

Is Local Really Better?

Comparing EGS and Locally-Managed Rural Works Programmes in Nasik District

This paper compares Maharashtra's Employment Guarantee Scheme with the Sampurna Gramin Rozgar Yojana to find whether the programme is better or worse than the SGRY. A study conducted in 2002-03 in Nasik district, Maharashtra, shows that notions of "participatory localism" largely undermine the apparent advantages of the alternative approach. It further suggests that simply reshaping the EGS to make it like the more democratic and decentralised SGRY will not solve any problems.

SANJAY SAVALE

I Introduction

It is no surprise that the Employment Guarantee Scheme (EGS) comes in for considerable criticism. Like all rural public works programmes, it is very vulnerable to corruption. It is generally relatively easy for the site managers to exaggerate the amount of earthwork actually done, and the numbers of workers appearing on the muster rolls. Long delays in the payment of wages to workers are common. Further, the EGS is more difficult to manage than ordinary rural public works programmes. Different government agencies not used to working closely together have to design reserves of projects ready for implementation, and then coordinate the actual implementation according to seasonal weather patterns. And, compared to the institutionalised and relatively permanent gangs of contract workers that normally provide the muscle on public works projects, workers may come to EGS projects with a sense of legal rights and entitlements.

However, if we accept that a scheme like the EGS is intrinsically fallible, then the important question for policy purposes is whether EGS is better or worse than other rural public works programmes in Maharashtra today. That is the question I address in this paper. To answer this question I have raised 24 criteria to compare EGS with Sampurna Gramin Rozgar Yojana (SGRY) projects. They are: (a) cost of projects (Criterion 1); (b) person days generated by the work (Criterion 2); (c) poverty in the villages where the projects were sited (Criterion 3); (d) remoteness of the villages where the projects were sited (Criterion 4); (e) usefulness of the assets created to the locals (Criterion 5); (f) supervision and monitoring of the work (Criterion 6); (g) use of unnecessary machinery (Criterion 7); (h) involvement of (unauthorised) contractors (Criterion 8); (i) frequency of interruptions in the works (Criterion 9); (j) delays in paying wages (Criterion 10); (k) involvement of local workers (Criterion 11); (l) involvement of women workers (Criterion 12); (m) distance from the worksite to the workers' homes (Criterion 13); (n) the response of local people to project (Criterion 14); (o) average daily earnings per worker (Criterion 15); (p) amenities provided at worksites (Criterion 16); (q) awareness of the programme to the local people (Criterion 17); (r) extent of workers collective engagement with project management (Criterion 18); (s) ability of (potential) workers to press their demands (Criterion 19);

(t) extent of NGO support to the workers (Criterion 20); (u) political-administrative level of the project negotiated (Criterion 21); (v) principal actors involved in planning and implementing the projects (Criterion 22); (w) involvement of politicians in project design and implementation (Criterion 23); and (x) the level of corruption (Criterion 24).

These criteria are important because they throw light on – the implementation and performance – the two basic aspects in analysing the qualitative aspects of the schemes. I do not deal with the larger question of whether it is worth investing public resources in such schemes that are unlikely to perform very well, but simply note that, in Nasik district, evidence proves that a scheme like EGS to provide income for marginal rural people during dry seasons and drought is necessary. I also do not compare EGS with all actual or potential alternative rural public works, but with the main contemporary alternative: the comprehensive rural employment scheme – SGRY.

The SGRY scheme is a central government rural employment scheme initiated in 2001, and is funded by a combination of central (75 per cent) and state (25 per cent) funds. A few details on its history are given in Section II. Several features of the contrast between the EGS and the SGRY are important for our purposes. Most importantly, the SGRY is presented as a local scheme – projects are initiated and implemented through the three-tier locally elected bodies – the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). Thus, in contrast to the "centralised", "bureaucratic", "hierarchical" and "homogenous" EGS, the SGRY allegedly embodies all the claimed advantages of contemporary "localism" – the democratically elected local bodies are expected to be more effective than "remote bureaucracies" in identifying and using public resources to respond to locally specific needs. In contrast to the messy implementation processes in the EGS involving complicated coordination between different government departments, responsibility for implementation in the SGRY lies with a single implementing body – the PRI. Unlike the self-selection of employees on EGS projects, the PRIs have the discretion to choose who gets employed on such projects – the argument being that they are more likely to be aware of those in real need of such employment.

In practice, the local autonomy embodied in the organisation of the SGRY has its limitations. The funding comes through government agencies, and is subject to the characteristic limitations of activities funded by an annual budget that has to be spent within

the financial year. Further, government technical agencies are to varying degrees responsible for the design and construction of SGRY works. However, the fact that the EGS and the SGRY are both rural public works programmes being implemented alongside one another provides an excellent opportunity to test, at least in the context of contemporary Maharashtra, the relative performance of two schemes that represent, respectively, (a) the more centralised, bureaucratic and hierarchical organisational model and (b) the more fashionable localist, democratic alternative.

An extensive field research was done in Nasik, one of the 35 districts of Maharashtra with a population of 4,987,923 in 2001. Nasik might be termed a "traditional EGS district", in the sense that the per capita EGS funding has been relatively high there since the scheme was instituted in the early 1970s. The research on the EGS was done during 2002, and then collected the data to compare it with the SGRY during April to June 2003. These field visits and interviews could bring out the details of the history, trajectory and outcomes of 29 separate rural works projects. Fifteen of these were SGRY projects and 14 were EGS projects.

II Comprehensive Rural Employment Scheme – SGRY

The creation of the EGS in Maharashtra in the early 1970s stimulated the government of India to introduce, throughout the country, public works schemes that were similar to EGS in that they were basically intended, albeit with variable emphasis, to create (a) employment for the rural poor on a need basis, and (b) useful rural infrastructure through labour-intensive works. Let us term these central government initiatives the "parallel rural works schemes". They are called parallel rural works programmes to EGS just because they focused their emphasis on the two most important objectives, i.e., to create (a) employment for the unskilled rural poor and (b) useful rural infrastructure through labour-intensive works. Let us term these central government initiatives the parallel rural works schemes. There are two important general contrasts between them and the EGS. First, they do not have law-bound "guarantee", like the EGS. Second, while the EGS is uniquely a Maharashtra programme, fully funded by the state government of Maharashtra, these "parallel" schemes, however, are funded principally by the government of India. The states are required to implement them, but to bear only a proportion of the cost.

The main early antecedents of SGRY were: the food for work (FFW) programme, begun in the 1970s, the national rural employment programme (NREP), initiated in 1980 as the first large-scale national rural wage employment programme and the rural landless guarantee scheme (RLGS), started in 1983. In April 1989, the NREP and RLGS were amalgamated into the Jawahar Rozgar Yojana (Jawahar Employment Scheme – JRY), and even the nominal work guarantee attached to the RLEGP was omitted. The emphasis was on creating community assets, notably roads and buildings. Under new arrangements, the district authorities (through the district rural development agencies – DRDAs) applied directly to the rural development ministry in Delhi for JRY funding. District authorities could in principle bypass state governments, although the latter were required to fund 20 per cent of JRY expenditures. In April 1999, the JRY was renamed the Jawahar Gram Samridhi Yojna (Jawahar village prosperity scheme – JGSY). The employment assurance scheme (EAS), launched in 1993, was targeted on backward blocks located in

the drought-prone, desert, tribal and hill areas. Like the EGS, the employment assurance scheme was designed to provide employment on demand during lean agricultural seasons to all able-bodied adults in rural areas. The assurance relates to the stated objective of providing up to 100 days of assured manual employment at statutory minimum wages to each wage employment seeker in rural areas, subject to a maximum of two beneficiaries from each family. In 2001, the JGSY and EAS were amalgamated into one scheme – the SGRY.

In the SGRY the states are required to meet 25 per cent of the cost, with the centre paying 75 per cent. The aggregate funding is however divided equally among two sub-programmes, labelled in bureaucratic jargon as first stream and second stream. To some degree, the first stream represents a continuation of the previous EAS scheme, and the second stream is the successor to the JGSY. The first stream is implemented at a higher level. Twenty per cent of total SGRY funds are allocated to elected district councils (zilla parishads), and 30 per cent to the lower, block-level councils (panchayat samitis). The other 50 per cent of total funding – the second stream component – passes through the hands of district level authorities, the district councils and the district rural development agency, who distribute it among the lowest level elected village councils (gram panchayats) mainly on a per capita basis.¹ The regulations for the management of SGRY are quite extensive. Some of the more significant are as follows:

- For smaller schemes, costing up to Rs 1,00,000, the village councils need not seek the approval of any authority other than of the village general assembly (gram sabha) that they are formally required to convene four times a year. This provision is significant for the second stream projects, which are relatively small. Seven of the 15 SGRY projects I examined were below this limit of Rs 1,00,000.
- All work should be executed under the direct guidance of public employees. The use of contractors or other middlemen is forbidden.
- There are extensive provisions relating to publicity, transparency, supervision, record keeping and auditing.
- Wage payments are to be made partly in cash and partly in kind, at the same rate as the official minimum wage.
- Thirty per cent of employment opportunities should be reserved for women and women and men should receive equal wages. In addition, and typical of such schemes in India, (a) there are elaborate – but practically irrelevant – specifications about priorities among different needy categories of people for access to SGRY employment; and (b) a small proportion of total resources is to be directed to individual beneficiaries from disadvantaged social groups, rather than for the creation of collective assets.²

One final point needs to be made about the processes used for allocating SGRY funds in Nasik district. I have indicated above that second stream funds are divided up among village councils largely on a per capita basis. There is very little targeting of money to areas of greater need. By contrast, a very pronounced targeting – of a different kind – is practised annually in the allocation of first stream funds. The official SGRY "guidelines" make only broad statements about the need to focus activities on poorer or more backward areas.³ However, in Nasik district the elected local council members have chosen to focus expenditure on small areas, and not to use need as the main criterion. The same procedures are followed in the district councils, which allocate 20 per cent of SGRY funding, and the block-level councils, which allocate 30 per cent. At both levels, the available funds are divided among all elected council members. Each member then nominates

one single village council area, in which his or her allocation will be spent in the next budgetary year. This allocation procedure indirectly reduces the scope for employing local labour in SGRY, both by creating intense but short-lived very local labour demands, and facilitating the substitution of machinery for labour.

III Methods

The results reported here were shaped by the general understanding of the political and organisational factors affecting the implementation of public works projects on the EGS in Nasik district in 2002. In 2003, during the later dry season, April to June, which is the peak period for rural public works projects again some more cases were explored. At that point much of the district was suffering from drought, so there was a great need for employment and a deal to observe – both actual EGS and SGRY projects and some conspicuous failures of the government machinery to provide as much work as was needed.

I selected total 29 projects from six tehsils (Trimbakeshwar, Igatpuri, Dindori, Nasik, Niphad and Sinnar) of Nasik district. Fifteen were SGRY projects and 14 were EGS projects. Fifteen of them were from the tribal backward belt, which comprised Trimbakeshwar, Igatpuri and some part of Dindori tehsil and 14 from the remaining non-tribal developed belt. Thus total sample of 29 projects comprised: seven EGS projects in tribal areas; seven EGS projects in non-tribal areas; eight SGRY projects in tribal areas; and seven SGRY projects in non-tribal areas. A number of other factors also affected these sample cases, I like variation in terms of distance from towns and types of work (i.e., roads, different types of irrigation and soil conservation), etc. The project was also aimed at four villages in which both EGS and SGRY works were under simultaneous implementation. It was difficult to get access to the lists of current projects from the government offices. The final sample is partly purposive, with some random elements.⁴

A standard list of the range of issues on which needed information for each project was used. Because each project was different. Some had long histories and involved complex political and organisational interactions. Therefore, it was not possible to use a standard questionnaire. Although many government officers were cooperative sometimes suspicions were risen especially, when the violation of formal procedural rules were questioned and, on occasion, significant corruption was taking place. Local contacts were widely used during the survey.

After collecting the data, each project according to a range of parameters was categorised using a five-point score in each case. Data on the scoring of projects is given in the summary table on the basis of criteria 1 to 24 (Annexure). First, we assigned a score of five points to each observation in the furthest left hand column through to a score of one point in the furthest right hand column. Then we calculated, for each question, an average score for (a) the EGS and the SGRY projects separately; and (b) tribal and non-tribal projects separately. Finally, we expressed the average scores as a ratio of one to the other, EGS in relation to SGRY, and tribal in relation to non-tribal projects. The summary table is easier to grasp than to explain. For example, the first row indicates that the average EGS project was appreciably more expensive than the average SGRY project, and that there was little difference, on average, between the cost of projects

in tribal and non-tribal areas. These data are referred in the text in terms of the number of the criteria in the summary table.

The figures in the summary table are not precise. They signal broad patterns. For example, it is clear from comparing the two columns that there are many differences on average between EGS and SGRY projects, but that, in most respects, projects in tribal and non-tribal areas are on average very similar. Given the crudity and frequent subjectivity of the ranking exercise on which these figures are based, one cannot read anything into small quantitative differences. For example, any score of 0.9 or 1.1 should be assumed to be the same as 1.0, i.e., virtually identical. Only when we get to figures of 0.7 (and less) or 1.3 (and more) can we be confident that we have identified a statistically significant difference between EGS and SGRY (or tribal and non-tribal) projects. Section IV deals with patterns that emerged from the simple quantitative comparisons of EGS and SGRY and Section V deals with the comparison of the project in tribal and non-tribal areas.

IV Comparing EGS and SGRY Projects

The data in the summary table enable us to compare the 14 EGS projects and 14 SGRY projects according to a range of criteria. The SGRY projects clearly performed better on only one criterion: shorter delays in the payment of wages – whether in cash or in foodgrains – to workers (Criterion 10). There are many stories, relating to EGS and other public works, of workers having to wait for weeks to actually receive payment. This is clearly a major deficiency for a programme designed to help the needy on a seasonal basis. Data in context of Criterion 10 shows that the typical EGS worker had to wait for between one and two months to be paid, while in all but one of the SGRY projects, workers were paid within a month. On actual daily earnings (Criterion 15), there was no consistent difference between the two schemes, and considerable variation within them. However, when delayed payments force labour to borrow from moneylenders at high interest rates, the value of the EGS wages is considerably lower if delayed. The SGRY organisational machinery is thus superior to that of EGS on one dimension that is very important to the workers.⁵

At first sight, the SGRY projects also seem to perform better on a related issue: the existence of fewer, smaller gaps in project implementation, when workers are temporarily laid off. The Criterion 9 indicates that gaps were small and rare in the case of SGRY projects, but more common with EGS projects. It is however not possible to use these facts to make clear judgments about relative organisational performance. My interviews suggest that one reason lies in contrasting funding arrangements. The SGRY projects are relatively small, and supposed to be completed within one year, and there is considerable organisational pressure to complete work quickly. The concentration of the larger (first stream) projects within single villages each year clearly facilitates that goal. By contrast, EGS projects are not ruled by the annual budgetary cycle. They are larger and technically more complex than SGRY projects, and therefore intrinsically more likely to fall victim to logistical or organisational delays. The comparative figures in the summary table covering Criterion 1 on project costs do not tell the full story on that issue. Several of the EGS projects in the “large budget” category are actually very large compared to even the biggest SGRY projects. And most of the EGS projects suffering the worst delays are road construction activities, which require a wide variety of raw materials in appropriate sequences

(stones of different sizes, water), and a great deal of local transport of stone. Glitches in the management of such projects are common, and may have little to do with specific glitches in the organisational machinery of the EGS.

The EGS projects come out on average as markedly superior to SGRY projects in two particular respects. In a number of ways, the EGS better meets the needs of poor rural people for manual wage work and especially for work at times when no other employment is available. I have already given some of the underlying reasons for this: The SGRY work is driven by the annual budget cycle rather than employment needs; the SGRY funding is spread almost evenly across all areas on population and backwardness basis; and second stream SGRY funds are concentrated very heavily on individual village council areas during the course of a year. Much of the difference between the two schemes at a project level derives from a contrast signalled by the data based on Criterion 7: the more widespread use of illegal heavy machinery, especially the JCB earthmovers, to substitute for labour in SGRY projects.⁶ Referring to Criteria 11 and 14 high use of illegal machinery and relatively high number of outside workers were detected in SGRY than EGS projects. As per Criterion 8 the SGRY workers were more likely to be employed by “big contractors”, and the data, covering Criterion 12, shows women were much less likely to find work on SGRY projects than on EGS projects.

The EGS has a relatively good record of employing women. In these cases the EGS was more welcoming to women workers for three reasons: first, because the EGS is better targeted to the employment needs of poor people, it is easier for women to find work near home. Second, the larger contractors who employ heavy machinery on SGRY projects tend to rely on a small and relatively skilled male labour force.⁷ Third, the fact that drinking water is supplied for workers more frequently on EGS than on SGRY projects (Criterion 16) probably enhances the relative attractions of the EGS to women workers. For, if water is not supplied institutionally, women typically bear the additional burden of fetching it.

As I have mentioned above, the two dominant developmental motives for public rural works programmes in India have been (a) meeting the employment needs of the rural poor, especially needs arising from the seasonality of agriculture and unpredictable rainfall, and (b) using otherwise-unemployed labour to create useful rural infrastructure. The previous paragraphs demonstrate that, with the exception of the greater timeliness in the payment of wages under the SGRY, in Nasik district in 2003, the EGS was more effective at meeting the first set of objectives. What about the second set? Which of the two programmes tends to make better use of money to create rural infrastructure? We cannot answer that question with precision, for that would involve complex estimates of the value of a range of different projects, some of them as yet incomplete. The best we could do in the circumstances was to address the following questions, in the local Marathi idiom, about each project that we studied to a range of workers and local residents: “How valuable is this project to the locality?” “How sustainable is it?” “How far does it meet urgent local needs?”. We then categorised all projects on a five-point scale in terms of their local usefulness. The results according to Criterion 5 reveal a marked difference between the two schemes: EGS projects were much more likely to be described as useful. This finding seems consistent with other observations about the speed with which SGRY projects are prepared and implemented, and the higher level of technical supervision of EGS projects

(Criterion 6). Recall that, because the local administration has to maintain a “shelf” (ie, a reserve) of EGS projects implementable at short notice in case of drought, many are designed, at least in outline, long before they reach the construction stage. By contrast, SGRY projects are designed once the money becomes available.

If we take the two main sets of objectives of rural public works programmes – meeting the employment needs of the rural poor, and building useful rural infrastructure – the EGS seems superior to the SGRY on every count – except the timeliness of wage payments.⁸ But there are other, political criteria to take into account. We value the “mobilisation” aspects of the EGS: the fact that on occasions it becomes the node around which popular organisations can rally poor rural people to press for a range of rights and programmes. From a rather different perspective, adherents to the ideas of “democratic localism” that we referred to at the start of this chapter are likely to suggest that we pay serious attention to other potential “processual values” of the SGRY scheme. First, relative to the EGS and previous public works schemes in India, the SGRY puts decision-making power in the hands of democratically-elected members of each of the three tiers of local government – district, block and village. Second, there are formal provisions for village general assemblies to supervise and control the ways in which village councils plan and execute second stream SGRY projects. How then do we evaluate these two programmes from a political perspective?

The point about participatory local control through village general assemblies can for practical purposes be dismissed. In Nasik as in most of rural India, genuine village general assemblies are rare events. If held at all, they mostly comprise a small number of people closely associated with the village council. But one cannot so easily dismiss the argument that, even if SGRY funds are badly used or misused, they are helping to strengthen local government (panchayat raj). The most optimistic version of this argument is voters will gradually become more aware of – and vigilant over – the use of SGRY funds, and that this will both ensure better deployment of money and strengthen local democracy. We cannot assess that argument because it contains too many uncertainties and speculations about the future and it is convenient to do that by comparing reality with the expectations one might have as a strong believer in democratic localism.

The optimistic believer in democratic localism would hope that, relative to the more centralised and bureaucratic EGS, the higher degree of involvement of local councils in planning and executing SGRY projects would result also in a greater alignment of works with genuine local infrastructural needs; and a greater use of local labour (and contracting?) resources. The first qualification to that optimism is that these “three localisms” – in decision-making, in project design and in resource use – may sometimes compete with rather than reinforce one another. Such competition is especially likely when we put into the picture two other aspects of the SGRY system. First, there is money to be made by those who plan, supervise and manage the work. Second, there are strong pressures to complete the work quickly – which may both motivate and serve to justify the illegal use of contractors and unnecessary machinery. The frequent use of contractors and machinery in SGRY schemes, at the expense of employment opportunities for the local poor, and, according to the views reported as per Criterion 1, at the cost of spending money on the creation of assets that do not have a high enduring local value. External contractors and heavy equipment are confined to first stream SGRY projects. The second stream projects, for which

a little funding is provided to all village councils annually, are too small to attract that kind of attention. In one of my cases, the sarpanch and other councillors decided to let the Rs 1,14,000 allocated to them for SGRY works revert to government because they did not want to undertake the responsibility of completing the works within the timeframe while complying with government rules and regulations. In most such cases, the effective “contractor” was some combination of one or two active members of the village council and the village administrator (gram sevak). Few other people are actively involved in supervision. It was striking that, in the few cases where the chairs of the village council (sarpanches) were women, they had been largely or entirely excluded from knowledge of, or control over, “their” SGRY projects.

Partly because of the need to meet the reporting obligations set by the government of India, it is relatively easy for researchers to obtain information about SGRY projects and funding. By comparison, the government agencies responsible for EGS projects do not release information easily. It would however not be accurate to say that information about SGRY projects is available to “the public”. It was certainly not available to workers on SGRY projects. I found that very few of them even knew about SGRY (Criterion 17). Most associated their source of work with the village council or the JRY programme that preceded SGRY.

On the basis of evidence available, it is not possible at present to reach a very optimistic conclusion about the contribution of the SGRY to the development of genuinely democratic local government. There are elements of relative “localness” about the decision-making processes. But these are not very democratic. They largely involve elected representatives making individual decisions, often for particularistic benefits, rather than much open deliberation. And challenging or exposing malpractices of local powerholders in a democratic fashion, is not possible for the poor who are dependent on them throughout the year. Further, these local decision-making processes do not translate into the creation of particularly efficient or appropriate local assets, or marked benefits for local poor labourers.

From the arguments presented above it seems clear that SGRY projects do not conform closely to the expectations of democratic localists. Do EGS projects conform any more closely to the expectations of those who view the scheme as a mechanism for political mobilisation – either (a) a node around which the rural poor will organise to demand work and the work conditions to which they are formally entitled, and/or (b) a means to support and sustain political mobilisation around other issues? Most of the time, actual or potential workers did not mobilise around EGS. In most projects, the workers had little or no knowledge about rules and rights under EGS, and indeed, in approximately 40 per cent of cases, they did not know they were working on an EGS project. In the very worst case, an attempt to explain EGS rights to workers who were waiting for work to begin at an EGS work site where work had been stopped by officials without explanation and a journalist friend’s attempt to highlight the conditions of these workers led to government officials’ attempt to finish the work with machinery. When this was resisted by local labour, he warned the villagers that he was not going to restart the work in order to teach them a lesson. The journalist was accused of reporting in order to exhort money from officials and subsequently resigned.

But there was another side to the story. In the tribal areas, an activist NGO, alerted by this research, had begun in 2001 to publicise information about EGS rights and entitlements. They had worked in four of the areas from which the author selected

EGS projects, and had some impact, particularly in the opening of new works. While in most years, approximately 60 per cent of the shelf of projects is implemented, in the two districts where this NGO worked the figure went up to 95 per cent. The impact was discernible. As one woman put it, “I never previously ate rice in the dry season. We used to eat ‘kanyaa’ (‘congee’ – basically liquid with little foodgrain content). Now, the EGS employment gives us the luxury of eating rice in the dry season!” Data based on Criteria 18 and 19 show that there were also cases of some organisation, resistance and collective bargaining by EGS workers in other projects. In one such case, a social activist has convinced villagers not to give or take bribes in the employment projects that are started in the village. When an incidence of bribe-taking came to light, the villagers, rather than take the confrontational route of formal complaint, decided to use it as a negotiating tool with the officials, to get more work started and to get prompt payment of wages.

Thus, the EGS does provide a potential platform for the local organisation of rural labour. Because EGS projects employ local people to a greater extent than do SGRY projects (Criterion 11), there is a greater latent potential to match local issues with knowledge of the rights associated with the EGS to generate local mobilisation. And local people in general tend to be in a better bargaining position to demand their rights under EGS projects than migrant labour. The most advanced form of political organisation associated with the SGRY found in my sample cases was some collective bargaining over wage rates. Among the EGS projects, there were four cases where workers took more assertive action, and downed tools because of delayed wage payment or the illegal use of JCB earthmovers.

These differences between the EGS and the SGRY in the degree of worker mobilisation are not huge. But they seem to illustrate the potential still latent in the EGS, while it is unlikely that SGRY schemes will ever generate significant worker mobilisation. The second stream SGRY projects are too small in size and are implemented over short time spans. In the first stream projects, local workers attempting collective action are likely to face the wrath and opposition of some combination of powerful local politicians, external contractors, and the regular employees from elsewhere, that external contractors bring with their machinery. I cannot be sure of the indirect consequences of the latent mobilisation capacity of workers under EGS arrangements. However, it seems likely from my evidence that it discourages the government employees and private contractors who manage EGS projects from adopting wholesale the practices that are widespread in SGRY projects: diverting public money intended to employ the rural poor into already-bulging private pockets through substituting machinery and external contract workers for local (especially female) labour. Evidence referring to the Criteria 7 and 8 indicate that there was significantly less of this in EGS projects. This may be because of relatively better checks and balances and the multiplicity of actors involved in EGS implementation.

V Comparing Projects in Tribal and Non-Tribal Areas

The main purpose in comparing projects according to whether they were located in tribal or non-tribal regions was to check that the differences I have explored above between EGS and SGRY projects were not in fact partly the result of broad location

factors. They are not: the differences between EGS and SGRY projects hold regardless of whether they are located in tribal or non-tribal areas. There are however a few differences between projects in tribal and non-tribal areas that merit some comment.

The most striking is the much more enthusiastic response of tribals to employment opportunities on public works (Criterion 14). Tribals are very poor people (Criterion 3), dependent to a high degree on rainfed agriculture, whose main alternative source of livelihood in the dry season or drought is long distance migration for work purposes. Men are most likely to migrate. The data covering Criteria 12 and 13 show the people who remain and succeed in finding employment on public works are very likely to be women and the work is generally close to their homes. On average, agriculture is more productive in the non-tribal areas, the economy is more diversified and there are wider non-agricultural work opportunities. The EGS and SGRY projects, paying the minimum wage, are not always greeted with enthusiasm there.

In the tribal areas, the fragile agricultural base helps produce low population densities and relatively small settlements. Public works projects tend to be relatively small in financial terms (Criterion 1), but to generate a relatively large amount of employment (Criterion 2). This is partly because there are in the tribal areas relatively few cases of the outright displacement of local workers by contractors using outside labourers and machines (Criterion 7). There would be too much resistance. In one case I examined, tribals were successful in preventing the use of a JCB machine and the use of alternative outside workers, despite not being paid wages for a month by the muster clerk. Data as per Criterion 8 indicates that where contractors are employed in the tribal areas, they tend to be local people. The data in the context of Criteria 21, 22 and 23 depicts the politics around public works schemes in tribal areas that is also relatively local. I found as per Criterion 17 that the tribals are slightly more knowledgeable than non-tribals about the EGS and SGRY schemes. This runs contrary to the stereotype of the socially excluded tribal population. It may partly reflect the greater need of the tribal populations for employment on public works. However, in context of Criterion 20, there is a more direct explanation: knowledge was higher in those tribal villages where, as mentioned above, an NGO had been working since 2001 to increase awareness of rights and entitlements under EGS and SGRY. The NGO found it more difficult to mobilise the workers in SGRY than EGS projects. This may be partly because the NGO did not acquire so much knowledge about the SGRY or focus its attention there. But that in turn reflected an assessment that it would be very difficult to mobilise workers against the very local power-holders who are in charge of SGRY. The relative outsiders who implement EGS projects are not quite such daunting targets.

VI Concluding Observations

I reached four general conclusions from my comparisons between EGS and SGRY projects. The first is that neither scheme is unambiguously superior to the other: each performs better in some respects and is in turn outranked in others. The second is that, nevertheless, EGS is more effective than SGRY in meeting the needs of the rural poor, particularly in favouring labour vs machinery in the implementation of projects, in the hiring of local workers who are in need of employment and in meeting more closely minimum wage regulations. The third is that despite the features

of EGS that seem to favour the poor, there is more variation in performance among EGS than among SGRY projects. This is partly because, in some cases, the types of political mobilisation of potential workers that are implicit in the ideal model of the EGS were actually realised. Workers did organise to demand their rights under some EGS projects. Precisely because EGS projects are larger, depend heavily on external technical expertise, and form part of a uniform state-wide scheme, the potential for labour mobilisation is always present. By contrast, there was no sign of any political organisation of labour under the SGRY scheme.

The SGRY is organised in such a way that it is highly unlikely ever to generate labour mobilisation. Contrary to the expectations generated by ideologies of “localism”, the workers employed in the SGRY projects knew less about the scheme and the conditions under which it should be implemented than did workers in the EGS. My fourth conclusion therefore is that, to the extent that the organisational framework for rural public works in Maharashtra continues to shift from the EGS to SGRY-type “localist” programmes, the prospects for the political mobilisation of rural labour around public works will decrease.

As far as tribal-non-tribal comparison is concerned, in Nasik as elsewhere in India, tribals live in relatively more remote rural areas, and, relative to other population groups, tend to be disadvantaged and marginalised on many dimensions. They enjoy lesser access to government services of all kinds, receive less education, have less political power and suffer from a low social status. In essence, the need for employment on rural public works was greater in the tribal areas. Potential workers, especially women workers, turned out in larger numbers. The illegal use of heavy machinery to substitute for labour was less frequent. The use of private contractors, although formally illegal under both EGS and SGRY rules, is less common in the tribal belt. And, in the tribal areas, the contractors were more likely to be local people. Similarly, the politicians and public servants who had most influence on individual projects were more likely, in the tribal areas, to operate at lower and more local levels – in part perhaps because smaller amounts of money were involved. In sum, the conditions for the effective implementation of rural public works conforming to the spirit of the original EGS – the combination of the technical expertise of government agencies with responsiveness to both local seasonal employment needs and local opportunities for building useful infrastructure – now seem to be greater in the remote and disadvantaged areas of the state than in the economically more advanced areas which were the locus of most political mobilisation around the EGS in the late 1970s and 1980s.

It is hard to disagree in principle with those critics of the EGS who call for the scheme to be decentralised, localised and democratised. V S Page, the originator of EGS, felt this need in last years of his life. He worked out, “Shramshaktidware Gram Vikas”, a sub-scheme of EGS, to get rid of serious structural problems in EGS. The sub-scheme (put on to implement since 1989) intended to comprehensive and integrated and participatory village development. It was in a way an appropriation of EGS on the basis of ideas of localist, participatory decentralisation. However, the state, the planners and the implementers sidetracked the sub-scheme. It makes sense in principle that locally elected councils should have more influence over the design and implementation of EGS projects. But would that actually improve things in practice? We have to be sceptical.

Evidence from elsewhere in the world (for example, social funds projects in Brazil) demonstrates how broad notions of

Annexure

Summary Table: Comparing EGS to SGRY and Tribal to Non-Tribal Projects

Criteria	Meaning of a High Score	Ratio of Average Scores of:	
		EGS:SGRY Projects	Tribal:Non-Tribal Projects
1 What was the cost of projects?	More expensive	1.5	0.9
2 How many person days of work were generated?	More work	1.9	1.2
3 How poor were the populations of the villages where the projects were sited?	Poorer	1.1	1.3
4 How remote were the villages where the projects were sited?	More remote	0.9	1.1
5 How useful to the local poor people were the assets being constructed?	More useful	1.4	1.0
6 Who supervised and monitored the work?	More qualified personnel	1.6	1.2
7 To what extent was machinery used unnecessarily?	More	0.6	0.8
8 What was the involvement of (unauthorised) contractors?	Higher	0.6	0.8
9 How frequent were interruptions in the works?	More frequent	2.1	0.9
10 What were the longest delays in paying wages?	Longer	1.5	1.0
11 Who did the work?	More local people	1.7	1.3
12 What proportion of workers were women?	More women	1.5	1.3
13 How close was the worksite to the workers' homes?	Closer	1.0	1.3
14 What was the response of local people to project employment opportunities?	Greater	1.2	1.9
15 What were average daily earnings per worker?	Higher	0.9	1.0
16 What amenities were provided at worksites?	More	1.4	1.2
17 How far were local people aware of the formal provisions of the programme?	More aware	1.5	1.2
18 To what extent did workers collectively engage with project management?	Higher extent	1.5	0.9
19 How did (potential) workers press their demands?	More collectively	3.2	1.1
20 How far did the workers benefit from NGO support?	More	1.2	2.0
21 At what political-administrative level was the project negotiated?	Higher	0.9	0.9
22 Who were the principal political and bureaucratic actors involved in planning and implementing the projects?	Higher level	1.1	0.8
23 To what extent were politicians involved in project design and implementation?	More	1.0	0.9
24 What was the level of corruption?	Higher	0.8	0.8

* – Ratio of average scores of EGS projects to average scores of SGRY projects.

** – Ratio of average scores of projects in tribal areas to average scores of projects in non-tribal areas.

“participatory localism” can be used to justify development projects that are in practice relatively centralised and controlled by well-informed politicians, bureaucrats and contractors rather than ill-informed local community assemblies.⁹ The SGRY projects in Maharashtra are different from those projects in many material respects. But a close analysis of their implementation reveals a similar set of factors at work. Both are justified in terms of the advantages of participatory, democratic and localist approaches over more hierarchical and centralised mechanisms of public service delivery. The realities of political and bureaucratic life in these projects with the notion of “participatory localism” largely undermine the apparent advantages of the alternative approach. My evidence from Nasik district suggests that simply re-shaping the EGS to make it more like the more democratic and decentralised SGRY will not solve any problems. And it will take us further to see that the rural poor have any actually applicable rights with capacity building of the local PRIs to realise the benefits of the alternative model. **[EW]**

Email: sanjay_savale1@rediffmail.com

Notes

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- 1 The budgetary provision of such parallel public works schemes is so thin for reaching out to the largest number of village communities that it is very difficult to satisfy the local requirements in terms of employment and infrastructure. [For details see A Krishna, 2002].
- 2 22.5 per cent of first stream resources should be earmarked for individual beneficiaries from the scheduled caste or scheduled tribe families living below the official poverty line. It is expected that such resources would be used to improve private land.
- 3 Refer SGRY Guidelines, 2002.

- 4 The 29 projects were located in 24 different villages. The tribal villages were located in Trimbakeshwar Taluka (five villages), Igatpuri taluka (one village) and Dindori taluka (four villages). The non-tribal villages were located in Dindori taluka (three villages), Sinnar taluka (six villages), Nasik taluka (three villages), and Niphad taluka (two villages).
- 5 There are two likely explanations for this difference. One is that the procedures for checking indents and authorising wage payments are fewer under the SGRY than under the EGS. The other is that, while the funds for SGRY work are given relatively promptly by both the government of India and the government of Maharashtra, the weight of evidence strongly suggests that, in recent years, the government of Maharashtra has in various ways tried to discourage EGS expenditure, partly by delaying transferring funds to the implementing agencies.
- 6 Such use of JCB earthmovers also occasionally happens in EGS projects. In one EGS project, a percolation tank, a JCB was being used in addition to labour. The labourers were desperate for work and were willing to accept the use of the JCB in exchange for better daily wages, and more importantly prompt payment.
- 7 In one SGRY project, despite having a woman sarpanch, the village council decided to give work to a group of kokana men, who declined to accept any women or elderly labourers as this would bring down the wage rates of the group as a whole. The other tribal group – poor mahadev koli were totally excluded from the work. The sarpanch (a mahadev koli) was helpless because after the expiry of her two years in office, she would have to continue working in the fields of the marathas and the kokanas whom she could not afford to alienate.
- 8 Actual wage earnings on the two schemes were about the same (Criterion 15).
- 9 Refer Judith Tendler's work (2000) explaining the dynamics behind the outcome of social funds projects in Brazil, supported by large international aid and development agencies in Latin America.

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