migrate out in large numbers and women take up work, but care for children is not sufficient in the area. There are no functioning facilities, or even crèches on the worksites. Sometimes, little children are left by themselves on the NREGA sites. Women feed the children in the morning and then only at night (breast-feeding is disrupted), at least in Rajasthan. If the children are taken to the public works sites, they are on the ground without a mat, etc. - mixed effected on women and children.
- Women take up employment as extra income but do not know what to do with the children. The interviewers tried to ask what would be suitable, but nobody could answer. Solutions; semi-permanents structures etc. employing one person, and looking after the children at home in somebody's house etc. – this area needs more thought.
- Payment of wages - women prefer grain. Payment by cheque is suggested for administrative purposes, but from on-the-ground experience in Rajasthan there is a negative response to that: women are not in favour of cheque payments because they cannot access banking facilities. Women would never get the money in hand if paid by cheque.
- The situation differs from state to state. In Uttar Pradesh the situation is different. Almost no women on the public works sites, with a total of 7 women employed on the visited sites. Lack of awareness. Women thought they were not entitled to work on the public works sites because most work is hard labour and the social norm is against women doing a man's job. In fact at the public hearing, lots of pressure was exerted into convincing the women that it is not suitable work for women. It is considered an extra source of income, but social norms prevent women from getting employment.

Ms Vinamrata Rai, Poorest Areas Civil Society Programme, New Delhi, presented the participants with the results of a study that came at a time when the act had been enforced after 6 months. The study is not a critique but it is meant to facilitate the implementation of the schemes in 6 states (including in Bihar, UP, MP). The following shortcomings were observed:

- Minimum wages were not paid.
- Unemployment allowance was not paid appropriately
- Awareness level is low at the level of panchayats and at the level of the community.

- The kind of work that has been identified did not match the requirement.
- Ways forward suggested by study:
 - Awareness to generate demand for NREGA.
 - Capacity of panchayat needs to be built.
 - Capacity of key implementers needs to be built.
 - Clear roles and responsibilities.
 - Flexibility for technical work.
 - The website of NREGA has not been regularly updated and does not provide regular information.
 - Collaboration needs to be improved. Broad based state level participation and inclusiveness need to be promoted.
- No specific findings on women and children.

Ms Rinku Murgai, World Bank, shared their ideas about a study to be conducted in 3 states (Rajasthan, Orissa, Bihar) over two years as a way of looking at a range of indicators in relation to NREGA implementation. Households will be drawn from NREGA and non-NREGA and tracked over a period of 6 months, to be visited 4 times in the course of the study. A household survey will be conducted to collect info on labour supply by households including children, educational attainment, attendance and labour market opportunities, assets and credit. It will be a multi-topic study:

- The main interest in the study is not around children and women, though.
- The main research question will about the overall impact, looking at economic impacts, to track both direct and indirect impacts, at household level; and track spill-over effects in the labour market, such as rising wages, benefits for casual labour, and to some extent the benefits of assets being constructed; as well as to unpack the programme in order to understand the mechanisms around questions of:
 - Does it actually guarantee employment; what are the, administrative processes, knowledge gaps?
 - What determines demand for NREGA work; how it varies by gender (women and children)?
 - Specifically on children, the study will look at:
 - **impact on child labour** (are children less likely to go to work? or stay home and take care of siblings etc.?)
 - **impact on education** (the timeframe for the study will be 2 years– so might not be enough to conclude from on educational attainment levels, but at least some patterns of changes in attendance, retention etc. will be observed)
 - **impact on migration** (changes in migration patterns etc.)

Ms Smita, American Indian Foundation, shared findings and observations about migration and how this relates to NREGA and impacts on children:

- Distress migration has become a habitual pattern for India.
- Under the best scenario, NREGA is supposed to have a major impact on reducing distress migration.
- When families migrate (including children), they go and work 8 months and come back and this migration stays at survival level.
- The main occupations are in occupations such as brick-making, salt-breaking, factory work –attracting low-cost labour that also draws on child labour.
- This migration and the work migrants do is not regulated.
- There are multiple violations of the requirements on child labour. Payment is below the minimum wage, and conditions are appalling. Migrants come back with hardly any surplus. There has turned into cyclical mobility and there appears to be no alternative for them.

- Migration is linked to monsoon, and workers are forced to leave because otherwise they would face starvation. They leave in October and come back in April – as a pattern in a typical cycle. There is a perception that NREGA could have an impact in breaking the cycle and providing economic choices to these people. NREGA should become conscious of the timing and needs of rural households with regard to acute harvest-related poverty. The phenomenon of seasonal migration is acutely under-researched, and there are few panel data on patterns of movement, destinations and types of work (e.g. Orissa, Maharashtra).
- There is variation in the pattern and there is little predictability as to where migrants find work. These people are deprived of all entitlements, such as under the Public Distribution System (PDS), for over 8 months in the year while they are in migrant situation, making them “second class citizens”.
- Government policies do not take into account mobility, migration and ensuing particular needs in access to basic services.
- Impacts on the life of this group of people have not been studied. They lose their entitlements, and voting rights, because elections take place generally in the season during which they migrate, i.e. the first half of the year. These migrants do not participate in panchayats and their voice gets reduced in the village and they get totally disenfranchised. The next generation cannot break the cycle and they also migrate for work. Children become full workers at age 11-12 and later in life it is difficult to break this pattern.
- Backward states are main origin areas, but better off states are also affected by migration. Employers prefer migrant labour because it is lower-cost. There is no knowledge of local culture etc. and thus, migrants become more vulnerable under unfamiliar administrations. The economy of migrant population is circular, and they continuously face difficult conditions, falling sick, missing on opportunities etc.
- If NREGA were made available in September-October of each year, this might help break the cycle of migration, and ensure that people migrate, they will find work. The impact on children will also be positive.

SESSION 2 PANEL DISCUSSION: BRAINSTORMING ON RECOMMENDATIONS AND RESEARCH DIRECTION RELATING TO IMPACT ON WOMEN AND CHILDREN

Dr N.C. Saxena chaired a panel comprising of (in the order of speaking):

- Ms Manjula Krishnan, Economic Advisor, Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India
- Ms Annie Namala, Indian Institute of Dalit Studies
- Professor Naila Kabeer, IDS, University of Sussex
- Professor Jean Drèze, Centre for Development Economics, the Delhi School of Economics,
- Ms Neera Burra, UNDP
- Dr Santosh Mehrotra, Senior Consultant, Rural Development, Planning Commission, Government of India

Mr Saxena remarked on the richness of experiences shared by the research community in terms of benefits, shortcomings and other aspects of NREGA. The fact that the Government was supporting so many studies was highly appreciated.

He emphasised that this session’s focus was on women-friendly and child-friendly programming. A few observations and ideas:

- Digging is a man’s type of work, and necessarily desirable for women
- The scheme is meant for public works
- 35% of the funds are to be spent on work schemes employing members of scheduled tribes and scheduled castes.

- It could improve nutrition and food for children.
- In villages, the forest departments are short of staff and are outside the NREGA programme. There is a need for stronger linkages with the programme.
- Drought proofing is not implementable outside a long-term perspective.
- There is room for using the programme to improve school boundaries. Most schools are without school boundaries,. Providing for the salaries for cooks in schools is another legitimate item to be placed on the scheme.
- Raising the wages of women, re-examining the rates and type of work. In kind wages may be one solution.
- In NREGA there is no complementarity for linking wages with food grains.
- Lastly, special work for pregnant women and those who cannot do hard work, and the wages of those women could be paid out of NREGA funds.

Additional comments provided following each discussant:

- Women could be employed to work as care-takers for the children whose mothers work on the sites
- Data shows that most workers are persons from SC, ST groups, but most likely the wages are too low, that is why the most disadvantaged are attracted.
- There is a need to look at who is working and at what wage? The law prescribes that they can choose which months they could work, but people are not really aware of this provision
- There should be a trade-off between a decent wage and a self-selecting wage. Lower wages explain why there are fewer working days than expected.

Ms Manjula Krishnan, Economic Advisor, Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India, shared with the participants that her responsibility is to look at facilities for women in various programmes. Few months back, when the news came that 42% of beneficiaries are women, the ministry was happy about it. Yet, the questions remain: How does the Act and the schemes benefit the mother and child, looked at from a woman- and child-friendly perspective?:

- More women come forward to work. 30% of workdays are reserved for women, but more come to work because (not based on a survey) work was immediately available and wages were acceptable.
- A lot of this work involves hard labour effort (water conservation, water harvesting and other manual work).
- The woman is the primary care-giver, works at home, and she also works hard on NREGA sites. The woman is hard pressed on NREGA. The questions arise:
 - Does the woman benefit in terms of quality of life?
 - What happens to the child when the woman is at work?
 - Unprotected children at home are in a dangerous situation. If the child does not go to school or is left alone, then the child misses out on opportunities or become subject to abuse etc. Therefore, new elements should be built into the programmes
- If the woman comes to work, the programme provides for crèche, but often these do not exist on the site. The woman has to be given a protective environment at home or on the site. Otherwise, it does not come across as a woman-friendly scheme.
- Semi-skilled activities should be identified, which are less back-breaking. Alternatives should be identified and options should be offered, even if home-based. These options need not necessarily be outside the house. With a little bit of skills training, some women could be employed to become care-takers, look after the children, and thus also contribute to the economy as through the NREGA.
- NREGA is becoming a woman-oriented scheme, therefore more attention should be paid to type of work, care for children when the woman is at work etc. to benefit both the women and the children.
- On the issue of child labour, withdrawing child labour (new regulations). Is there space for reducing child labour?

Ms Annie Namala, Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, shared her thoughts from observations rather than from experience, because there is little research into social exclusion, such as based on field visits in Bihar where there is a network in Bihar associated with NREGA programmes, and experiences in UP

- With the kind of system in place, discrimination and exclusion takes place by default. It is not a planned measure to have exclusion; discrimination just takes place. This should become the assumption behind research into NREGA. It is important to look at who works and who does not work on the programmes, particularly from the data.
- Dalit, tribal, migrant communities etc. - backward communities are vulnerable communities. There is a need to look at these groups.
- Distress migration mostly affects Dalit communities, who use migration as a survival mechanism.
- One area to be highlighted: lack of a formal system of information and communication. In panchayats, information is circulated through informal mechanisms, which means that the marginalised will never be brought in. A formal system of information and communication need to be developed.
- Of critical importance is the choice that people should have. The need for ensuring that village level plans include the different groups and there is choice with respect to the type of work offered.
- Local leaders hold the job cards (mukhiyas or panchayat secretaries) and often there space for misuse and corruption.
- Workers are often paid Rs.35 but sign for Rs. 65.
- The time gap. People apply before the migration period, wait and then migrate but unsuccessfully.
- How to collect and keep data? It is important to ensure continuity of data, to be kept in a disaggregated manner. At community level, people can access their rights. Mechanisms for knowledge dissemination and accountability need be built.
- Field assistance is encouraging. 50% are women. The need to include Dalits and marginalised communities is important. Dalits work as workers. There are no investment programmes for the areas where the Dalits live. If NREGA could be used to build assets in the marginalised sectors, then they could participate in planning, assessing and benefit-sharing as well.
- There is a need for a pro-active mindset to implement the programme in an equal way. Look at the type and level of discrimination at panchayat, village level etc.

Dr Naila Kabeer, Professor, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, Brighton directed her comments as a reflection to the presentations regarding NREGA. Pieces of the 'jigsaw puzzle' of the NREGA impacts reported by researchers include:

- How well NREGA is implemented is a critical part of ensuring positive impacts on women and children result from this programme (awareness etc. is precondition for this programme to work).
- To what extent do benefits accrue to the poor, and to children?
- And how does one define work, and think about areas that can have positive synergies for children and women?
- Investing into building the social infrastructure (sanitation systems for example) would have positive implications for children etc. An evaluation of road programmes in Bangladesh, showed that public works, apart from generation employment opportunities and work activity also increases girls' enrolment in schools, as it makes access to school easier. T
- Thinking laterally around work and employment guarantees, one needs to look at the care of children etc. and other issues of security and protection which are part of the care economy and decent work etc.
- If one believes in pro-poor growth, then these elements should be included. The interdependence between what happens to women and children is important. Pregnancy

and child care preventing women to look for work needs to be addressed, as there is a host of issues around child care and care facilities.

- On the other hand, women who work, end up having to neglect their children. Therefore, it is important to think about how to make the care and the work relationship more manageable. One needs to think about what interventions are complementary to these, so that negative impacts or spill-overs do not happen.
- There is a danger when there is a conventional approach in a programme's design which might exclude those already excluded, such as migrant workers. By excluding migrant workers, it makes it harder to reach them and their children.

Dr Jean Drèze, Professor, Centre for Development Economics, the Delhi School of Economics, while drawing on the findings of the recent FOCUS report on children under 6, referred to the motivation for NREGA, which was at the time not only to increase employment and reduce poverty, but also to bring about economic and political changes in the panchayats, bring in a culture of transparency, by leveraging the balance of power, by injecting investments into the economy. NREGA was also seen as an opportunity to promote the empowerment of women. It is an important aspect, because of the need to make progress towards the goal of gender equality.

- There is evidence that, provided women have income opportunities, there is more gender equality. NREGA is an opportunity in this respect, especially in poor areas where there is little culture of participation of women in these works.
- From his own experience in the implementation of public works programmes, 10 years earlier women had no opportunity for work outside the household economy. The situation has remained almost unchanged. In this context, bringing employment opportunities is a way of achieving this change. But this process should not take place at the expense of children.
- There is a concern that children would suffer, that women working would deprive them of care etc. Women are represented in large proportion on the NREGA sites. Focusing on the negative impacts could become counter-productive, as this would mean losing sight of positive linkages.
- The welfare of children depends on **economic resources, knowledge, motivation, public facilities, social norms, and on the environment, including the health environment, to cite only 7 factors - besides women's time**. With respect to these, many are positive. The power of women has improved, and the extent of distress migration is likely to decrease significantly, which could also have a positive implication for children.
- Without saying that the time factor is not important, one has to think about ways to ensure that children are not adversely affected. The key is the integration of NREGA with the universalisation of ICDS. One way of ensuring that working women do not have a negative impact is to create crèches at work sites. As has been said, little has been done in this regard. In the NREGA guidelines it is more like an after-thought and there is little on what actual facilities should be provided, or on budget and implementation of these provisions.
- It is important not only from the point of view of women and children, but it could be a movement for crèche facilities across the countries, on the example of Rajeev Ghandi crèche scheme. This is an important direction to go.
- Another approach is a complementary approach - to accelerate ICDS, inclusive of crèche services. The younger children stay at home and there are home-based services. The crèches are highly valued here. Women value crèche services through ICDS.
- In case one is not aware, NREGA is extending, but what is not there is how to ensure extension of services. NREGA can help in extending the ideas for crèches. It might help develop creativity.
- It would create collective demand for child care services. Under NREGA, it could be generated easily through women's workers associations and spearhead work in other areas and create broader-based demand.

- There are many natural complementarities. Crèches could be seen as an element of universalising ICDS. It could be seen as an integral part of NREGA and help accelerate ICDS. This could become the best way of ensuring rights-based development.
- Some of the questions are not easy to answer, because they involve large-scale research, which is difficult to conduct. We could learn a lot from informal small-scale evaluations etc. The situation varies from state to state. Such efforts, especially action oriented research, would be welcome.

Ms Neera Burra, UNDP, shared her experiences from a 5-day field visit to NREGA worksites in a highly-populated state. Among her observations were:

- In one village, 120 people got waged employment. In 25 families, women released their husbands of bonded labour. Part of the reason was that wage is equal and higher than minimum one, at Rs. 117.
- All people were migrants before. Many said they would not go back to migrating. Many would work rickshaw drivers, etc.
- NREGA had an immediate impact, on local wage, which went up
- Also, importantly, many workers were Dalits.
- Part of the reason for making it hard manual work was to make it self-selecting, to target the poorest. This is something to keep in mind.
- There is a huge difference between applicants and people who got work. Job cards were empty because they did not want manual labour. At the time of passing the act, it was an issue for debate.
- The working class comes for work is an indication that the right people benefit. Migration has reduced, at least for the season. The demand is higher than supply. Also, there are fewer projects available.
- In one village, the villages took the researchers to a school (broken roof etc.) and pointed out that they would want to repair it through public works. The answer was that there was a limit as to what could be done.
- Partly the problem has to do that with the fact that there are too many goals in NREGA. Either you stop everything or limit the scope of NREGA. There are many provisions not matched with budget.
- There is corruption. Many said that there is no corruption or possibility for corruption at the local level. There were no contractors employed. There is corruption coming from areas not thought of. Job cards in women's and men's names who are illiterate and who do not know how much they are paid. These are emerging issues.
- There is little incidence of women being sent home. Women paid in-laws to look after younger children.
- A major impact was on bonded labour and migration. The number of days was limited. More workdays are needed.

Dr Santosh Mehrotra, Senior Consultant, Rural Development, Planning Commission, Government of India, shared his observations, stressing that there was a perception that NREGA is new a type of scheme, but in fact India has a 35-year history of rural employment schemes:

- There are specific reasons why NREGA started. A series of evaluations have been done of the various 14 schemes over 35 years. They came up with a specific set of conclusions. To summarise, research should try to answer the question of whether NREGA addressed the problems of earlier employment schemes.
- Earlier programmes:
 - Most funds were used for capital-intensive activities and generated little employment [Preliminary results of NREGA: beneficiaries generate 30 days of employment]
 - Generated few durable assets. [NREGA builds assets]
 - Tended to be supply-driven by the government [NREGA is a demand-driven scheme which is good.]

- Tended to be dominated by the bureaucracy centred on panchayat
- UNICEF could look at whether NREGA has succeeded in answering these questions and remedy the mistakes.
- Focus on process more than on results, then one could offer suggestions on the design or implementation.
- The Ministry of Rural Development could then take the suggestions on board, especially on how to improve the design of the programme.
- Regarding the extent to which scheduled tribes (ST) and scheduled castes (SC) found work, statistics on NREGA schemes on the Ministry of Rural Development website showed interesting variations regarding the population benefiting. This could be due to a variety of factors, such as levels of wage offered.
- With regard to women, on national average, women take up 38% of the work generated, but there is a tremendous difference between states.
- If a specific study were to cover a few states, it could give a sense of what is determining women's participation, and it would help improve policy.
- The importance of rich description in the anthropological sense cannot be underemphasised. The government has many vertical programmes, operating like 'silos'. The real issue is a need for more convergence at the local level, without which there will not be much effectiveness at the state and government level. In the development plan going into effect in April 2007, much emphasis will be placed on decentralisation, decentralised planning and activity planning; thus it would be important to research into what kinds of convergence could be achieved (the Act encourages convergence between programmes).
- One issue coming up in the National Planning Commission is that there should be more financial resources for the programmes to be implemented further. As far as ICDS is concerned, the suggestion is that it should be provided for buildings. The money released in the enriched ICDS programmes could be used as suggested by Jean Dreze, which could focus on 0-3 or 4 years old children, who have been neglected in the programme before, and which is a factor contributing to malnutrition.
- In districts where there is no NREGA, there is SGRY (Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana). UNICEF could compare the two and tell NCP what improvements could be made. Fundamentally, there is a need for improving policy design.

SESSION 3: CONCLUSIONS ON NREGA, RESEARCH DIRECTIONS, AND WRAP-UP

Ms Amita Sharma, Joint Secretary, Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, placed the discussion into a national and into a governance perspective, reminding that NREGA is an Act, but implementation lies with the Ministry of Rural Development, state governments, the Planning Commission, and the Ministry of Finance for budget allocations. Accordingly, there is a need to be more realistic.

- 3 areas constraints and recommendations to the act:
 - 1) **Implementation.** There is a need to link three elements:
 - Need for diagnosis which is missing. There is a strong legacy from previous employment programmes, and the discourse from these earlier schemes needs to be looked at more carefully.
 - The works programmes are supply-driven and allocation-based .. A lot of programmes are in transition mode, and by offering valid critique, the course for such transition can be set, so the Ministry welcomes the discussions.
 - There are many vested interests, so change is not easy.
 - 2) **Challenges to a Rights-based framework.**

- A rights based framework builds on the demand for work and the principle of guarantees
 - But there are preconditions for a rights-based approach to function, most importantly literacy. Information has to reach those who are entitled to work, but if the information has to be mediated through those who are literate and who at the same time are the contractors – such as the village gram panchayat leaders, the precondition is often not met.
 - Bringing about social change faces this dilemma.
- 3) **Severe budget constraints:**
- Financial support is needed, and the programme is evolving. A recent Cabinet note increased the NREGA allocation by 2% for administrative expenses, including for crèches and worksite facilities, as compared to a proposed 6%. However, the allocation – section 22 of the act – was reduced to 1.5%, due to financial constraints, and the Ministry of Finance put an embargo on recurrent expenditures such as for staff, worksite facilities, and crèches. Making financial resources available for the NREGA is therefore imperative, mapping all requirements, taking into account the seasonality of needs, and using a perspective plan.
 - Convergence at the local level is necessary of different government schemes. NREGA could consider opening its areas of works to other types of employment.
 - There is not enough support for these elements of the programme.
 - On the Dalit agenda, for Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes, there is an addition to the Act for land development, such as through irrigation, to enable the poor to be productive.

Regarding a research agenda, Ms Sharma highlighted several questions:

- The issue of distress migration is crucial. But NREGA is not a panacea, nor should one collapse too many objectives into one programme. NREGA is a social safety net for the most destitute. It offers work for half a work season, it cannot reduce unemployment.
- One could look into various modalities, and case studies would be extremely helpful. For instance, research could look contribute to problem-solving, since the problems are well-known. It would be important to look at what works, at different situations and different social contexts. Peer-learning and dissemination of knowledge is important. In a nutshell: ‘Tell the person from Bihar not that they cannot do it, but that they can do it exactly or even better than the person from Kerala.’
- In case study work, it could also be useful to look into public private partnerships, such as examples from Maharashtra, where there were pilot schemes in horticulture. One would be interested in research on seasonal timing, wage levels, spin-off effects on schooling, peer learning, and so forth. The Ministry would be happy to support such research.

In closing, Ms Sharma noted that her Ministry has taken very innovative steps – including to support activism on NREGA and mobilising people to claim their rights. As one example, the Ministry will soon be issuing an act supporting CSOs to comment on NREGA.

As to next steps, Ms Sharma invited the workshop’s participants to place op-eds with key media, using the research findings for immediate action as well as for policy design – most urgently to advocate for higher budget allocations for crèches.

Ms Gabriele Köhler, Regional Advisor Social Policy, UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia, highlighted three areas as emerging from the discussion:

1. **Regarding programmes**, interesting questions had been raised around the immediate objectives of public works, for basic livelihoods and for creating production-related rural infrastructure, and the wider and more creative options of creating child infrastructure and spaces, and using employment schemes to provide support to friendly schools or the Integrated Childhood Development Schemes, thereby creating paid jobs in the care economy. Such approaches could respond to the interests and concerns of women and children.
2. **Regarding research proposals** - UNICEF ROSA will compile the ideas brought forward and organise a second round of exchanges, probably virtually, thus providing an opportunity to compile and categorise different issues, and to engage with those who would like to pursue research on NREGA and its impact on children and women. Conceivably, ROSA could commission stand-alone research or "piggy-back" on existing research.
3. **Regarding advocacy and outreach campaigns**– this would be to organise **further events, perhaps** from a regional perspective, looking at rural or general employment works in other countries. Nepal, for instance, is also affected by distress migration. It would be interesting to take some of this discourse into other countries in South Asia, which too are searching for new development ideas.

Tejinder Sandhu, Strategic Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, UNICEF India, thanked all participants for the rich contributions to an interesting and productive exchange of perspectives. The UNICEF India Country Office would be responding to many of the suggestions and ideas for research. Regarding advocacy, UNICEF India could team up with TV channels, using them as a forum for public feedback on NREGA schemes. The very high-level participation from two Ministries – the Ministry of Rural Development and the Ministry of Women and Child Development - and the Planning Commission, of senior Government Advisors and leading researchers and academics, and of UN agencies – ILO, UNDP, the World Bank and Solutions Exchange attested to the wealth of intellectual capital on which India draws, and UNICEF will do its utmost to "put the pieces of the puzzle together" for better results for children.