

DISTRICT LEVEL CAMPAIGN ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF APREGS ON 20th December, 2007

Introduction:

NREGA (National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) was passed by the Government of India in the year 2005 in order to empower the rural laborers with a right to get employment of 100 days per year per labor family during off season. It was launched in Anantapur District on Feb 2nd 2006 by the Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh, and came into effect from 01/04/2006, in 200 drought prone and backward districts in India. Accordingly the Government of Andhra Pradesh formulated the scheme called APREGS.

Start up – problems and the role of NGOs:

During 2006-07 (ie), the first year of its implementation, there were many shortfalls like low and delayed provision of employment for job-seekers, delay in payments, absence of basic amenities at work spots, incidences of corruption and non-payment of compensation etc. in the implementation of APREGS. These shortfalls were partly due to improper functioning of Government machinery and partly due to lack of awareness amongst labor community. Keeping that in view AF along with some other NGOs like APPS, REDS and APUHAC (Andhra Pradesh Upadhi Hakku Amalu Committee) arranged an awareness campaign on 20th December, 2007 at Lalithakala Parishad, Anantapur. It was a joint initiative of like minded NGOs and CSOs, who were actively involved in lobby and advocacy work at District, state and National levels for proper implementation of APREGS. The Government functionaries at District and state levels have extended good cooperation to the NGOs and CSOs by responding in a positive manner to implement the recommendation made by this joint forum. Mr. Gopal, Director of Center for Environment Concerns (CEC) who is also working as State Committee member of APREGS took good initiative in the arrangement of the campaign at Anantapur. The entire expenditure on this campaign was borne by AF and APPS together. This team set up with the active staff members as a joint forum for organizing the event. They worked hard in giving awareness to the rural farmers and laborers about the campaign and mobilized people to attend the campaign. And they also took the outcome of the campaign to the District Collector, Project Director and Principal Secretary, APREGS.

AF's role and participation in the campaign:

The Resource Mobilization and Advocacy cell of AF played active part in organizing the campaign along with other NGOs and planned all events like distribution of pamphlets in the villages, selection of place for the campaign, food arrangements for the laborers etc. The District level steering committee conducted three meetings for the NGO members to plan and design the entire program.

A massive labour rally in Anantapur town:

AF staff campaigned and organized the agricultural laborers in the villages, gave them awareness on the campaign and helped them to attend the campaign at Anantapur on 20th December.

Nearly 1500 laborers from AF program villages and another 1500 from programme villages of other NGOs from different parts of Anantapur District participated in the campaign.

The rally was flagged off by Mr. K.R. Venugopal, (Retd. IAS), former Secretary to the Prime Minister, a committed human rights activist and a designer of many anti-poverty programs in the country, and Dr. Y.V. Malla Reddy, Director, AF and State Committee member of NREGS. The huge gathering of 3000 members participated in the rally, started at 11.30 a.m. from the city center (Clock Tower) of Anantapur city to LKP, the venue, demanding effective implementation of the Andhra Pradesh Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (APREGS) with all entitlements granted under National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA). The rally, by raising slogans on proper implementation of REGS attracted the attention of thousands of onlookers.



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Main demands voiced out from the labour rally:

1. Work for not less than 100 days should be provided to all job seekers.
2. Works should be decided in the Grama Sabha with full participation of all stakeholders.
3. Muster roll should be read aloud every day in the presence of the people
4. Wages should be fixed in such a way to allow a “living wage”.
5. Tools must be supplied to every village. Minimum basic amenities like water, shade, crèche etc; should be provided at the working place.
6. Crèches should be organized for every 10 children in order to help the nursing mothers to participate in work.
7. Funds should be released to the Post Offices before hand and weekly payments should be made to the laborers, regularly every week.
8. Ceiling of Rs.100 per day per person should be lifted.
9. Stringent and immediate action should be taken on the findings of Social Audit, in cases of corruption and undue delay in payment.
10. Receipts should be given to the labor who applied for work.
11. If anybody is injured in the work place, medical expenses should be paid.
12. Unemployment compensation should be paid within 15 days after application.
13. For the works done by women, especially single women, payments should be made for 30% more rates than proposed in the SSR.
14. Funds released and the works taken up should be made public in the village.

The Public Meeting:

The rally was followed by a public meeting. The following persons participated in the campaign and in the public meeting:

1. Mr. K.R. Venugopal, Retired collector, Ex. Secretary of PMO, as the chief guest,
2. Dr. Y.V. Malla Reddy, Director, AF, State Committee member of NREGS,
3. Mr. Minar Pimple, Asia Millenium campaign,
4. Mr. K.S. Gopal, CEC convenor, AP Upadhi Hakkula Amalu Committee,
5. Mr. K. Srinivasulu, Ex. M.P (Member of Parliament), Anantapur.
6. Ms. Bhanuja, Director, REDS (A NGO from Anantapur)
7. Mr. P. Balaram, APPS, (A NGO from Anantapur)
8. Mr. Jeevan Kumar, Human Rights leader,
9. Mr. Murali, Director APREGS Programme, Government of AP.
10. Ms. Kalpana and Mr. Avinash from WASSAN.

Ms. Hestor Foppen from ICCO who came to visit the watershed villages also attended the campaign.

The Anchor of the public meeting, **Mr. Balaram** of APPS welcoming the gathering pointed out that, in the district wage seekers encountered many difficulties at different levels of the scheme like getting the job card, allotment of work, measurement of the work done and finally in wage payment. He said that in the District wage seekers obtained only 25 days of work on an average during this year, as against targeted 100 days. He said that the campaign was organized to voice the problems encountered in accessing the entitlements under the act and place them before the district administration. He also brought to the notice of the gathering assurances given by the minister for rural development and principal secretary at a meeting in Hyderabad to address the problems of the wage seekers.

Dr. Malla Reddy, Director AF/RDT, emphasized that rural laborers particularly the youth themselves had a very crucial role in making the scheme a success. They should point out the mistakes in the implementation of the scheme at different stages individually, group wise and village wise, and actively participate in the process of its planning and management. They must be the



main actors in protecting their rights and accessing the benefits in full. Otherwise the fruits of the scheme would not reach the intended beneficiaries. They should improve the productive assets in order to enhance the productivity of the existing community lands and the lands belonging to the poor who are the labor themselves. He expressed his concern that, the wage they get just to fill their stomachs is not just. They should get an adequate wage amount which

enables them to live with human dignity, avail medical facilities and education for their children. He also said that particular concern has been that women with infants and small children were not able to avail themselves of the wage opportunities under this scheme as there was no facility to take care of their children. Finally, he gave a call to the wage seekers to voice their demands to the Government functionaries and make the Government receptive.

Mr. Malla Reddy made the following important suggestions for the forum to consider:

- The labour youth, particularly the educated hyouth have a crucial role in APREGS.
- The names in the daily muster rolls must be verified by the labor themselves, so that no manipulation takes place in the muster rolls. This can easily be done by the educated youth among the labour.
- The wage seekers should see that their voice is heard in choosing works and they should bargain for such works, which create productive assets for themselves in the long-term.
- The existing ceiling of Rs.100/- as daily wage was unjust and insufficient to meet the basic needs of food, shelter, clothes, health and education of the rural families in the background of increased cost of living and widening income disparities. A concept of living wage of at least Rs.150/- should be adopted in the place of a minimum wage of Rs.80/-.
- The farmers should participate in the implementation process and ensure the quality of works done in their fields themselves.
- The laborers must raise their voice and concerns at village level, to enable NGOs and CSOs to take their demands to District and State levels.

Mr. K.R. Venugopal said that the right to work was not because of somebody's mercy, but it was already enshrined in the Indian Constitution. He explained that the basic and highlighted right to work is contingent on a group of other enabling rights. And in order to access the basic right to employment, first the other rights must be realized. He pointed out that the present NREG Act is a downgraded version of an earlier Employment Assurance Scheme (EAS). While in the EAS each family was guaranteed 200 days of employment per family, the present Act guarantees only 100 days.



He opined that delay in wage payments extending to more than two months was defeating the very purpose of the Act. The delay in payments may be because of the fact that, while the scheme is being implemented in more than fifty thousand villages, Post Offices are present in only thirteen thousand villages. He pointed out that the toiling people had a right to demand "a living wage" for leading a life with dignity and that it was enshrined in Article 43 of the Indian Constitution. He said that in India 220 women out of every 1000 are living on daily wages,

whereas in Andhra Pradesh a massive 400 women out of every 1000 are living on daily wages. The nursing women are facing a lot of problems in attending to wage labor works. When the Balwadies are implemented effectively then only they would be able to participate in work without any anxiety about their children. Without such enabling conditions, these many needy women would not be in a position to obtain any benefit under this guarantee of employment.

He pointed out that there were lacunae in the Act itself and without addressing them its objectives could not be achieved. He said that wage payment procedures should be to the convenience and needs of the wage seekers.

Mr. Venugopal made the following important suggestions:

- In a family both husband and wife should get 100 days of work each, so that the family is assured of 200 person days of work in a year.
- The delay in making payments should be avoided, because it is this delay that is forcing wage seekers in to debt traps.
- Balwadi Centers in the villages have to take care of the children from 6 months to 6 years of age and they should operate in accordance with the women's work timings.
- Balwadi Centers should also provide nutritious food to children twice a day.
- In order to create food security, each family shall be given different food grains in quantities sufficient to them at PDS price and the remaining amount could be paid in cash.

Mr. Minar Pimple of United Nations Millennium Campaign said that Employment Guarantee Act was first implemented in Maharashtra since 80s. . He said that the Government of India in last two years has taken up two revolutionary actions. One is provision for RTI (Right to Information) and another one NREGA. They are very progressive measures enacted in the country. He said that the Government of India is bound by international agreements to provide its citizen some basic rights like right to food, right to shelter, right to education and right to work. He said that the laborers should safe guard their rights to lead a dignified life in the society. He said that the toiling people had a right to demand effective implementation of the Act.

Mr. Kaluva Sreenivasulu, former MP observed that there was non co-operation by some people in the villages during the social audit, and many of the laborers complained on the nonpayment of bills. He pointed out that the laborers in the district were yet to receive the full fruits of the Scheme though it was launched with much fanfare in this district by the Prime Minister himself.

Mr. Murali, Director APREGS, Government of Andhra Pradesh acknowledged that there were many problems that need to be solved, and listed the steps being taken to solve some of them. He said that the government was able to reduce the delay in wage payments. As a solution he said that the state government was planning to introduce Smart Cards. He said that 780 crores worth of works were implemented in 30,000 villages in the State of AP and 5 lakh 72 thousand laborers have worked. In the programme.13,000 post offices were engaged in the bills payment. Also he said that this time Government is planning to see that,

- One mate will be there for a group of every 50 laborers,
- Muster rolls will be completed by Saturday of every week,
- Muster rolls will reach the Mandal Office by every Sunday,
- On every Monday payments will be finalized and sent to respective post offices.

He added that some of the highlights of APREGS were:

- Equal wage for men and women.
- Comparing to other states the minimum average wage in Andhra Pradesh is high @ Rs.80/- where as in other states it is less.
- Minimum wage is followed correctly only in our state.
- The Middlemen are totally excluded.
- Direct payment to the labor through Post Office.
- 70 lakhs savings accounts were opened in the Post Office.

All the speakers called laborers to be united, to access the rights provided by the Government. They said that it must be the labor that can control the corruption and overcome the bottlenecks in the implementation of REGS.

Suggestions and observations by the labour:

Mr. Narayanaswamy of Mallepalli, a wage seeker said that if the fruits of NREGS should reach the laborers properly, the SHGs and VOs should be involved actively.

Ms. Nagalakshmi of Manirevu village felt that poor farmers and farm laborers are benefitted by APREGS. Their economic position is improved to some extent. However to plan the works and to see their proper implementation there were no efficient CBOs between the people and the Government. She suggested labour groups should be formed and empowered.

Ms. Gangamma from Kalagalla village said that four members from their family worked under APREGS but they were unable to get the minimum wage for their working days. Because of the change of the Field Assistant the wage payment was not done for them till now. She demanded that the officials would take necessary steps while changing the Field Assistants to avoid such problems.