

Samarthan's Campaign to Improve Implementation of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme in India [published December 2011, updated November 2013]

By Ramesh Awasthi¹

Since 2005 the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) has committed India to providing a minimum of 100 days of unskilled work per year to every poor rural family that needs employment. This key “safety net” program was established to provide a fallback employment source that ensures income to the poor when jobs are not available. The scheme also has the potential to stimulate economic growth on two fronts. First, as it increases the incomes of poor families, in most cases it will increase consumption and second, it brings knock-on economic benefits by putting people to work on locally planned development projects like those that address drought, deforestation, and soil degradation. Rampant corruption, however, has undermined the NREGA’s promise. Unfortunately, India’s most innovative development policy is being implemented like many other government programs in the country: without transparency or the people’s participation.

Box 1: Key Features of NREGA

1. The village government (*gram panchayat*) is the key agency for implementing the program.
2. In terms of NREGA, the *gram panchayat* should prepare and present a list of work projects and a labor budget for the year to a general village assembly (*gram sabha*), get the necessary technical and administrative approval from block-level authorities, and maintain a “shelf of projects” ready to be undertaken whenever there is demand for work.
3. The *gram panchayat* pays NREGA wages directly into the individual bank/post office accounts of the workers.
4. Employment will be given within 15 days of an application for work, failing which the worker is entitled to a daily unemployment allowance.
5. The *gram panchayat* should issue a dated receipt for each written employment application it receives in order to monitor whether employment is provided within the guaranteed 15 days.

With support from the International Budget Partnership (IBP), Samarthan, a civil society organization (CSO) that works in the Indian states of Madhya Pradesh (MP) and Chhattisgarh, engaged in two years of intensive advocacy around the NREGA. In five villages each in the Sehore and Panna districts of MP, Samarthan’s campaign aimed to make people aware of the benefits they are entitled to under the NREGA and to improve the implementation of the

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scheme. Samarthan also monitored the budget for NREGA at district, block and village levels to ensure that payments to the workers were not delayed. The impact of this phase of the work is documented in the initial version of this case study.²

Box 2: Major Findings of the Initial Case Study

Samarthan's campaign – which involved budget tracking, social audits, community organizing, training local officials to prepare projects and budgets, and advocacy with state level officials with sustained media outreach – yielded the following:

- greater awareness among workers of their rights and entitlements under NREGA;
- a rise in the percentage of workers getting demand-based employment;
- better understanding of the blockages and sources of irregularities in the administrative process of NREGA; and
- increased capacity of local officials to propose public works projects and budgets.

The issues: What is the campaign responding to?

While Samarthan's campaign had a positive impact on the implementation of NREGA, its influence was primarily local and temporary — and its victories provoked a backlash of hostility from village leadership and *panchayat* officials. Ultimately the bureaucracy, from the *panchayat* secretary all the way to the district level, found new ways to manipulate the data so that money from the program could again be siphoned off, and NREGA remains riddled with corruption. Official records do not show a drastic decline in NREGA enrollments (Tables 1-4) because officials manipulated the data, but media reports and reports filed by youth observers show that wage cuts and delayed payments led people to drop out of the scheme.

Village *panchayats* often collude with village leadership to benefit from corruption in the implementation of NREGA. In fact, Samarthan staff members received threats from a *sarpanch* (head of the *gram panchayat*) in Sehore block and a threatening phone call from a member of the State Legislative Assembly. Pressing further with the local leadership was unlikely to bear fruit. As Samarthan Director Dr. Yogesh Kumar explains, “If we pushed hard on holding local officials accountable for another three to five years, we would only end up handling conflicts without yielding much results. We had to settle for a trade-off between fighting for local-level accountability and working for policy-level changes to bring about transparency in the system.”

The district administration also stopped cooperating with Samarthan, going so far as to instruct the *panchayat* secretaries and the administrative staff at the district offices to not share any data or records with Samarthan staff. The *sarpanches* and the *panchayat* secretaries also stopped taking up NREGA works in those villages where Samarthan was active, and instead all works were undertaken in other villages. As a result, people in villages where Samarthan was active suffered a disadvantage.

Samarthan concluded that the situation would change permanently only when power relations had changed more fundamentally, i.e., if the poor were empowered and the *gram sabha* (village general meeting) were able to hold the *panchayat* to account. In light of this, Samarthan modified

² Ramesh Awasthi, “[Samarthan's Campaign to Improve Access to the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme in India: International Budget Partnership Study No. 4.](#)” August 2011.

its strategy, focusing more on training local youths to support social audits, bringing sympathetic urban elites into village social audit processes, and organizing workers into a trade union. It also expanded its operations to 10 districts to show that NREGA problems were not unique to the two districts where it previously worked.

2. Strategy to address these issues

Social audits are an essential feature of NREGA as a means for ensuring transparency, participation, and accountability. The basic objective of a social audit is to strengthen public accountability for the implementation of projects. As per Section 17 of the law establishing the scheme, social audits that involve public vigilance and verification of the quantity and quality of works at different stages of implementation were conceived of as a continuous and ongoing process; and they are to be conducted in every village *panchayat* at least once every six months, involving a mandatory review of all aspects of local works.

Holding social audits during a *gram sabha* meeting provides the workers with an open public platform to voice their grievances about not getting work, fake entries and resulting low-wage rates, delays in payments, etc. In this forum the village secretary and *sarpanch* (elected head of the village council) face public pressure to be accountable, as well. The presence of *Janpad panchayat* (administrative block) officials ensure that the proceedings are recorded in writing.

Box 3: Social Audits as per Schedule 17 (1) of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act

- 1) The *Gram Sabha* shall monitor the execution of works within the *Gram Panchayat*.
- 2) The *Gram Sabha* shall conduct regular social audits of all the projects under the Scheme taken up within the *Gram Panchayat*.
- 3) The *Gram Panchayat* shall make available all relevant documents, including the muster rolls, bills, vouchers, measurement books, copies of sanction orders and other connected books of account and papers to the *Gram Sabha* for the purpose of conducting the social audit.

As the original case study showed, however, the social audit processes established in NREGA are weak, and the workers had not been able to challenge the powerful village leadership. The social audit committee members were not aware of their role in and did not understand the process of social audits. Samarthan's youth volunteers observed that, in some villages, *sarpanches* were chairing the social audit meetings and the *panchayat* secretaries were arriving totally unprepared, without complete documents/vouchers for the expenditure on NREGA works. Workers also did not have access to records and documents related to NREGA projects, nor were they empowered to ask for verification of records to expose corruption. As a result, very few people attended *gram sabha* meetings, and many times the lack of a quorum at the meetings was the reason given by the village secretary for not conducting a social audit.

Because of the problems caused by the corruption, workers were abandoning NREGA. If the faking of entries in the muster (which means fewer spaces for actual workers to be employed on a project) and delays in wage payments could be addressed through the social audit process, Samarthan posited, people would likely return to NREGA. Samarthan's strategy was to create pressure from below by increasing awareness among village people, pressure that would also be supported by *Janpad* officials under a suitable policy environment, which would lead to social audits that were more likely to be carried out properly, resulting in less corruption and workers returning to NREGA.

Youth volunteers

Mobilizing youth volunteers from villages and training them to facilitate, monitor, and document the social audit in their own village formed the core of Samarthan's new approach to holding the governments to account for properly implementing NREGA. Youth volunteers would:

1. build the capacity of social audit committee members with regard to the social audit process and the committee's role in the process;
2. coordinate the process between the workers, committee members, and Samarthan, including accessing the relevant records from the scheme's management information system (MIS) that are available on the NREGA website and supplying them to social audit participants for verification in the audit; and
3. mobilize village people to attend the social audit *gram sabha* and ask relevant questions so that social audits were properly carried out in front of the people.

NREGA workers labor union

Samarthan also decided to form a membership organization of workers to create pressure from below to ensure their entitlements under NREGA. The workers at the bottom level of the village power structure can only resist intimidation from the village leaders through their collective strength as consolidated in local labor unions that are backed by a federation at the block and district level. Forming these organizations is a long-term strategy to change the power dynamic so that a sustainable impact on the situation is more likely.

Involving other civil society players

Samarthan has also organized civil society members in cities to present the evidence collected by youth volunteers to the district authorities, thus exerting pressure on the officials to address NREGA problems.

Samarthan constituted such "Social Watch Groups" in Sehore and Panna districts. The groups included lawyers, trade union leaders, social workers, and CSO and media representatives. Members of the Social Watch Groups also attended social audit meetings. Because of the groups' broad representation, when they met the district officials with evidence from the field, the officials could not dismiss them as a single CSO pitted against government officials.

The Social Watch Groups were conceived of and formed and functioned only in the areas of intensive Samarthan intervention, i.e., Panna and Sehore. In other districts Samarthan had planned to give only basic support for social audits (i.e., initially giving overall guidelines and training and then extending greater support as and when needed) in about 800 *panchayats*. The findings from these audits would be used for advocacy.

Beyond Sehore and Panna: scaling up to 10 districts

For the first phase of the NREGA project, Samarthan chose to undertake intensive interventions in Sehore and Panna blocks. For the new phase, Samarthan decided to scale up interventions to eight new districts in order to create a larger base of evidence for demonstration and impact on policy.

3. How the campaign unfolded

Training youth volunteers and strengthening the social audit process

Samarthan trained selected young people from villages as master trainers. They, in turn, trained youth volunteers (two from each village in 10 districts) on social audits through both training camps and an online training e-course.³ These youth volunteers then would build the capacity of social audit committees in their villages and would work as facilitators in the social audit process at the *gram panchayat* level. The volunteers would provide necessary information to the committee in their village to enable its members to ask relevant questions and thus make the social audit process more effective.

The youth volunteers were also trained to do a survey in villages to collect information from the people about NREGA works that were either completed, incomplete, or ongoing; the quality of work done and wages received; and payment delays, etc. To do this work, the youth volunteers were equipped with the following NREGA MIS data: a) names of persons employed in last six months, b) wages paid to them, and c) works taken up and completed.

The youth volunteers found discrepancies between the data that was officially reported and the reality on the ground; they fed this information to the committees in each village in order for it to be taken up in the mid-August 2012 social audit. Samarthan distributed pamphlets in villages asking people to attend social audit *gram sabhas*. Samarthan prepared the pamphlets and approached local members of the state legislative assembly to ask that they lend their names and pictures on the appeal.

The volunteers attended social audit meetings as observers in about 550 *panchayats* and recorded their observations. The evidence about irregularities and corruption they collected was collated and fed to the press, which covered the stories widely.

The basic objective of this whole exercise was to build the capacity of social audit committees in the villages and strengthen the social audit process. Though not paid workers, Samarthan covered the youth volunteers' travel expenses and some incidental charges for the days they collected data in social audit process. The volunteers were young villagers from the same *Panchayats* where they helped Samarthan in the social audits. An important motivation for these youths was to bring changes to their village, especially in the way NREGA was implemented. Because their active participation is limited to the two times a year that they would collect print outs of muster rolls from Samarthan for the social audits, the volunteers' involvement is quite likely to be sustained.

Overall, the experience of 1,600 youth volunteers engaging in social audits in 800 *panchayats* in mid-August 2012 was encouraging. They raised awareness in villages by both going from house to house to verify the data available from an Internet-based MIS, which Samarthan had provided them in print outs, and documenting their observations of the social audit process on a form from Samarthan. The youth volunteers, however, may have limited impact in standing up to village leadership because they typically lack social capital (i.e., social, political, and economic support from their caste/kinship networks) in their village.

³ Educated village youths with some computer education and access to the Internet at block-level towns could take advantage of an online social audit course. This course can help create a cadre of youths trained in social audit even beyond the 10 project districts. However, at the time of writing, out of about 1,600 youth volunteers who participated in the August 2012 social audit only eight had gone through online training. Until now only 127 youths had gone through online training and there was no data available about their effectiveness in the social audit process. Details of the course are available at: www.samarthan.org/school//courses/CourseOnSocialAudit.

Involving other civil society players: Social Watch Group

The Social Watch Groups worked closely with Samarthan, meeting at its offices once every two to three months. At these meetings, they discussed the progress of NREGA in *panchayats* and the problems faced by the workers. Samarthan organized field visits for members to attend *gram sabha* meetings, and some group members attended social audit *gram sabhas* and discussions about NREGA with the block- and district-level officials. Samarthan also discussed with this group the evidence collected from the August 2012 social audit. The village leaders thus far have not objected to their presence, probably out of hospitality for the “educated urban guests.”

It will take time for the Social Watch Groups to consolidate and assume their expected role. Up to this point the result achieved by the effort to form these groups has been that civil society has become aware of the realities of NREGA implementation on the ground and has started taking an interest in the issue.

Organizing workers into a labor union

Samarthan has distributed 5,000 forms to enroll NREGA workers as members of a trade union and had begun to enroll workers at the time of writing this update. The NREGA workers are enrolling in the union in the hope that it will give them a stronger collective voice at the block and district levels once the federation bodies are constituted. The potential of this process is unclear, as it is likely to take a few years before it becomes an effective mechanism for enforcing accountability in NREGA.

Continuing with intensive work in three villages in each block: preparing labor budgets and budget tracking with data from the NREGA MIS

As described in the initial case study, intensive work continued in Sehore (Rola, Devli, and Sevania villages) and Panna block (Jardhoba, Janakpur, and Sunehra villages). Individuals who needed job cards were assisted in getting them, while job cards of those too old to work or living outside the particular *panchayat* jurisdiction were cancelled. Demand for work by citizens and the *panchayat*'s demand for funds were tracked at the block and district level so that Samarthan could maintain a clear understanding of the issues for NREGA advocacy.

Samarthan facilitated the preparation of labor budgets in order to get an accurate picture of labor demand in the villages. It conducted a house-to-house survey to assess likely labor demand in different seasons and followed these with ward meetings to identify probable works. The labor budgets were then submitted to the *Janpad panchayat*. The release of funds was monitored, as were the completion of works and payment of wages, using the MIS data available on the NREGA website.

The *Janpad panchayat* took five to six months to process labor budgets and feed the data into the MIS. The government, however, had decided to give priority to completing existing incomplete works. According to Mr. Ashok Chaturvedi, CEO of Panna *Janpad*, there were 3,000 incomplete works under NREGA, and by focusing on completing those in the current year, the number of incomplete works has come down to 800. According to Samarthan staff members, all works sanctioned, other than incomplete projects that were prioritized, were chosen from the labor budgets Samarthan helped develop in Sehore, though that was not the case in Panna.

Media advocacy

As in phase one of their campaign, Samarthan maintained regular contact with the press. Some media representatives were invited to join the Social Watch Groups, and some occasionally visited social audit meetings in villages. Samarthan issued press releases, briefings with data, and photographs relating to corruption in NREGA implementation to the press as a way to put pressure on the concerned government officials for early action.

4. Changes in the impact of the campaign

Drop in NREGA performance

The historical NREGA data from the MIS records on the government website up until 2011-12 show a drop in in both the number of person-days of work created and the number of persons completing 100 days of work under the scheme. If we discount for the widespread manipulation of data (bogus names on the muster), as documented by youth volunteers, the decline in NREGA output could be even more serious. (See Tables 1-4.)

The MIS data do not indicate any definite trend and the only inference that can really be drawn is that eligible workers are moving away from NREGA. This inference is corroborated by the youth volunteers and Samarthan staff, as well as by the newspaper reports about the out-migration of labor from villages in search of wage labor.⁴

Physical performance of NREGA in Samarthan villages

(Source: MIS data from government website www.nrega.nic.in)

Table 1: Sehore Block, Person-Days of Work and Households

Village	Person-days of work generated				Households completing 100 days' work			
	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
Chhaprikala	619	3,993	93	98	0	2	0	0
Devli	3,665	4,196	3,960	4,928	2	2	5	2
Kapuri	5,489	4,735	4,321	5,903	7	3	2	6
Rola	1,308	4,158	1,508	680	0	0	0	0
Sevniya	924	5,062	1,379	961	0	4	1	3
Total five villages	12,005	22,144	11,261	12,570	9	11	8	11
Block Total	263,695	450,494	527,250	588,134	205	666	762	738

Table 2: Sehore Block, Number of Workers, and Number of Households

Village	Number of job card holders				Number of households provided work			
	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
Chhaprikala	278	278	278	278	53	93	11	6
Devli	464	464	464	464	100	141	100	90
Kapuri	262	268	268	268	157	138	135	149
Rola	339	339	339	339	117	134	65	45
Sevniya	510	510	510	511	83	105	55	36
Total five villages	1,853	1,859	1,859	1,860	510	611	366	326
Block Total	60,746	61,186	61,256	62,002	10,302	11,863	12,329	13,295

⁴ Panna Jagran, 9 January 2012, "Manarega mein manmani, majdooron ke samne roti ka sankat," *Star Samachar*; Panna, 9 June 2012, "Pet ke liye palayan ki majboori," *Panna Bureau*; "Aakhir kyon ho raha hai palayan," *Star Samachar*; Panna, "MNREGA ki badhali se khuli palayan ki rah."

Table 3: Panna Block, Person-Days of Work & Households

Village	Person-days of work generated				Households completing 100 days' work			
	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
Jardhoba	8,550	4,889	15,194	14,228	0	2	36	22
Janakpur	3,195	4,750	11,202	8,151	0	2	30	21
Krishna-kalyanpur	19,458	6,638	9,811	9,507	27	2	11	20
Kunjvan	6,510	5,297	5,586	5,626	1	0	7	12
Sunahra	12,093	16,867	18,929	12,535	20	48	54	11
Total five villages	49,806	38,541	60,722	50,047	48	54	138	86
Block Total	618,465	674,693	810,544	764,586	303	729	1,562	1,688

Table 4: Panna Block, Number of Workers, and Number of Households

Village	Number of job card holders				Number of households provided work			
	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
Jardhoba	564	565	565	652	262	164	299	323
Janakpur	387	411	411	420	115	136	202	193
Krishna-kalyanpur	484	485	485	486	420	203	254	212
Kunjvan	307	313	317	321	147	110	124	130
Sunahra	481	493	493	504	283	321	328	275
Total five villages	2,223	2,267	2,271	2,383	1,227	934	1,207	1,133
Block Total	44,534	45,815	45,845	46,939	17,917	15,351	18,151	16,625

Awareness created about Social Audit

Samarthan timed its campaign to focus on the social audit *gram sabhas* held on or around 15 August 2012 and issued press releases about the social audit all over the state. On Samarthan's request, the state NREGA Council issued a letter to district officials to extend physical support to Samarthan for facilitating the social audit process. The training and work of the youth volunteers was well publicized by the media, with wide coverage across the state given to the collated evidence collected by the volunteers from 10 districts. As the bureau chief of *Dainik Bhaskar* in Panna put it, "Everyone in Madhya Pradesh is talking of social audit, and that is only because of Samarthan; earlier no one knew of the social audit."

Isolated impact of intensive work in Panna and Sebare

- a) Village *panchayats* fined for delayed payment of wages

Samarthan tracked delays in wage payments to workers and followed up with written complaints to block and district authorities — and sometimes even motivated the workers to make a presentation to the district collector.⁵ As a result, the Panna District Collector issued an order on

⁵ Nai Duniya, "Mazdoori pane bhatake rahe mazdoor," 8 June 2012.

9 December 2012 imposing fines of Rs. 1,000 each on 69 *panchayats* in the district, to be paid by 15 December 2012.⁶

b) Compensation to a worker for being injured while working on NREGA

A worker named Raguvir Singh fell into a well and was gravely injured while working for NREGA. He was not compensated, even for treatment expenses, although the NREGA provides for compensation in such instances. Samarthan took up the case, issuing written complaints and press reports.⁷ As a result of these efforts, Singh's hospital expenses and the compensation provided for in the Act were paid to him.

Overall impact of the revised strategy

The first phase of the Samarthan project coincided with the initial phase of NREGA implementation in the state. The campaign, by improving how NREGA was being implemented on the ground and thus the flow of funds, benefitted the poor by increasing access to wage employment. In due course, however, the bureaucracy and the village leadership got familiar with the system of NREGA implementation, and the local officials found ways to manipulate the system — by circumventing the scheme's rules — for personal profit. The poor at the lowest rung of the socioeconomic ladder of village society could not challenge this corruption. Democratic institutions of the village *panchayat* have statutory provisions that ensure adequate representation of oppressed castes and women, but in reality these groups did not have any real power. Struggling to survive, the poor migrated, both seasonally and for longer periods, to urban areas or other parts of the country.

The decline in the performance of NREGA, even in the Samarthan villages, is the consequence of social dynamics and should not be taken as a failure of Samarthan's first-phase strategy. Samarthan appropriately shifted the strategy of its campaign for the second phase. Unlike their elders, the younger generation in villages are less bound by feudal, caste-dictated relations. Young people who have some formal education and have been trained by Samarthan have started to question the capture of NREGA by the rich and the powerful. Their annoyance, as well as a deeper understanding of the issues, was reflected in the focus group discussions for this update on the case study. Samarthan's campaign also has increased awareness about and support for the social audit as an institution of vital importance for addressing problems in NREGA implementation. It is too early to determine whether the Workers' Union that Samarthan is forming can provide the collective voice needed by the workers to claim their rightful entitlements; an assessment of the union's impact may still be a few years away.

Samarthan's training of youth volunteers from the villages has also influenced the government strategy. Dr. Abhay Pande, director of the newly created Social Audit Cell of the NREGA Council in Bhopal, listed the following components of the strategy he plans to implement in the state (many of which are very similar to what Samarthan is doing):⁸

- *Gram sabha*, the most appropriate democratic and statutory body for this role, should conduct the social audit. This role should not be taken away by any other agency.
- Vigilance committees will be formed at village, block, and district level.

⁶ Dainik Jagran, Gwalior, "Aakhir vilamb se mazdoori bhugtan ka doshi kaun," *Star Samachar*, 11 December 2011; and "Mazdoori ke terah karod bhugtan me vilamb," *Satna*, 12 December 2011.

⁷ "Ghayal shramik ko kshatipurti ki darkar," *Star Samachar*, 9 June 2012; and Dainik Jagran, "MNREGA me man ka raj: char mah se nahin mili mazduri," 11 June 2012.

⁸ In discussion with the author accompanied by Yogesh Kumar.

- The village-level committee will include two to three educated young people from the families that receive work through NREGA.
- Two to three strong-willed youths from the neighboring *panchayats* would be appointed to work as facilitators/observers. (He felt that the youths from neighboring *panchayats* were more likely to be able to challenge the local leaders.)
- CSOs would be appointed to build the capacity of youths to participate at all these levels.

5. Explaining the impact of the campaign

This update on the Samarthan campaign illustrates the difficulties that a civil society organization may face when challenging the socioeconomic structures of the society, including the need to constantly work on its strategy to most effectively influence governance issues at the community level. This section discusses the factors that played or will play a role in determining the impact of the revised strategy.

Working on a larger scale

Through its wide contacts with other CSOs in the state, Samarthan was able to develop partnerships and scale up its work in 10 districts, including Sehore and Panna. The Samarthan coordinator in Panna, while discussing the impact of scaling up his work, said, “Earlier the government officials would trivialize the evidence presented as ‘some discrepancies at some places with a scheme being implemented on such a large scale,’ and asked us as why we focus on Panna and defame them. Now when we go with data from 10 districts, they realize that it was a systemic failure and are compelled to think of systemic remedies.”

The media coverage received for the social audit campaign in mid-August also generated statewide publicity and created wider awareness among young people about the need to strengthen social audits in order to reduce corruption.⁹ The Samarthan staff in the Bhopal office reported that growing interest in social audit and increasing enthusiasm about it has resulted in Samarthan receiving an increasing number of inquiries from different parts of the state about training on social audit.

Documenting and presenting evidence

Samarthan analyzed and collated the data from 10 districts on the social audit process and the mismanagement and poor practices in NREGA implementation that were exposed by the social audit and documented by youth volunteers. Very diligent planning and thorough documentation impressed the media, and the resulting coverage created a favorable atmosphere for advocacy at the policy level. Sunil Sharma of *Dainik Jagran* in Sehore praised Samarthan’s documentation, saying, “We always contact the concerned officials to confirm the authenticity of the reports (received from Samarthan), but the officials were not able to deny good evidence and hence the media reporting becomes effective.” The bureau chiefs of *Dainik Bhaskar* and *Pradesh Today* said that they became interested in the issue of NREGA implementation mainly due to indisputable evidence from the field repeatedly presented by Samarthan.

Engaging with government at various levels

⁹ “Youths getting training to perform Social Audit in gram sabhas,” Hitavada, *Jabalpur*, 24 August 2012; “Social Audit se Ujagar hua MNREGA ka bhrashtachar,” Satna, *Star Samachar*, 20 August 2012; “Gramsabhaon ko mazboot karne ki jaroorat,” Bhopal, *Navbharat*, 18 August 2012; and “Gramsabhaon me hua jamkar hangama,” Badwani, *Patrika*, 16 August 2012.

Samarthan is seen as a credible CSO and a knowledge and training resource by government officials from district to state level. Samarthan has strong footing through its community-level projects and has experienced and skilled professionals on its staff. It has been involved in capacity building efforts serving government staff like ICDS (Integrated Child Development Scheme), ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activist), teachers, *sarpanches*, and *panchayat* secretaries. Samarthan's director has worked on many government committees and working groups for preparing government plans and programs at national and state level. And, Samarthan has implemented many projects in collaboration with government departments.

However, working too closely with the government entails the risk of being co-opted or being seen by other civil society players as being co-opted. There are many CSOs in India that start playing the role similar to that of a private contractor for implementing government programs. These CSOs avoid exposing corruption and pointing out discrepancies in implementation of government programs for fear of losing future contracts or assignments. Samarthan has diligently maintained its independence and has never wavered from its objectives to strengthen governance and to bring about changes at the policy level, as is evidenced from its work on NREGA.

The description of its work on Samarthan's website (www.samarthan.org) aptly explains this approach: "Samarthan also works with policy makers to advocate different aspects of strengthening the rural governance institutions. . . . Monitoring the implementation of NREGS for ensuring transparency and accountability is part of this work. Empirical evidence is generated from ground realities . . . to build evidence based research agenda for advocacy."

Samarthan has been able to expose corruption and discrepancies in implementation of NREGA, in spite of local antagonism, and still work closely with the government on many other projects. Another important factor contributing to this strength of Samarthan is that it is not dependent on government funding. Samarthan gets funding support from many national and international funding partners, such as Tata Trust, the Ford Foundation, Water Aid India, the UN Millennium Fund, UNFPA, and, of course, the International Budget Partnership, for its work on the NREGA campaign.

6. Alternative explanations of impact

While the MP state government of BJP (*Bhartiya Janata Party*) was interested in larger allocations and maximum utilization of central funds for NREGA, the national government (United Progressive Alliance, with Congress Party as its major partner) wanted the benefits to reach the poor, since it rode the popularity of this scheme to a second term in power. The central government, therefore, is pushing for greater transparency and accountability, through social audit, of NREGA implementation. Large-scale corruption in NREGA implementation in many other states has emboldened the push from the center. For the above reason, the media probably became more receptive to highlighting the importance of social audit at the same time when Samarthan was taking concrete steps of making it more effective through youth participation.

7. Conclusion

The early impact of Samarthan's interventions started waning toward the end of its first phase, and the staff were threatened against exposing corruption by local leadership. It also became evident that insisting on local-level accountability was a dead-end strategy due to collusion between political leadership, the bureaucracy, and the dominant castes controlling the

governance structure at the village level. Samarthan advocacy efforts, too, were affected by the executive's dismissing the exposed cases of corruption as "a few here and there." Samarthan altered its strategy but persisted with its aims. Scaling up the interventions in 10 districts with other CSO partners and putting educated and trained youth volunteers as the flag bearers of its strategy has started to show results. The other components of their strategy — organizing the NREGA Workers' Union and supporting the involvement of civil society at the district level through Social Watch Groups — are in their early stages. Samarthan will need to continue on its new strategy before its effectiveness can be fully assessed.

APPENDIX

People interviewed

1. Dr. Abhay Pande, Director, Social Audit Cell, NREGA Council, Bhopal
2. Ashok Chaturvedi, CEO, Panna block
3. Sanjay Singh Parihar, APO, Panna block
4. Prabhakar Tikaria, PO, Panna District
5. Dilip Singh, Former *Sarpanch* of Amlano abad village, Sehore
6. Two Workers' Union members, Sehore
7. Baljeet Singh Rathore, Chief of Bureau, *Dainik Bhaskar* newspaper, Sehore
8. Sunil Sharma, Senior Reporter, *Dainik Jagaran* newspaper, Sehore
9. Samarthan staff Yogesh Kumar, Dr. D C Saha, and Vishal Nayak
10. Samarthan Sehore; Manoj Tiwari and Ghufranal Hassan
11. Samarthan Panna; Gyanendra, Ram Avtar, Lakhan Lal, and Rahul

Focus Group Discussions

Three focus group discussions were held for this case study.

1. Sehore: 15 persons attended, including 2 village *panchayat* members, 2 cluster coordinators, 2 Social Watch Group members, a village *sarpanch*, and 8 youth volunteers.
2. Panna: Social Watch Group, 10 persons attended, including Sudip Shrivastava (NGO – Manasi), Yusuf Beg (President of Unorganised Sector Workers Union) and four media persons (Indramani Pandey of *Haribhoomi*, Suresh Pandey of *Dainik Bhaskar*, Nadim Ulla Khan of *Raj Express*, and Karan Tripathi of *Pradesh Today*).
3. Panna: 7 persons attended, including two *sarpanches*, three *panchayat* secretaries, one husband of a woman *sarpanch*, and one village level NREGA aide.