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‘They don’t want to work’ versus ‘They don’t want to provide work’: Seeking explanations for the decline of MGNREGA in Rajasthan

Deeptha Chopra¹

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¹ Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex

Email correspondence: d.chopra@ids.ac.uk

ISBN: 978-1-908749-35-2

email: esid@manchester.ac.uk

Effective States and Inclusive Development Research Centre (ESID)

School of Environment and Development, The University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL, UK

www.effective-states.org

Abstract

This paper presents a political economy explanation for the dramatic decline of MGNREGA in Rajasthan. Originally one of the highest performing states, Rajasthan has seen a sharp decline from around 2010 onwards in the uptake of MGNREGA. The paper makes a case for this decline being counter-intuitive, given that actors working at the grassroots level were central in the formulation processes of the Act, contributing critically to the design of the Act. This paper uses information from recent field visits and secondary literature to unpack the reasons for this decline, discussing both demand-side factors and supply-side factors as explanations. It demonstrates that in Rajasthan, it is primarily the supply-side factors that have led to a decline in MGNREGA's performance. The paper demonstrates that in Rajasthan, the greatest strengths of MGNREGA, i.e. demand-based nature and provisions around transparency, have been made its greatest shortcomings. Given the political nature of implementation of the MGNREGA, it is concluded that Rajasthan needs to put in place political engagement strategies, rather than merely technocratic solutions, if this downturn is to be arrested.

Keywords:

MGNREGA, Employment Guarantee, Rajasthan, politics of implementation

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1. Introduction

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is a public works programme that guarantees 100 days of employment as a right to all rural households in India. It is the largest social welfare programme in India, with a budget of about USD 7 billion every year. Some of its hallmark features are its demand-based nature, labour-intensive works as decided by rural communities, and strong transparency and accountability measures. It has been implemented since February 2005 in 200 districts, with a gradual extension to all districts of the country from April 2008 onwards. Rajasthan, a drought-prone state, has been both the forerunner of the Act's implementation through a long history of public works programmes, as well as the place where the demand for a National Employment Guarantee Act was fielded and pursued from 2002 onwards by active civil society groups (Chopra 2011a).

This paper traces the performance of MGNREGA from 2008-09 onwards in Rajasthan, showing that there has been a sharp downwards trend in the performance of the MGNREGA. In understanding the performance of the MGNREGA, it is important to distinguish between different indicators of performance. This paper uses the proportion of total person days worked/number of rural poor in the state as an adequate measure of performance which covers both coverage and demand aspects. While Rajasthan still stands above the all-India average figures of this proportion, it is important to explain the decline in the state's performance since 2010.

The paper provides a political economy explanation for this decline. In doing so, it evaluates demand-side reasons (in terms of the need for MGNREGA in Rajasthan), as well as the supply-side constraints that could provide potential explanations. For exploring the supply-side constraints, it explores the state government's capacity to capture demand, implement the programme and undertake monitoring; and further examining how these play out in the context of Rajasthan. It is argued that in operationalising the various design features of the Act, supply-side factors have been more prominent. Additionally, it will demonstrate how the MGNREGA's biggest strengths, its demand-based nature, and provisions around transparency and accountability, have become its biggest weaknesses. The central argument of the paper is that politics is critical to understanding reasons for non-implementation of the MGNREGA, and therefore any improvements also require political solutions.

The paper is structured as follows: after a brief methodological section, the paper introduces Rajasthan's political and economic scenario. In this section, data on the MGNREGA's performance in Rajasthan is presented, thereby establishing the decline in its performance over time. Section 3 establishes why this decline is counter-intuitive, presenting a short history of the Act's formulation, and the role of Rajasthan-based civil society groups and social movements in instituting critical and distinguishing design features in the Act. Section 4 presents an analysis of demand-side factors, before delineating the supply-side factors in terms of state capacity and

political commitment towards the Act, making a case for the importance of the supply-side dynamics in constraining the Act's implementation in Rajasthan. Finally, Section 5 concludes with some reflections on the implications of the importance of state capacity and political commitment in explaining performance variations of anti-poverty initiatives like the MGNREGA, and how this downward trend can be checked.

1.1 Methodology

The paper is based on both primary and secondary data sources. For all statistical data, the MIS data generated and publicised by the Government of India was downloaded and used for calculating the performance trends. In addition, a desk review of MGNREGA's performance was conducted, using materials from the Government of Rajasthan's website, newspapers and various journal articles. This desk review also prepared the ground for primary fieldwork in the state. Primary fieldwork consisted of two visits to Rajasthan during 2010-2013, whereby interactions with workers and workers' families at work sites and in villages were conducted. Further, semi-structured interviews were conducted with officials of the Department of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj in Jaipur. These interviews were carried out as per the requirements and styles of 'elite interviewing' with senior bureaucrats and other personnel working on the implementation of the MGNREGA in the state. Special emphasis was given to understanding their experiences, interests and perceptions regarding the Act. All interviews were recorded with the permission of the respondents, subsequently transcribed and coded through qualitative analytical software. This paper presents the analysis of this data.

2. MGNREGA in Rajasthan – a declining trend

Rajasthan has been a drought-prone state, with very weak indicators of human development. It is occasionally grouped with a set of states known as 'BIMAROU'¹ states (Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh), which have high levels of poverty, illiteracy, poor health, low levels of economic growth and very high gender inequality (Mohapatra & Sharma, 2013). The state's rural population is largely dependent on rain-fed agriculture, but a huge desert area, sporadic rainfall and recurrent droughts have made agriculture unreliable and have resulted in frequent out-migration to urban areas or to the neighbouring states (Bhatt, 2009). Regular droughts and crop failures have also led to low and vulnerable per capita incomes, which has also reduced the state's dependence on agriculture and allied activities to extract taxes from its poor population.

Public works programmes in Rajasthan have a long history, being put into place by the state government as a response to recurrent and severe droughts in the state (Sisto, 2013; Bhatt, 2009). These groups were active in formulating the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, with their inputs and demands for an Act at the national level being based on their experiences of previously run employment programmes in the state (Shah, 2007; Chopra, 2011a). Given this history, and continuous demand for employment in the state, it is not surprising that

¹ In colloquial terms (Hindi) this refers to being sick.

the Act performed very well in Rajasthan when it was first launched in 2006 in six districts of the state (Negi, 2010). In 2007, the Act was extended to six more districts and in 2008 it was operationalised in the remaining 21 districts² as well.

Rajasthan has two main political parties – Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) and Indian National Congress (INC). From 2003 to 2008, Rajasthan was a BJP stronghold, with Chief Minister Vasundhara Raje in power. From 2008 till 2013, the Congress has held sway, with Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot at its helm. Recent assembly elections have seen a groundswell of support for the BJP, which will form the new government in Rajasthan (The Economic Times, 2013). The Act is implemented in the state by the Department of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj.

Rajasthan was one of the best performing states under the MGNREGA in 2008-09 and 2009-10, with the maximum number of days of employment generated in the state. Further, there were high numbers of households getting jobs and large amounts of funds being spent (see Table 1). In addition, the proportion of households completing 100 days of work was very high – almost 75 percent of the households who worked under MGNREGA in Rajasthan got 100 days of work, which meant that the total person days generated was quite high.

Table 1: MGNREGA performance in Rajasthan

Year	Total funds	Total expenditure	% of funds utilised	Total number of HHs provided employment	Total person days generated	Proportion of HHs completing 100 days
2008-09 ³	724534.52	616439.73	85.08	6373093	482955000	75.78
2009-10	820272.52	566903.4	69.11	6522264	449809000	68.97
2010-11	587878.39	328907.13	55.95	5341653	259518753	48.58
2011-12	412431.08	318278.93	77.17	4522234	212055139	46.89
2012-13	381433.15	343585.41	90.08	4217157	220303090	52.24

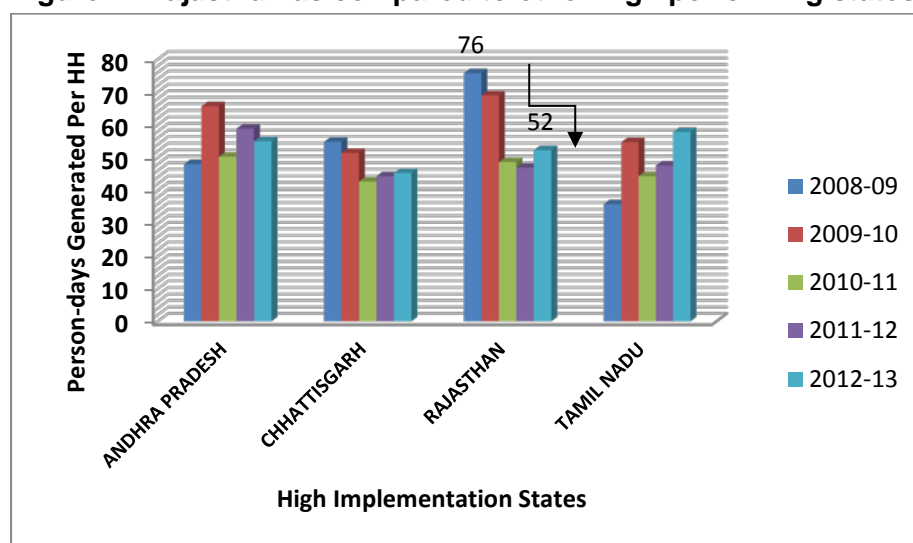
Source: www.nrega.nic.in, author's calculations.

Rajasthan's performance in MGNREGA is good, not only in terms of its own numbers, but also in comparison to other strong performing states – as Figure 1 shows.

² Phase 1 (six in 2006): Banswara, Dungarpur, Jhalawar, Karauli, Sirohi, Udaipur. Phase 2 (six in 2007): Tonk, Swai Madhopur, Chittorgarh, Barmer, Jalor, Jaisalmer. Phase 3 (21 in 2008): Dausa, Rajsamand, Alwar, Baran, Nagapur, Dhaulpur, Bundi, Bharatpur, Hanumanghar, Bhilwara, Jhunjhunun, Sikar, Pali, Ganga Narar, Churu, Jodhpur, Bikaner, Ajmer, Jaipur, Kota, Pratapgarh.

³ Earlier year figures are not taken, as all districts were not covered under MGNREGA.

Figure 1: Rajasthan as compared to other high performing states

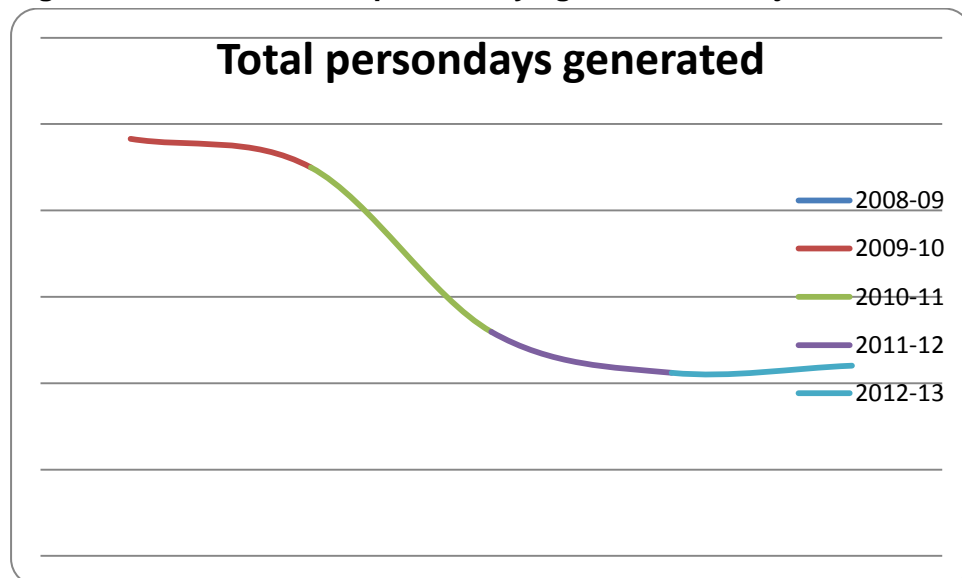


Source: www.nrega.nic.in, author's depiction.

This success was attributed to several factors, the main one being the active presence of civil society creating awareness amongst people (Menon, 2008). In addition, Rajasthan has had a long history of public works programmes, which the government initiated almost annually because of the droughts. This meant that the state government had the machinery in place and a track record of managing public works programmes, so the implementation of the MGNREGA was familiar territory (Dreze & Oldiges, 2007). Amongst the rural population, the high demand for employment on public works also reflected the lack of suitable alternatives.

What was thus surprising was the sudden fall in numbers and funds in 2010-11. In fact, the total expenditure in the state in 2010-11 fell to almost half of what it had been in 2008-09. This was accompanied by a commensurate decline in the number of households getting employment, and the proportion of households completing 100 days fell sharply too. As can be seen in Figure 2, the total number of person-days generated in 2010-11 was nearly half of the numbers in 2008-09, and only 40 percent of the number generated in 2009-10.

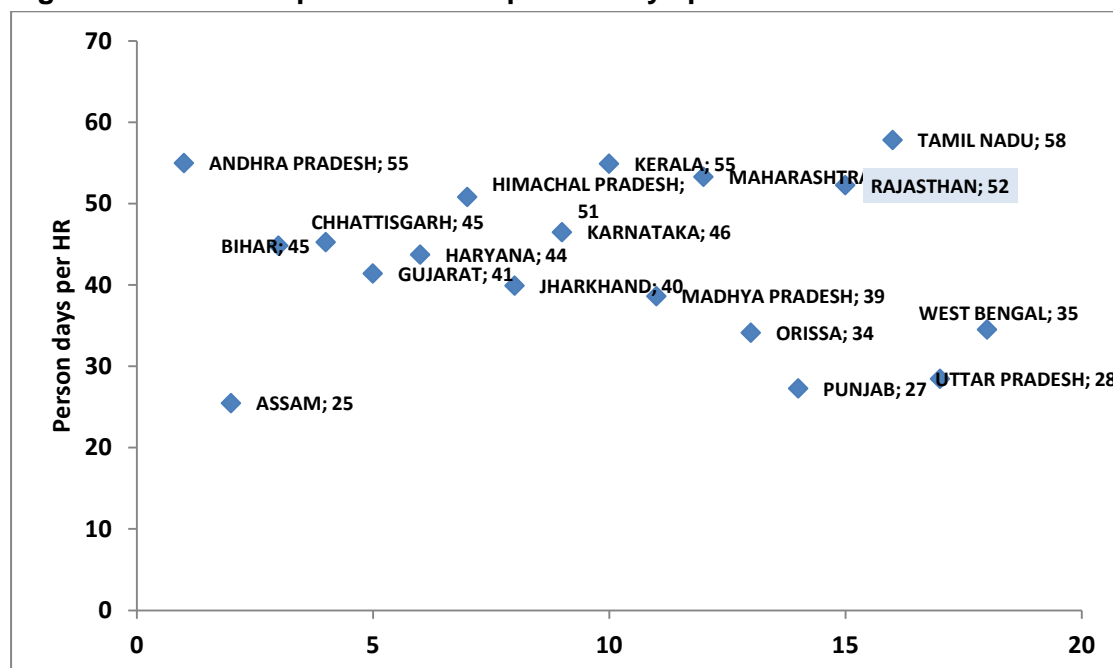
Figure 2: Total number of person days generated in Rajasthan



Source: www.nrega.nic.in, author's depiction.

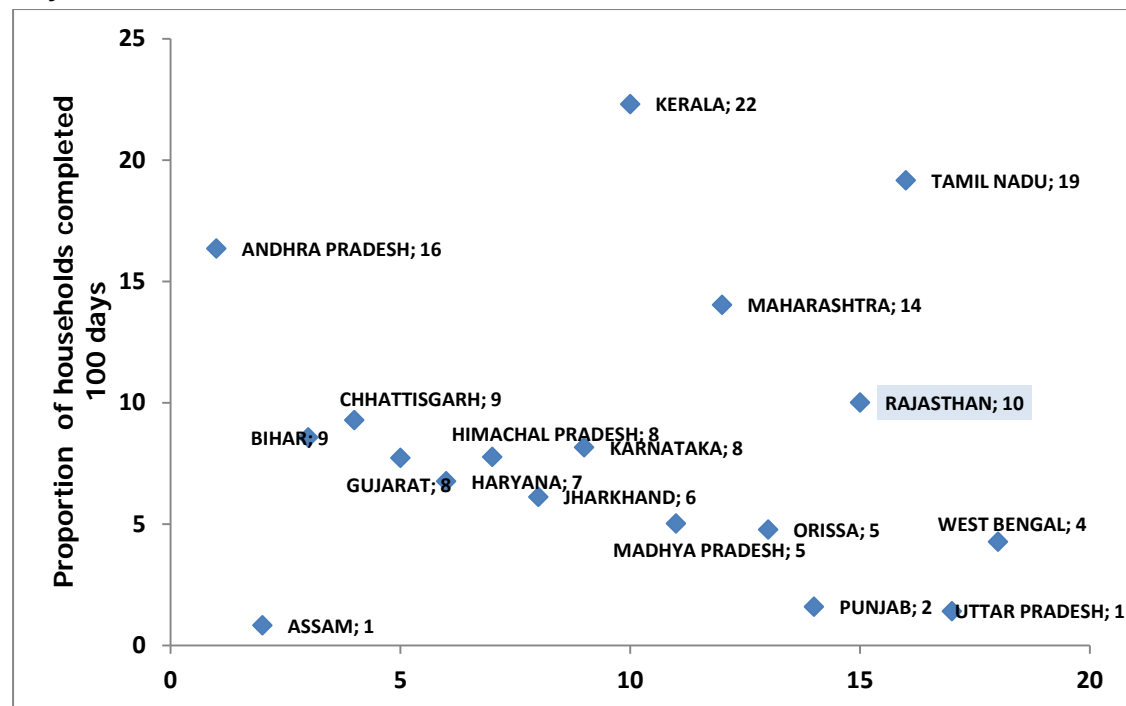
As can be seen from Table 1 and Figure 2, this sharp decline has somewhat levelled off in 2011-12 and 2012-13, but there is hardly any improvement in the MGNREGA's performance in the state. While in comparison to most of other states Rajasthan is still a high performer, with 52 person days generated per household, and 10 percent of households still completing 100 days (Figures 3 and 4), this sharp decline is intriguing and questionable. The next section demonstrates that the sharp decline in MGNREGA is not only surprising, it is also counter-intuitive.

Figure 3: State-wise performance – person days per household



Source: www.nrega.nic.in, 2012-13; author's depictions.

Figure 4: State-wise performance of proportion of households completing 100 days



Source: www.nrega.nic.in, 2012-13, author's own depictions.

3. Counter-intuitive trends

The MGNREGA was formulated in 2006 after a short but intense period of activism and negotiations between the Government of India and non-state actors, including social movements, civil society organisations, and other entities, such as the National Advisory Council (Chopra 2011b). In fact, the very idea of an employment guarantee Act and its demand came from Rajasthan, which had a long history of droughts and intermittent public works programmes, where activists ‘began to see [these public works programmes] as a need for sustained employment input’ (civil society activist). The formal articulation of an idea of employment guarantee was crystallised with the formation of the ‘*Akal Sangharsh Samiti*’ (Fight against Drought Committee), a network of Rajasthan-based organisations and individuals formed at the state level to deal with the issue of droughts in 2001.

As a response to precipitating starvation deaths and severe under-nutrition, activists approached the then-chief Minister Ashok Gehlot and the Congress party with a draft bill of a State Employment Guarantee Act.⁴ While the idea was initially dismissed by the state government, due to lack of adequate financial resources, the onset of elections within the state in 2003 and at the national level in 2004 helped to push this demand onto the political agenda. The surprise victory of the Congress and the formation of the United Progressive Alliance at the centre with support of the Left parties crystallised the idea of a national-level Employment Guarantee Act. From this

⁴ Modelled on the Maharashtra Employment Guarantee Act.

time onwards, the contribution of the Rajasthan actors peaked through their participation in national events and on bodies such as the National Advisory Council, giving them considerable influence over the provisions of the Act. The struggle to get these provisions into the MGNREGA is well documented (Chopra 2011a, Chopra 2011b), and their ability to get most of their desired provisions into the final text of the Act speaks of their immense power at the national level.

Armed with the Bill that they had formulated and their field experiences (including that of engaging in public works programmes, a struggle for payment of minimum wages and a struggle against corruption), they were able to institute certain critical design features into the Act, which include:

- Demand-based functioning of the Act, ensuring that it was rights-based;
- Payment of minimum wages to labourers in a timely manner;
- Provisions of social audits and strong transparency and accountability mechanisms.

It is therefore not surprising that when the Act was passed and implemented, the same activists continued to play a critical role in its implementation in Rajasthan (Dey, 2014). They conducted awareness creation drives across the state about the existence and provisions of the MGNREGA, and also participated in the Central and State Employment Guarantee Councils. The most intense involvement of these actors was for ensuring accountability and transparency in the Act's implementation (Lakha, 2011). In the early days (2006-09), the activists liaised with the state government (and the central government) to ensure that social audits were undertaken. This involved training people to conduct social audits, procuring necessary records, and holding public hearings after each social audit. These audits helped to both check corruption and enhance awareness about worker rights and provisions of the Act amongst the rural population. Subsequently, this led to high demand for employment under the Act, to which the state government had to respond – thereby setting in motion a virtuous cycle of people's demand and state's responsiveness. This then resulted in the high figures of MGNREGA performance up until 2008-09 – as shown by Table 1 above. One would therefore expect that this virtuous cycle would only continue in the next few years. Instead, as shown above, there was a sharp decline in the MGNREGA's performance, which is counter-intuitive.

But before we turn to analysing and understanding a possible explanation of this sudden decline, examining the political party configurations in the state highlights another counter-intuitive trend, as can be seen in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Political trends and MGNREGA performance in Rajasthan

Period of time	Party in power at state	Party in power at centre	Expected MGNREGA performance	Actual MGNREGA performance
Pre-2004	Congress	BJP		
2005 - 2008	BJP	Congress led UPA	Low	High
2009 - 2013	Congress	Congress led UPA	High	Low

With opposing parties in power at the centre and the state, one would expect that performance of a social policy initiated and associated with the party at the centre would be low. This is because the party in power at the central level would not want the credit and political rewards of the social policy to give advantage to the opposition party at the state level. At the same time, it would not be in the interest of the central-level political party – in power – to give privilege to the party in opposition, which is the party in power at the state level. In a centrally funded scheme where the centre could potentially jeopardise implementation at the state level (through resource constraints and delays for example), an opposing centre-state political party configuration would therefore mean low performance of the scheme.

However, this was not the case in Rajasthan. In fact, the fund flow, utilisation of funds and performance of the MGNREGA, in terms of numbers of households provided with employment and other indicators, were high during the time that the BJP was in power at the state level. Instead, and counter-intuitively, the performance of the MGNREGA fell drastically when the Congress came back into power in Rajasthan, even with a continuation of the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) coalition at the centre. One plausible explanation for why the BJP invested more in the Act could come from their recognition that this would pay electoral dividends in the long term. Interestingly, this good performance in Rajasthan is also mirrored in another BJP ruled state – Chhattisgarh. Conversely, the Congress party in the state might have not had the political vision, leadership or the energy to counteract the negative effects of local power politics that were brought to bear on the Act (as discussed below). In addition, despite strong commitment at the centre to this flagship programme, the Congress seems to have found it harder to work with state governments where they were in power, as compared to the BJP. This could be because of weak leadership at the state level in making MGNREGA's implementation a political priority, with both Rajasthan and Assam being examples of this shortcoming

The next section uses data collected through primary research to understand the reasons for a decline in the MGNREGA's performance in Rajasthan.

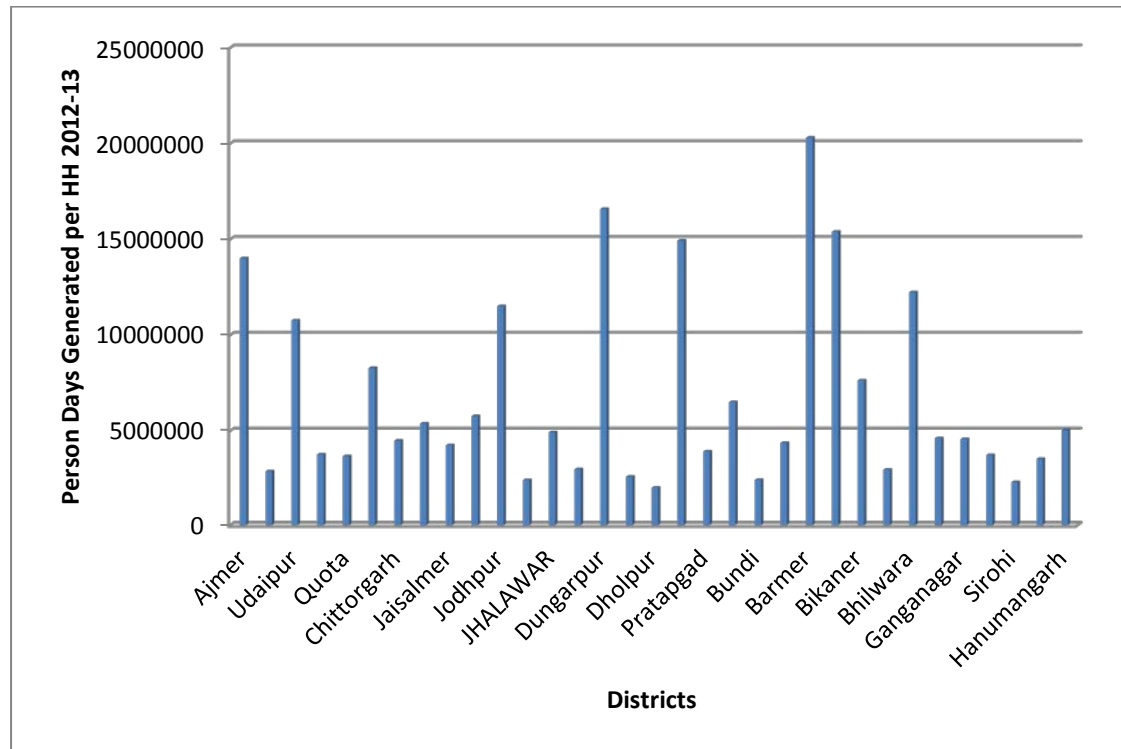
4. Reasons for decline: demand and supply-side factors

The MGNREGA is a demand-led programme – this implies that the programme will only provide employment to those who ‘express’ a demand for work. Once the demand has been expressed, it is assumed that the state machinery will kick into action and employment will be provided through the opening of appropriate worksites. The individual then turns up, does the work, and is paid his/her wages either in cash or into a bank/ post office account. In this chain, therefore, demand seems to be the lynchpin around which the functioning of the MGNREGA depends. The higher the demand, the more the state performs by delivering employment to the rural poor.

In trying to explain the reasons for the decline in performance, a decline in demand would be quite significant. In fact, state-level bureaucrats and senior officials expressed this as the single most important reason why Rajasthan had seen a decline in the MGNREGA’s performance. This decline could be explained in factors such as market wage rates increasing, which were in fact a signal of MGNREGA’s success in the state, rather than its decline:

“Initially the market was maybe at a lower rate than NREGA, therefore the demand under NREGA would be higher, but over the market years the wages have increased...it is the success of NREGA that people are now getting higher wages and they are also assured of work whenever they desire...”
(Senior Government official, Rajasthan).

The variation in MGNREGA’s performance across Rajasthan’s districts (Figure 5) was also attributed to demand fluctuations. Demand for employment was higher in districts where there were little or no alternative employment opportunities, and the socio-economic condition of people necessitated that they accessed employment under the scheme. In fact, some state officials said that the number of people provided employment under the programme could not be a measure of performance at all, “because labour deployment is based on demand” (senior government official, Rajasthan), which in turn depended on wage rates outside MGNREGA, the socio-economic profiles of people in terms of their need for such employment, and the geographic variation across different years which determined whether other employment opportunities were available.

Figure 5: Person days generated per household across Rajasthan's districts

Source: www.nrega.nic; author's depictions.

However, a review of secondary literature, a study of climatic variations and personal observations refute all these demand-linked factors. Firstly, no fall-off in demand could be explained by a change in climatic conditions in Rajasthan. Between 1901 and 2002, 47 droughts of varying intensity have been observed (Jethoo, Poonia, & Dass, September 2012). At the block and village level, the number of drought-free years is practically zero, which leads to the conclusion that every year some or other part of Rajasthan is affected by drought (ibid.).

Secondly, no major employment opportunities have opened up in the state as the growth rate remains more or less constant. While Rajasthan achieved a relatively higher growth rate of 6.9 percent between 2006 and 2010, this was primarily attributed to rapidly growing industrial and service sectors (Various authors, 2010), even though the agriculture sector employs much of the rural population (over 60 percent of all jobs in the state) (Planning Commission, 2011). Most of Rajasthan has been placed in zones II & III (low productivity, highly dependent on rainfall, low level of irrigation and high incidence of poverty) as per agro-economic division and land productivity by the Planning Commission of India, and shows a rather precarious scenario of employment opportunity within agriculture sector (Dutta, 2009). This demonstrates the presence of a considerable informal labour force from the primary sector that remains unemployed, despite the state maintaining a constant growth rate fuelled by non-primary sectors. According to the National Sample Survey Office's (NSSO) 62nd round survey on employment and unemployment, conducted from July 2005 to June 2006, only about 53 percent of rural males and 40.3 percent of rural females in Rajasthan belong to the labour force.

Thirdly, given that 16.05 percent of the 84.19 lakh⁵ rural population still lives below the poverty line (Planning Commission, July 2013), it is highly unlikely that the socio-economic profile of rural households would have changed such that about half of the households who had been working under MGNREGA in Rajasthan in 2008-09 would no longer need work in 2009-10 and 2010-11. Finally, my field observations and interviews with rural women and men carried out in 2010-11 in Rajsamand district showed that there was a lot of unmet demand for MGNREGA-related employment – and that people really wanted employment but were unable to obtain it. This is corroborated by Himanshu, Mukhopadhyay et. al. (2014), who found from the analysis of the NSS data, that while only 15 percent of households were denied work in 2009-10, this number rose to 32 percent in 2011-12.

That there is widespread unmet demand is true not only of Rajasthan, but also of other states – in Bihar, Ravallion calls this a rationing of work (Dutta, Murgai et al. 2012). A recent Government of India (GoI) initiative, the Kaam Mango Abhiyaan (Movement to Demand Work) was initiated by the Ministry of Rural Development in six districts – Sitapur (Uttar Pradesh), Nashik (Maharashtra), Raichur (Karnataka), Katihar (Bihar), West Singhbhum (Jharkhand) and Sundergarh (Odisha) (Shivakumar 2013). This came after recognition by the government that the decline in work under MGNREGA was not due to lack of demand, but because of the failure to capture demand effectively.

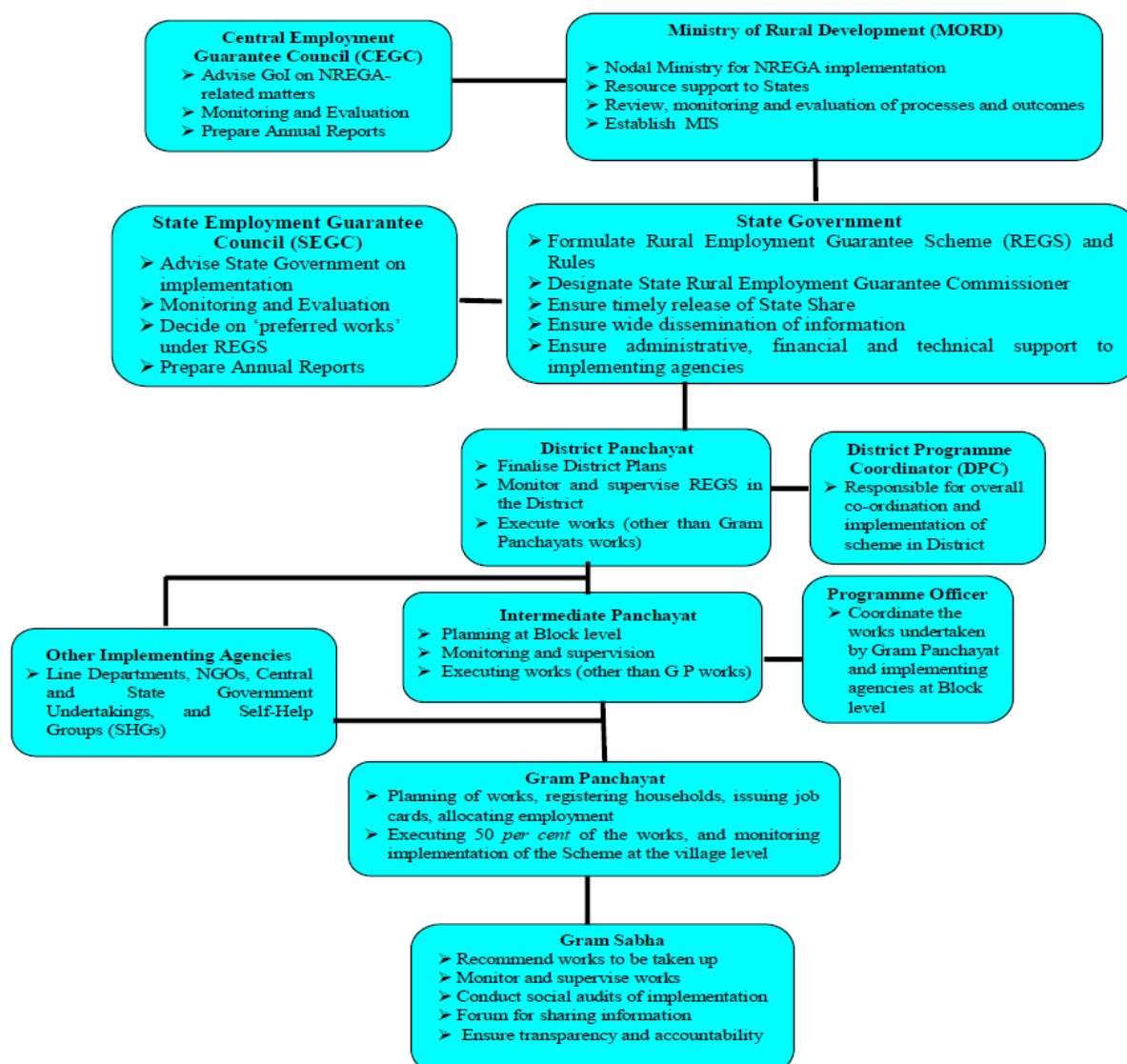
In considering why there was no demand then, it is important to explore what can be considered ‘supply-side’ factors – i.e. the workings of the state machinery to capture this demand, and to fulfil it by the provision of adequate employment. Adequate implementation of the Act also depends on the state’s monitoring capacity, which ties directly into the transparency provisions of the MGNREGA. These three supply-side factors are discussed below.

4.1 Capacity to capture demand

Along with expressing demand for work, equally important is the process through which this demand is captured and noted by the state machinery. The role of local-level state functionaries and elected leaders of *Gram Panchayats* is especially important in this process, given the administrative structure of MGNREGA’s implementation, as detailed in the diagram below:

⁵ 8,419,000

ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE OF NREGA



Source: MORD (2008).

In Rajasthan, the main form through which this demand is captured is an application form entitled 'Form 6'. This form, introduced in 2011 by the then-ruling Congress government, comprises a requisition that needs to be filled for work under MGNREGA. The form also has a receipt attached that has to be handed over to the worker as proof of when the work was sought. This receipt is critical for tracking whether the work has been provided within 15 days of requisition, or whether the worker is eligible for unemployment allowance.

Field visits to Rajsamand District in 2010 showed that poor households were facing obstacles in registering demand through Form 6. Although almost everyone knew about the existence and importance of Form 6, there was unanimous agreement that it was an uphill task to get this form accepted by the *Rozgar Sevak*⁶. Either the

⁶ The person responsible for collecting/accepting the demand for work.

Rozgar Sevak was unavailable at the Panchayat Office (which is supposed to be open and accessible every day), or in a few cases, the *Rozgar Sevak* had flatly refused to take the form, saying that “there is no employment, I will inform you when there is employment” (worker, Rajsamand district). In the few cases that the form has been accepted, no receipts have been issued.

This signals an inherent shortcoming in the design of the MGNREGA – because the requisition for demand needs to be filled out and submitted, this leaves the space open for frontline state actors like *Rozgar Sevaks* to refuse to accept the form. Even when the form is accepted, the *Rozgar Sevak* could refuse to give an acknowledgement of the form being registered. This can have two potential effects – firstly, the *Rozgar Sevak* may simply throw away the forms, not passing them up the chain so that worksites can be opened up. Secondly, the *Rozgar Sevak* may pass the forms up the chain, but at no level of this chain are officials obligated to provide work, or unemployment allowance in lieu of work, as the existence of these forms can simply be denied or ignored.

In Rajasthan, this lack of capture of demand is perhaps one of the main causes of there being ostensibly ‘no demand’ for employment that was being expressed to me by higher-level state officials. It is also important to explore the reasons why this demand was not being captured. Two aspects can be important – intention (motivation) and systemic factors.

The lack of adequate numbers of frontline staff, and the overloading of responsibilities onto limited numbers of staff may be an important determinant in the failure to capture demand in Rajasthan. This capacity problem was alluded to by the state officials in Rajasthan as arising because of fluctuations in demand for employment, both seasonally and yearly:

“...we do not have...uniform defined structure throughout the year, so that's a serious constraint in terms of creation of capacities...we may have eight months when ...[demand]...is very low, and ...four months...[demand] is high...[and there is yearly variation]...when there is a drought...so these contingencies also result in stress at the field level on how to complete the task [of providing employment]...we have to be on our toes..” (Senior government official, Rajasthan).

Further, the low capacity at the field level was attributed to a high turnover rate amongst contract employees (which most of the frontline staff in MGNREGA have been in the state):

“...we require them on a [irregular] basis]...contract employees would leave in between...they have greener pastures outside...” (Senior government official, Rajasthan)

This high turnover rate means that posts are vacant for long periods (during which forms expressing demand cannot be registered), or that staff are yet to be trained in the process of capturing demand and the rules and also regulations of MGNREGA, leading to inappropriate practices. Another associated problem of capacity is also linked to overloading of responsibilities – similar to the frontline officer not being there, if the person is busy doing other things, they just will not have time to be in the Panchayat office and receive Form 6:

“I have to maintain 14 registers...and now the order has come that I also have to go to the field every day and take attendance...how will I do everything...I take home all these registers, and I am still behind. If the registers are not done, the workers don't receive their wages on time, and they shout at me. And if I don't go to the work site, the MIS officer says I will not be paid my wages!” (Rozgar Sevak, Rajsamand District).

These instances show that lack of adequate infrastructure, staff and appropriate mechanisms to capture demand exist widely in Rajasthan. The Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) report has also raised issues of state capacity in terms of vacant posts for Programme Officers, Technical Assistants and Engineers in Rajasthan and other states (MORD 2008). These are supply-side issues of capacity that are negatively affecting the adequate implementation of the MGNREGA in Rajasthan.

The above quote shows the inability of frontline staff to adequately carry out their heavy load of responsibilities, and partly explains why demand for employment is perhaps not being captured. The above discussion also shows that frontline functionaries are unwilling to implement the Act, as they do not want to be held accountable for the lack of provision of timely work. This then points to an important implication – that the lack of state capacity results in a subversion of the ‘right’ of workers to obtain employment.

But this conceals the inherent politics at play in the capturing of demand – the factor of intention or motivation. Firstly, there may be local politics at play – patrimonial relations and clientelism can play a role in selection of certain workers over others, operationalised through a rejection of applications of work from some people (Brinkerhoff & Goldsmith, 2002). Secondly, and perhaps more insidiously, is the interplay between demand, employment and unemployment allowance. Once demand is registered, employment has to be provided, whether the state machinery is geared for it or not. The penalty for defaulting on the employment, is payment of unemployment allowance after 15 days of the demand being registered, the burden of which has to be borne by the respective state governments. So one way of not being liable for any unemployment allowance is to not register demand in the first place. Like many other states, Rajasthan has never paid unemployment allowance, despite work not being provided within 15 days (Livemint, 2010). In Rajasthan however, this seems to play out even more critically and rather dangerously:

“We have been told not to give receipts, because the block machinery is not big enough, and they cannot cope with so many worksites...so in order to reduce the workload on themselves, I have been told not to register demand...otherwise I will be penalised...what can I do...I am a contract employee, I can be thrown out whenever they want, so I follow orders. I tell people there is no work, and I don't give receipts. I know what I am doing is wrong. But I cannot defy orders from above.” (Rozgar Sevak, Rajsamand district)

The above quote refers to an interplay between capacity and motivation. There is an obvious capacity gap; but this has in turn led to negative motivation or a disincentive to capture demand. This interplay can be often interpreted by potential workers in a negative way – “they don't want to give us work” is a sentiment we often heard from villagers in Rajasthan and other states during our field visits. Interestingly, there was also a corollary sentiment expressed by the state officials at various levels – state, district, block and even village-level functionaries often said “they [workers] don't want to work”. The section below explores how this sentiment is linked to the issue of demand capture.

4.2 Capacity to implement the programme

As has been seen through several quotes above, the capacity of the state is constrained, affecting the ways and extent to which demand is captured; but it also affects the ways in which the Act's provisions are implemented, as this section seeks to demonstrate. While lack of demand capture may explain the present-day situation of how the MGNREGA is being prevented from functioning, it does not explain fully the sharp decline in performance – from one year to another. A plausible explanation can be given by the negative spiral of bad implementation and lack of faith that is often the downfall of a social policy – and that is set into motion by a lack of capacity to implement the programme (Menon, 2008; Reddy, Tankha, Upendranadh, & Sharma, 2010).

The MGNREGA has some critical provisions that are to be adhered to during the Act's implementation, namely, timely minimum wages and provision of unemployment allowance. As has been discussed above, the payment of unemployment allowance is more of a dream than a reality in Rajasthan. It is also no secret that the state of Rajasthan has paid some of the lowest wages under the MGNREGA – as little as INR 2 in some cases (The Times of India, 2011)! It is thus going against the very guarantee of minimum wages that has been enshrined in the Act. While this paper cannot go into the technical details of how such low wages came about, it is important to understand and acknowledge the immense complexity of administration that the Act requires in order to calculate wages for each worker – with an army of Monitoring Information System (MIS) officers, field *Rozgar Sevaks* and technical engineers involved in the measurement of work and calculation of wages at each worksite for each worker. If this army does not exist, is not trained fully, or has too much work, the calculation of wages will suffer. This lack of capacity

to adequately implement the programme provisions has a direct effect on workers' motivations. While the minimum wage has been advertised widely in Rajasthan, when the workers receive less than they were expecting, with no recourse to complaint, the faith in the Act's provisions and guarantees is slowly eroded.

Even worse is the effect that delayed wage payments have – our field visits showed that in Rajasthan wages were not being paid on time. This observation has been made by several other surveys in the state (Dreze & Oldiges, 2007; Pradhan, 2012; Arora, Kulshreshtha, & Upadhyay, 2013). Even state officials accept that there is a delay – intricately linked to the issue of capacity for implementation:

“My block spends one of the largest share of the MGNREGA budget...I need people...one engineer in my block looks after 30 worksites, while in another block they might have one or two worksites under them...our MIS officers work late every day, and still our records are not complete...then we don't get the funds [from the state and the centre] so we can't transfer the money to Panchayats and they can't pay the workers.”

The other side of the picture of incomplete records holding up the money transfer from the centre was explained by the ministry of Rural Development officials in Delhi:

“In some cases if they have not completed the processes and procedures...including MIS... then we only transfer a part of that. We ask the State to complete the rest and then come back to us. For us it is ok, but for State it is a problem because each unit in State will receive very small amount and they will be reluctant to open works. At the same time we do not want States to park funds in savings bank accounts.” (Joint Secretary, Ministry of Rural Development)

The combination of a lack of capacity at the block and district level, and central auditing requirements has meant a delay both in opening of works, and in payment of wages. The process through which a delay in the opening of works is countered by non-registration of demand has been discussed above. This delay in opening of works, and especially in late payment of wages that are lower than expected, sets into motion a negative cycle of eroding trust, which affects demand. As a worker expressed:

“I would rather work for lower wages on a private landowner's farm and be assured that I will get my [lower] wages at the end of the day, than work in MGNREGA and not know when and how much [higher] wages I will receive.”

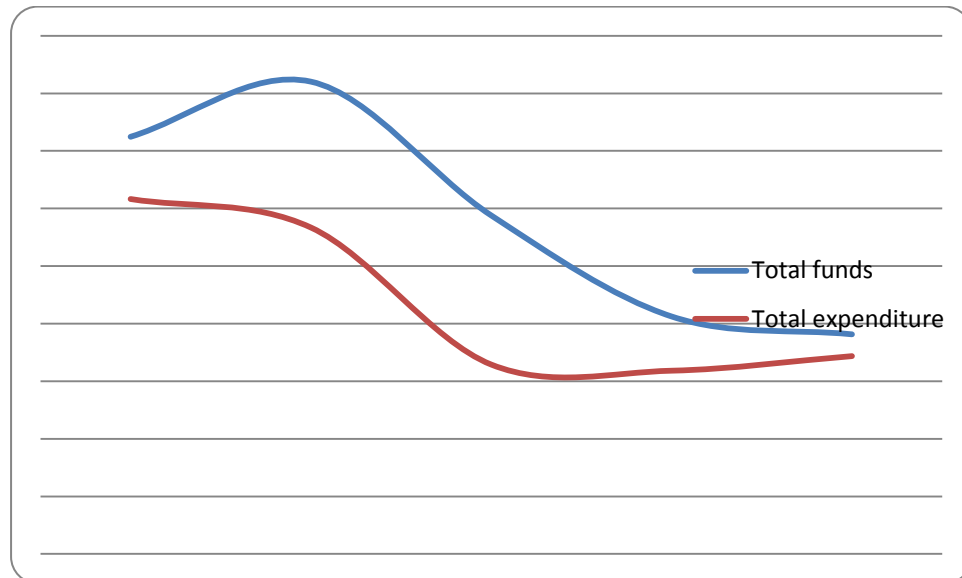
As trust in either timely provision of employment, or timely receipt of adequate wages erodes, this can lead to workers gradually self-selecting out of the programme, choosing instead to work in more arduous conditions and at lower wages. They would then not apply for work (therefore the demand falls), or if they do apply and start working, they may drop out as soon as any alternative employment becomes

available – thus leading to the perception that they either do not need the work; or worse, they “don’t want to work”. This negative cycle can play out quite rapidly, with workers choosing alternative (and sometimes more harmful) employment strategies, such as migration to other areas. This then also explains the failure of the MGNREGA to arrest distress migration, which was one of its primary goals (Bhatt, 2009).

This discussion has shown that the state’s lack of capacity to implement the programme provisions – in other words, supply-side factors – have been critical in explaining the decline in MGNREGA’s performance in Rajasthan. What this discussion still does not explain, is the counter-intuitiveness of the downward trend – what happened in 2009 that saw such a sharp decline in the MGNREGA’s performance? This is pertinent, especially as Rajasthan was a very high implementation state before 2009 – implying that it was managing to transcend capacity gaps and shortcomings to deliver on the MGNREGA. In fact, it can also be said that some capacities were being built over time – Rajasthan has had several rounds of recruitment of frontline officials, and a number of training programmes have been held regularly at state, district and block levels for staff. While there is a temporal dimension to how some capacity gaps translate into lowering demand over time, as discussed above, the sharpness of the decline remains to be explained.

4.3 Capacity to monitor implementation

Under the MGNREGA, there are two aspects of monitoring that are key – process monitoring, and financial/ fund release. In terms of the financial aspects, the process of preparing labour budgets starts a cycle of fund release from the centre to the state – which the state then utilises. Any left-over money from one financial year is then deducted from the fund request that the state puts in for the consecutive year. Close financial monitoring and an adequate planning process (which involves estimating potential demand) would therefore imply that the distance between total funds and total expenditure is quite small. In Rajasthan, as Figure 6 shows, the planning process has not been adequate, but is showing an improving trend. But it is interesting to note the sudden peak in total funds released in 2009-10, at the same time as a sudden decline in the expenditure during the same period. This perhaps points to something critical that happened towards early 2009, which translated into a sudden decline in expenditure that was not expected by the state bureaucrats at the time of submitting the labour budget and their request for fund release to the centre. The fact that more funds were released meant that the centre was also expecting an increase in expenditure during this year, rather than the decline that actually happened. This section explores the aspect of process monitoring to find an answer to this unexpected decline.

Figure 6: Estimating demand in Rajasthan

Source: www.nrega.nic.in, author's depictions

The MGNREGA has very strong elements of accountability and transparency measures, the most significant being the process of social audits that are mandated in the Act. Rajasthan has been a pioneer in social audits (some prominent ones being Janawad, Baran and Taswaria social audits, amongst others). The state government had actively sought the help of social activists, who first initiated and operationalised the idea of social audits and public hearings in the state. In fact, civil society pressure and strong networks with the state elite in the early days of the Act's implementation might have been a strong reason for Rajasthan being "the best performer among all states" for 2006-07 (Dreze et al. 2008), in addition to having "a high level of preparedness for the Act, having organised massive public works programmes almost every year" (ibid). However, there has been a drastic change in the relationships between the powerful civil society lobby and the state government with respect to the MGNREGA.

In 2009, the Bhilwara social audit (supported by Mr C. P. Joshi, the then Union Minister of Rural Development, Bhilwara being his parliamentary constituency) took place. It unearthed huge scams, after which the tide appears to have permanently turned against the MGNREGA. The unearthing of scams in the Bhilwara-2009 audit was followed by a powerful axis of panchayat staff, legislators (both BJP and Congress) and district officials joining hands to block civil society involvement in the audits, effectively bringing the government to its knees, which suspended the Bhilwara audit results conducted in October. Subsequently, the Gehlot-led Congress government called off audits in 32 districts in November 2009. The position of the government was heavily critiqued, especially for not supporting civil society engagement and the credibility it brings to the social audit process. This process played out in the court of law during the case filed by Sarpanch Maha Sangh, asking for a ban on the involvement of civil society in audits (The Hindu, 2009).

This event has resulted in three types of alienation – that of civil society towards the state; that of political actors at the local level (both Sarpanches and street-level bureaucrats) towards implementation of the MGNREGA, and that of the state towards civil society actors and transparency provisions of the MGNREGA. But over time, these have translated to a much longer lasting alienation – that of workers who have lost trust in the MGNREGA's provisions, but also in the state government's ability to implement MGNREGA efficiently or for grievance redressal, with no sanctions for non-performance or even misappropriation. The state's bureaucracy is now perceived to be in cahoots with local power holders, and workers feel they have no recourse to complaints against corrupt practices. At the same time, the local power holders have become wary of anything to do with the MGNREGA:

“I would rather not implement the MGNREGA, it is so complex and there are so many problems, I don't want to be blamed for not giving my village people work...when I can't pay them wages on time, I can't open worksites, and if I do, I get blamed if there are any problems.” (Sarpanch, Rajsamand District)

The above quote masks a deep problem that the author observed and noted during her field trips to Rajasthan, and which has been corroborated by several people working in the state. Social audits are one of a series of transparency measures that have been initiated in Rajasthan. This has made leakages from the MGNREGA difficult, small-scale and risky – for both local power holders, such as Sarpanches, as well as the frontline support staff (junior engineers, etc.). Thus, local actors who would have otherwise had a vested interest in implementing the Act (through diverting its benefits) are instead wary of the transparency measures that curtail the amount of money they can draw from the Act, as well as increasing the transaction costs of such actions. In addition, they risk being caught in the act of trying to divert funds for their own benefit. Instead, it is much easier to limit the scale of their engagement in the MGNREGA's implementation, and make money from other governmental schemes from which lining their pockets is convenient and still possible. This actually points to the displacement of leakages – from one government scheme to another.

There has thus been a three-sided negative cycle that has been initiated by supply-side factors. First, local power holders do not want to implement MGNREGA, instead masking their reluctance to engage in the MGNREGA by claiming that the state government does not provide work or wages in time. Secondly, workers have lost trust in obtaining MGNREGA work, and hence do not put pressure on local functionaries to register demand. Lastly, state functionaries have either inadvertently or consciously sent the message that demand needs to be captured in a controlled manner, because they do not have the capacity to deliver work or wages in time, and do not want to be caught out paying unemployment allowance from their state coffers. Instead they use the argument that there is no demand – “[workers] don't want to work” – to justify the fall-off in demand.

Initially working very closely with civil society organisations who had designed the Act, over time the Rajasthan state government has become hostile to them. It can be seen from the paper's analysis that the Rajasthan state withdrew support to civil society activists for conducting social audits. This has translated into a reluctance of state officials to supply any documents or information to activists for ensuring accountability and transparency in the Act's implementation. But the effects of this decline in state-society relations have also translated into a more sinister and long-lasting effect. Frontline workers are not capturing demand for fear of sanctions; while low wage payments and delays in payments have corroded the trust that people may have had in the MGNREGA.

5. Reflections and conclusions

The MGNREGA is largely a process-driven programme. Akin to a large piece of machinery, there are lots of nuts and bolts and complex mechanisms that need to work in tandem with each other in order for the results to be delivered. Even though Rajasthan continues to be one of the highest performers, it has also seen the sharpest decline in performance, which is unrivalled by any other state. This sudden downward trend was shown to be counterintuitive, both in terms of Rajasthan's political situation, as well as in terms of the reversal of a virtuous cycle of awareness and demand that had been set into motion in the state

This paper has discussed two possible explanations for this sudden reversal – demand side and supply side. In terms of the demand-side explanations, this paper has refuted the claim that there is a fall in the demand for MGNREGA work in the state. Neither climatic conditions, nor the economic performance of the state corroborates the claim that poor people in the state “don't want to work”. In explaining the counter-intuitive nature of the trend, one plausible explanation seems to be the lack of political commitment to MGNREGA at the state level by the erstwhile ruling Congress party, which has gone hand in hand with other equally critical factors as explained below.

In examining the supply-side explanations, a number of key findings emerged. Firstly, this paper demonstrated the complexity of the MGNREGA's implementation, requiring therefore a high level capacity of the state functionaries in order to implement the programme according to its salient provisions. In Rajasthan, it was shown that there are specific capacity gaps that have restricted the MGNREGA from achieving its full potential. Secondly, the paper demonstrated that these capacity gaps, especially in terms of capturing demand and implementing the programme, could have had a negative effect on the MGNREGA's image amongst the rural poor. Delayed wage payments, low wages and the state's lack of responsiveness in providing employment have corroded the trust of potential workers, who have begun to explore other not-so-attractive but more reliable avenues of employment. However, competence and capacity gaps do not explain the sudden decline in MGNREGA's performance in the state, especially as these are not volatile from one year to the next.

Thirdly, this paper has argued that the answers to the sudden decline in Rajasthan's MGNREGA performance lie in the sudden decline in the state's capacity to monitor the programme. The state government's relations with civil society have deteriorated to a large extent, with the state government becoming quite hostile to and distant from civil society in relation to the MGNREGA. This has been triggered through a political feedback process at the local level, with the state clearly placing itself in the same camp as local political actors, such as Sarpanches, and against civil society actors. On one level, this has translated into a reluctance on the part of state officials to supply requisite documents for conducting social audits. On another level, though not as problematic, this has affected the implementation of the MGNREGA by eroding workers' trust in the accountability and reliability of the state.

The fourth and perhaps most critical finding of the paper is that in Rajasthan, a fear of sanctions from above, reduced sources of leakages and increased risks because of the high level of transparency measures, fuelled in turn by fear of negative political feedback, makes local power holders steer clear of implementing the Act. The same logic operates for frontline functionaries responsible for the Act's implementation, for whom also the amount that they can divert from MGNREGA has shrunk, while the risks of getting caught have increased. Instead, it is safer and easier to make money out of other governmental schemes – a process that I have termed 'displacement' of leakages. All these are supply-side factors – which have negatively affected the provision of employment. On one hand, the state seems to be insidiously promoting sanctions against the capture of demand; and on the other hand, a violation of the MGNREGA's stipulations of minimum wage and timely payments ensures that workers' trust in the programme is gradually eroded. Finally, with the Rajasthan state government's collusion with local power holders through a ban on social audits in the state, workers have no recourse to ensuring accountability and transparency in the MGNREGA implementation.

In Rajasthan, therefore, it seems that the sudden decline in the MGNREGA's performance is primarily explained by supply-side factors. Further, it is clear that one of the biggest strengths of the MGNREGA, its transparency and accountability measures, has also become its biggest weakness through the actions of local power holders. Despite continuing strong networks of civil society with the state's political elite on other issues, anything pertaining to the MGNREGA is seen as 'out of bounds' of civil society influence at both state and local levels. Civil society pressure, which initially explained in part the success of the programme, is therefore ineffective in counteracting the negative effects of local power politics that local political actors have successfully brought to bear in strangling the implementation of the MGNREGA. The lack of political commitment and low priority accorded to the MGNREGA by the Congress party has furthered its decline, both nationally and in the state.

This then points to a critical tension between the aspiration that transparency and accountability measures have about strengthening programme implementation, and

the politics of the workings of these same measures to the detriment of the programme. So while, on one side, measures of transparency and accountability are key to the realisation of a rights-based programme, on the other side, in practice these have in effect diminished the engagement of local power holders in the Act, which is also critical to the success of the programme. Lack of state commitment to back up the Act's intent and provisions, and limited capacity, lead to distortions in the implementation of the Act, subverting these measures and the very objective of the rights-based programme.

It is thus clear that in seeking solutions to the fall in MGNREGA's uptake, technocratic solutions are not going to work. As shown by the discussion above, supply-side factors as they play out in Rajasthan are not restricted to technocratic capacity gaps or implementation structures and design of the state machinery, such as lack of personnel, inadequate training and inaccessible systems. Instead, there are underlying political processes at play, with actors at every level of the implementation chain adapting the implementation process to suit their ends.

This has translated in Rajasthan into a negative cycle of reduced interest in the programme on the part of the implementers, leading to a decline in implementation and resultant outputs. While workers have also lost trust in the Act (because of problems such as low and infrequent wages), the demand for employment very much exists, even if it is latent. It is therefore imperative that this negative cycle is countered by an explicit recognition of the political factors at play in the supply side dynamics of MGNREGA's implementation. In countering the current downward trend, the state will need to promote demand rather than stifle it. Providing incentives for demand capture, providing the right message to frontline officials and ensuring timely and adequate wage payments will help build some of the trust in the Act's functioning. More critically, but perhaps also more difficult to do, would be to separate the local-level state from local power holders, and prevent the Act from being twisted to meet vested interests. This is no small ask in a state such as Rajasthan, with its caste and gendered hierarchies, but re-vitalising the partnership with civil society actors and the state in ensuring transparency and accountability would be an important step. Another vital step to correct 'displacement' of leakages would be to ensure that other government programmes also instil strong measures of transparency and accountability – such that the opportunities for leakages are reduced from all programmes, rather than sounding the death knoll on the one programme that has taken a strong stance against leakages.

Finally, it is critical to note that although there is a perception of political feedback at the local level (and hence the Sarpanches' wariness of MGNREGA and any corrupt activities associated with the Act), until recently there seemed to be little political feedback at the state level. However, with the results of the recent 2014 assembly elections and a thorough routing of the ruling Congress party in favour of the BJP, we may well be seeing the start of the political feedback effects of non-implementation of policies such as MGNREGA working itself up from the ground to the state level (The Economic Times, 2013). While at the local level, negative feedback effects have kept

MGNREGA away from the people, a further decline in Rajasthan's implementation of pro-poor policies such as MGNREGA may spell doom for the newly elected BJP government – unless arrested quickly and decisively through increased political commitment of the state towards the Act and the people of Rajasthan.

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Effective States and Inclusive Development Research Centre (ESID)

School of Environment and Development, The University of Manchester, Oxford Road,

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