

# Facilitating social audits of government rural job scheme by Koya tribes in Malkangiri District



HARMONY

**T**rócaire has supported social accountability initiatives in Malkangiri, Odisha, India since 2010 through its partner organisation, Harmony. A key initiative has been the facilitation and coordination of community-led **social audit** processes of a government rural job scheme with a view to increasing the effectiveness of this scheme, and to mobilise local government resources to improve the implementation of the scheme.

**Harmony** has been working with the Koya tribes of Malkangiri towards more sustainable livelihoods through active participation in the local governance system since 2002. Harmony has facilitated and coordinated the social audits of

## BOX 1:

Koyas are one of 62 recognised tribes in the state of Odisha, India. They mostly live as rural communities in Malkangiri, the Southern district of Odisha, where they constitute the largest ethnic group. They live in low thatched houses and cultivate tobacco, ragi, maize and rice. They rear pigs, goats, cows and hens. Their main festival is Bijapandu festival which is celebrated each year in March.

## BOX 2:

The MGNREGS is a government job scheme that guarantees rural households 100 days of paid work every year doing unskilled manual labour. It is a powerful instrument towards ensuring inclusive growth in rural India through its impact on social protection, livelihood security and democratic empowerment. MGNREGS allows communities to actively participate in the decisions on key schemes required in the local area and also permits rigorous monitoring of these works through social audits. Learn more about how MGNREGS works here: <http://www.nrega.nic.in/netnrega/forum/2-MGNREGA.pdf>

the **MGNREGS (the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme)** in 22 villages of 3 numbers of gram panchayat<sup>1</sup> (village council) in twice a year in participation of Koya community members.

Due to lack of knowledge and support on how government education, health and food schemes work, delayed payments and a lack of accountability, Koyas often do not receive the

<sup>1</sup> Panchayat: This is village-level statutory institution of local self-government called the panchayat (village government) in India and it is democratic bodies at the below district level and have been given Constitutional statuses under 73rd and 74th Amendments of the Indian Constitution. A sarpanch is an elected head of the panchayat (village government) in India.

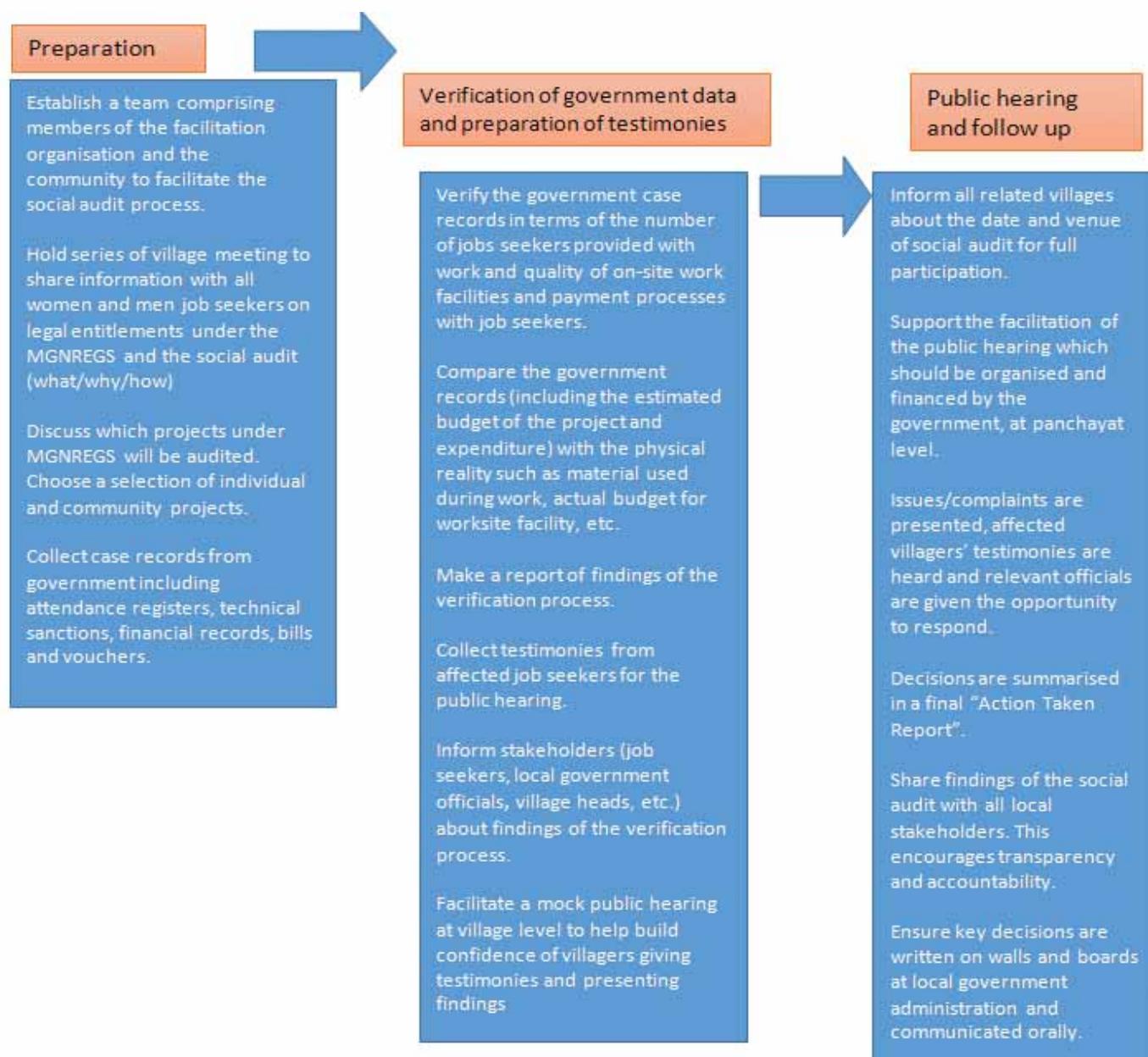
benefits due to them. They tend to migrate to other districts seeking a better income as labourers under private landlords, rather than stay in their villages, and seek work through the government job scheme. Once they migrate, they also become ineligible for other local benefit schemes. This dynamic has contributed to local governance being unresponsive, negligent and unaccountable, which in turn results in communities becoming more marginalised and vulnerable.

Through facilitating social audits of the MGNREGS, Koyas have become more aware of their rights, have participated more actively in holding local government to account and have obtained real results in terms of increased benefits, timely payment of owed wages, improved worksite facilities and more user-friendly and transparent procedures.

## Steps in conducting social audits

Social auditing is a tool that allows civic participation in the planning, monitoring and evaluation of government schemes at community level in order to hold government agencies to account for the performance of these schemes. It is a process that involves the final beneficiaries and other stakeholders of a particular government scheme, programme or policy and can be carried out at the beginning, during or after a scheme has been implemented. Trócaire partner Harmony took a multi-step approach to conducting the social audits, in which their role was to coordinate and facilitate the process from start to finish. A key part of the process was to build the capacity of community members to participate, including awareness raising of their rights and entitlements. The social audit process takes approximately 10-12 days. It involves key elements of preparation, verification of data, a public hearing and follows up as outlined in diagram 1.

Diagram 1: Social Audit Process in MGNREGS



### Some factors that shape the scope of the process are:

- Availability of information from the government about programmes to be audited;
- Expected level of community involvement in the audit;
- Resources available for the facilitation and coordinating organisation;
- Relationship between government officials and members of the facilitating organisation;
- Specific area of work and expertise of the facilitating organisation.



▲ Village meeting at Matapaka to identify the projects for social audit



▲ Job seekers in Matapaka village verify government records against their bank account records.

increase their confidence to participate in the social audit process.

Local level participation is essential in all steps of the social audit process. For the MGNREGS social audit, it is particularly important that job seekers are involved as it is their experience within the scheme that helps to bring evidence to effect change. Regular village meetings were conducted with the job seekers to help them to become aware of their rights. This helped to motivate job seekers to take part in the audit process. Harmony played a key role in providing technical support during the audit process and motivating job seekers to be involved.

### Follow-up of public hearing

After completion of the public hearing, the Gramsabha<sup>2</sup> or Pallisabha<sup>3</sup> should issue a resolution or a report and submit to the government administration. This should include recommendations for the government regarding actions to address specific instances of corruption and mismanagement. Copies of the report should be widely disseminated to government officials, media and participants involved in the process and other organisations deemed relevant to the issues at stake.

## Strategies

### Awareness raising, community mobilisation, technical support

It is important to increase the community's awareness and understanding of government schemes so that they are informed about their rights within the scheme. Raising awareness also helps to mobilise community members and

### Advocacy with government officials for case records of the projects

Understanding the local governance structure and who has key responsibilities for implementing the government scheme is crucial for lobbying the government about the proper implementation of the scheme. In Odisha, the local level administration, the Gram Panchayat, has key responsibility for implementing the rural employment scheme. However, staffs within this administration are instructed by Block and District level government officials. Harmony has focused on gathering data from the Block and District level in order to ensure that information required for the social audit process is provided. During the social audit process, Harmony kept all concerned government officials informed about developments at the village level and shared its findings with them. Harmony staff and village leaders often visited Block and District offices to collect data or to follow up on matters related to MGNREGS implementation in the project villages.

### Involving media in the process from beginning

Use of print or electronic media was also part of Harmony's advocacy strategy. Harmony staff developed good relations

<sup>2</sup> Gramsabha: "Gram Sabha" means a body consisting of persons registered in the electoral rolls relating to a village comprised within the area of Panchayat at the village level.

<sup>3</sup> Pallisabha: Village and hamlet level meetings for all villagers to attend as part of India's system of local governance.

with the media by keeping them briefed on the organisation’s work on MGNREGS, providing them with data and inviting them to the public hearings. Press releases, press briefings and site visits were used to highlight certain problematic issues and to pressure government officials to deal with issues more seriously and take action to resolve problems.

**Conducting mock public hearings to boost the confidence of community participants before official hearings**

Mock public hearings were arranged to enable job seekers and other stakeholders to practice their testimonies and spoken interventions ahead of the real hearings. These practice hearings were very helpful in increasing the confidence of job seekers to provide testimonies.



▲ Villagers’ participation in mock public hearing at Matteredu village

**Impact**

Since this programme only started in 2010, deeper and more systemic changes are still required. While substantial progress has taken place, there are still anomalies in the practical implementation of the MGNREGS which means that many male and female job seekers are unable to receive livelihood support through MGNREGS. However, clear progress has also been made as outlined below, and by ensuring that local level elected representatives play a part in the social audit process, they are subsequently able to apply the techniques learned to other government schemes including food schemes, mid-day meal at school for primary school children and Integrated Child Development Services.

**Improved job scheme implementation:**

Conducting social audits in 22 villages belonging to Matteredu and Matapaka panchayats led to the following improvements:

- Approximately 222,185 rupees (3,450 USD) of overdue wages were paid to 177 job seekers (97 women, 80 men) using 93 job cards<sup>4</sup>.

- All overdue wages owed to women working at crèches were paid.
- Six job cards were given to female-headed households.
- Anomalies between wages stated on job cards and what was received in bank accounts were rectified.
- More attention was given to ensure proper worksite facilities. For example, crèche facilities were provided on 3 worksites.
- Fairer and more accurate maintenance of documents like expenditure statements, job card and attendance register.
- More timely payment of wages.
- The required information board, written in the regional language was maintained.
- Government officials certified quantity of manual labour carried out immediately after completion of work by job card holders.
- Regular and accurate updating of job cards.



*“Every year I used to migrate after the cultivation period in search of better income. Mass migration of youth is also rampant in my village due to lack of employment in the area. I had lost faith in MGNREGS due to long delays in payment of my wages and local government authorities not listening to my complaints. In 2011, after a social audit process took place in my panchayat, I was finally paid the 4,000 rupees (62USD) that were owed to me from having worked on a MGNREGS project. Local government representatives also started to give priority to worksite facilities, especially crèches, maintaining accurate documents, paying wages on time and maintain an information board at worksites.” Said by Mr. Aita Kamrami (male, age - 25), Erbanpally village, Matteredu Panchayat.*

<sup>4</sup> Job cards are issued to households, and all adult members of that household can use the card to seek work under the scheme.

### Increased community participation and citizen empowerment:

Both the local Community Based Organisation (CBO) representatives as well as the job seekers who participated in the social audit processes gained greater awareness not only about the process and benefits of social audits, but also about their rights and responsibilities under the MGNREGS. Villagers' confidence to ask the local government administration questions about the quantity and quality of work being offered improved. They have increasingly demanded MGNREGS work in the area as well as demanding prompt payment of wages and proper worksite facilities.

*In my village we didn't have information about MGNREGS. There is no information board in the project site before or during the scheduled work. Generally the information board was prepared after the completion of MGNREGS work. But after our village social audit process I was able to know the whole budget including budget for worksite facilities and information board. Now-a-days my confidence level has been improved and I am better able to monitor the implementation of any MGNREGA project. Said Mr. Kesa Bamjami, Matapaka village, Matapaka village CBO Leader.*

In addition, seeing the tangible improvements as described above, other villagers were motivated to participate in village planning meetings related to specific MGNREGS projects and in subsequent social audits. This increased level of participation was matched by a qualitative change in the type of participation villagers displayed during public hearings: villagers were more proactive, engaging in negotiating and decision making. More villagers were motivated to engage with the MGNREGS instead of migrating in search of better income. Job seekers were motivated to work increased days under the MGNREGS as the processes related to the scheme became more transparent and the local government became more accountable to the local communities.

▼ Public hearing at Matapaka Panchayat



*Due to my old age nobody in the village was interested to engage me in any work but I was so happy when I got a job as care taker in the crèche under MGNREGS work. However, this happiness did not last as I did not receive the correct wage for my work. I heard about a meeting where villagers told me that I could get my due wages if I participated in the meeting. I attended the meeting and shared my problem where villagers suggested I should give a testimony in the social audit meeting. I shared my problem before officials and within a week I received my wage. Now I realised how important these village meetings are for people like me. Said Ms. Irme Madkami, Matapaka village.*

### Improved Governance

The social audits performed proved to be an effective mechanism towards good governance because on the one hand it provided an official space for people's participation and on the other hand it ensured greater accountability of the local administration to the villagers and more transparency. This was assessed through analysis of data on the social audits carried out against indicators such as the number of issues raised and resolved, the number of outstanding issues and the amount of overdue wages recovered. During door to door interaction with beneficiaries, Harmony could verify that there was a decrease in the number of complaints and issues remaining unresolved after the public hearing as well as an increase in the payment of overdue wages and resolution of some complaints, as indicated above. These results encourage more villagers to participate in future social audit processes, as well encourage them to seek the benefits they are entitled to under the scheme.

### Challenges faced

The social audit in Malkangiri has introduced a number of strategies to promote social accountability which includes intensive work with community. While facilitating the social audit process, Harmony encountered a number of challenges:

#### Some job seekers and CBO leaders were targeted:

After the social audit process, some job seekers and CBO leaders were targeted by government officials for highlighting faults and issues relating to the MGNREGS. This had an impact on the confidence levels of both job seekers and CBO leaders for continuing to highlight specific issues within the scheme. Some local government staff deliberately ignored CBO leaders who supported job seekers or village leaders during the social audit process.

**The villagers and job seekers get demotivated:**

While addressing some of the gaps within the implementation of the MGNREGS, some villagers and job seekers expected to see immediate benefits and started to get demotivated when some of the issues took longer to address than they initially anticipated.

**Some job seekers and CBO leaders were deprived of or faced delays in receiving other social benefit schemes:**

They were deprived of other facilities and benefits of government programs such as the Public Food Distribution System and pension schemes. However, in one case a CBO leader decided to complain to government officials at the district level about the issue in the hope that it would be addressed. This helped resolve the issue as the village level government official addressed the issue immediately out of fear that more senior higher authorities would punish him.

**Power dynamics:**

During the social audit, people with vested interests tried to disrupt the process. During focus group discussions, the vested interest groups threatened job seekers with dire

consequences if they gave testimonies and in some cases the local level government officials offered bribes to Harmony staff so they would not disclose the issues related blocked or delayed payments. Though continuous village level meetings and interaction with jobseekers, Harmony was able to gain the trust of community and facilitate the social audit process in professional manner.

**Dialogue between groups:**

Harmony played a role in trying to improve the social relations among various groups and encouraged dialogue between different groups to try to resolve the tensions, but unequal power dynamics still exist. Harmony as a leading facilitator for change in the operational area faced many major challenges after the social audit was completed. For example, vested interest groups tried to encourage elected representatives to forcibly withdraw the NGO's work in the area and encouraged villagers not to participate in any kind of village meetings. Harmony staff felt that some government officials purposely avoided them, however the overall reputation of the organisation worked to their advantage district magistrates, project directors and other dignitaries of the district respected them and they were able to use this to gain access to different levels of government.

▼ Payment meeting after social audit Matteru where GRS informing the job seekers on their wages





## Lesson Learned

### **Social audits increase government accountability:**

Harmony has found that using social audits is a useful process to increase government accountability towards the local community.

### **Changes through community involvement:**

Ensuring those who are direct beneficiaries of government schemes are centrally involved in the process helps achieve change. In the case of MGNREGS, job seekers are the direct beneficiaries and their involvement in the process was crucial as they had the best knowledge of the problems and challenges with the implementation of the scheme.

### **Importance of understanding community dynamics before implementation:**

It is essential for the facilitating organisation to have a strong understanding of the power dynamics of the communities they are working with. This will help to mitigate against tensions that might arise when

power is challenged at the community level. Harmony found that one of their key roles was to help alleviate tensions between the community and local government staff so that the social audit process was completed and communities felt able to demand their rights. Helping to alleviate tensions in the community required both strategic engagement and a deep knowledge of the local power dynamics.

### **Using government data and records:**

Without government data or case records, the social audit could not be meaningfully carried out. In India, the Right to Information Act has allowed local communities to access government records through the panchayat. Data should be gathered systematically and consistently from households, communities and the project site under consideration.

### **Preparation of testimony and data verification:**

Preparation of testimonies was very helpful in increasing the confidence levels of the villagers/job seekers which subsequently increased their active participation in the public hearing. Harmony also found that by systematically checking the validity of the data before going public also increased the likelihood of a positive outcome from the social audit process.

### **BOX 3:**

#### **Role of Harmony and the standards it strives to achieve:**

Harmony's role is to facilitate and coordinate the social audit process from start to finish, ensuring that community members are equipped with the knowledge and skills to participate. Through their experience, Harmony has identified the following key skills and characteristics that facilitators should have in order to engage with communities in social audits in the most effective way:

Technical competence on MGNREGS and social audits combined with patience, sensitivity and human kindness.

- Strong sense of justice and passion to defend and uphold human rights.
- Promotion of horizontal, democratic and respectful relationships between facilitators and community as well as government officials.
- Promotion of active participation and the ability to listen to others.
- Ability to resolve conflicts locally, exploring and accepting new and different views.

## Conclusion

Social audits are a key mechanism in involving communities to hold their governments to account and to ensure proper implementation of government schemes. In India, local panchayats have the power to call for social audits for all government funded programmes. It is very important that local communities are aware of this so that they can demand their elected representatives to call a social audit, and that

local representatives will be motivated to instigate this process. In order for this to be sustainable, not only do local communities need to be aware of their rights, they also need to know how to navigate local government structures, be very aware of local political realities and know where to focus efforts to achieve change, e.g. knowing to pitch demands at the district level when the village level is not responsive. Local CBOs can be instrumental in helping communities leverage their agency by being a bridge between villagers and their panchayats.

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