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ISSUE BRIEF

Unemployment and the Scope of an Urban Job Guarantee Programme

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|----|
| 1. ABSTRACT | 03 |
| 2. INTRODUCTION | 04 |
| • ECONOMIC CRISIS PRE AND POST-COVID-19 | 04 |
| • INTERNAL MIGRATION IN INDIA | 05 |
| 3. A BRIEF HISTORY OF EMPLOYMENT GUARANTEE PROGRAMS: AN ANALYSIS | 06 |
| • EMPLOYMENT GUARANTEE DURING THE ERA OF PLANNING COMMISSION | 06 |
| • MGNREGA: A PIONEER | 07 |
| • JOB GUARANTEE PROGRAMS TAKEN UP BY THE VARIOUS STATE GOVERNMENTS | 07 |
| 4. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS AND THE WAY FORWARD | 09 |
| 5. CONCLUSION | 10 |
| 6. BIBLIOGRAPHY | 11 |

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October 2021

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As India persists through the pandemic, workers further endure massive unemployment and underemployment. A majority of these workers are part of the vast informal economy with little to no social security.

ABSTRACT

As India persists through the pandemic, workers further endure massive unemployment and underemployment. A majority of these workers are part of the vast informal economy with little to no social security. In this context, the paper's objective is to explore the scope of an urban job guarantee programme. We begin our discussion by briefly looking at the pandemic's impact on the informal economy, current unemployment in India, patterns of migration, and the composition of urban informal economy workers. All such elements will set the rationale of the paper. This work is divided into three sections. The first briefly looks at some of the job guarantee programmes adopted in both rural and urban areas. The second looks at the different policy recommendations from experts for developing an urban job guarantee programme. The third brings forth certain policy recommendations.

Keywords: Urban Unemployment, MGNREGA, Employment Guarantee Programme

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 has shocked the Indian economy. The government imposed a nationwide lockdown on 24 March 2020 as a policy response to control the spread of the virus, following which all economic activities came to a halt resulting in mass layoffs, higher rates of unemployment, and loss of livelihood for those who lived paycheck to paycheck. All such developments disproportionately disadvantaged those most vulnerable due to their limited social security¹, especially informal sector workers.

During this time, many organisations assessed the impact of lockdown on work, employment, transportation, hunger, etc (PARI 2020; Action Aid 2020; Stranded Workers Action Network 2020; Azim Premji University 2020; Centre for Equity Studies 2020). Several conversations started with renewed interest in universal basic income, workers' rights in the informal sector, existing social security mechanisms, food security, universal validity of PDS cards², and job guarantee programmes.

Economic Crisis Pre and Post-COVID-19

The Indian economy was already deteriorating before the COVID-19 induced crisis. The informal economy had already persevered through the 2016 demonetisation and the 2017 Goods and Service Tax. The GDP has continuously fallen since 2015-2016, recording an abysmal 4.2% in 2019-2020, its lowest record since 2002-2003 (Dev and Sengupta 2020). Parallely, the country also experienced the highest open unemployment³ rate in 45 years, which stood at 6.1% according to the Usual Principal and Subsidiary Status [UPSS]⁴ and 8.9% according to the Current Weekly Status [CWS]⁵ (Kapoor 2020). As a result of the economic upheaval, the consumption expenditure was at its lowest in decades (Dev and Sengupta 2020). Therefore, it is safe to note that the catastrophic impacts which the informal economy and its workers underwent were not created but rather accentuated by the pandemic.

¹ According to the International Labour Organisation, social security is a human right. It provides income security and health protection. Both aspects reduced poverty and inequality while promoting inclusion and human dignity. Effective social security systems can guarantee risk protection such as pension, health, life insurance, maternity benefits, and disability covers.

² The Public Distribution System (PDS) under the National Food Security Act issues PDS/ration cards which allows poorer sections of the society to have access to minimum quantities of essential commodities at subsidised prices

³ Open Unemployment or chronic unemployment is a situation where a large section of the labour force is willing to work but is not able to get work opportunities to earn them a regular income.

⁴ The UPSS approach considers a person employed if they have engaged in any economic activity for a period equal to or more than 30 days in the preceding 365 days.

⁵ The CWS approach considers whether or not a person has made efforts to find employment in the week preceding the date of the survey, based on which they are marked as 'seeking/available for work' or 'not available for work'. It also considers if a person has engaged in any economic activity for at least an hour or a day in the preceding week. If they did, they are marked as employed.

The Centre for Monitoring the Indian Economy [CMIE] surveys show that the unemployment rate stood at 23.5% and 21.7% in April and May, respectively, following the pandemic induced lockdown (CMIE 2020). These figures were three times higher than the unemployment rate during the same time last year, which stood at 7.3% in April 2019 and 7.0% in May 2019 (CMIE 2019). As economic activities abruptly stopped after the lockdown, migrant workers' quickly lost their livelihood. This resulted in immense uncertainty which pushed many workers back to their native villages and homes in rural areas. This phenomenon of reverse migration created a situation that altered the labour market dynamics as areas that usually experienced negative net migration suddenly received a surplus of labour supply (Vasudevan et al., 2020). Hence, we see, the lockdown did not only bring the vulnerabilities of the migrant workers into public eye but also highlighted the existence of a considerable migrant population who retain links with their land. But who are these migrant workers and what kind of work do they engage in?

Internal Migration in India

According to the last Census (2011), India has 45.36 crore internal migrants, of whom 19.4 crore moved to a different district, city, or state (Srivastava 2020). Migration patterns to urban areas may be short or long term and periodic or circular⁶ (Krishnamurthy 2020). Among these workers, short term circular migrants are mostly engaged in casual and precarious jobs, primarily in wage employment, while the long term circular migrants are either self-employed or wage employed (Srivastava 2020). While the long term circular migrants are better settled in urban areas, they also mainly engage in jobs vulnerable to shocks such as the pandemic (ibid.). According to the leaked Periodic Labour Force Survey of 2019, approximately 75% of the workers were engaged in casual work or were self-employed, highlighting that an overwhelming majority of the workforce in our informal economy are outside the ambit of the employer-employee relationship (Kapoor 2020).

It has been over a year since the pandemic induced crisis highlighted the everyday realities of migrant workers engaged in the urban informal economy. However, the Centre for Monitoring of Indian Economy's [CMIE] latest data shows, India continues to experience a consistent rise in unemployment rates both in urban and rural areas. This is despite easing down lockdowns and lifting restrictions on mobility after the second wave, highlighting the economy's inability to create jobs (FE Bureau 2021).

According to CMIE, the first week of August 2021 witnessed the highest unemployment rate in 6 weeks at 8.1%. In this context, data shows that while unemployment is increasing to concerning numbers, urban unemployment continues to remain higher than rural unemployment, touching double digits in May 2021 with a staggering 14.73% and 10.07% in June 2021 (CMIE 2021). Hence, during this time, the discussion on a national policy measure for job creation becomes all the more crucial considering its potential to combat long term unemployment, poverty, and inequality.

⁶ Periodic and circular migration define migration patterns wherein workers either move for a period of time or during certain seasons of the year.

This paper critically looks at the existing job guarantee programmes in the country, both in rural and urban areas, and explores the scope for an urban job guarantee programme that can address the issues of unemployment and create a security net for workers who are migrating to urban areas. The realities of the migration patterns and sensitivity to the composition and conditions of informal workers in the urban areas have to be kept in mind while addressing this issue.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF EMPLOYMENT GUARANTEE PROGRAMS: AN ANALYSIS

Employment Guarantee During The Era Of Planning Commission

While India has a long history of urban self-employment schemes, it has minimal experience in urban wage employment (Chathukulam et al., 2021). One of the first of its kind was the Centrally Sponsored Scheme [CSS] called the Nehru Rozgar Yojana [NRY], which aimed to provide employment opportunities to urban unemployed and underemployed people during the 7th Five Year Plan [FYP] between 1985-1990. NRY intended to extend three employment-related schemes focused on urban wage employment, providing financial assistance to set up micro-enterprises, and promoting housing and shelter upgradation (Ibid.) NRY eventually failed as it could not produce enough employment opportunities to help generate income to access loans or a basic standard of living (Chathukulam et al., 2021).

During the 8th FYP (1992-1997), Urban Basic Services for the Poor [UBSP], another CSS, was launched. In 1995, the government of India launched the Prime Minister's Integrated Urban Poverty Eradication Programme [PMIUPEP]. During the 9th FYP, Swarna Jayanti Shahari Rozgar Yojana [SJSRY] was established based on the Hashim Committee's recommendation to replace NRY, UBSP, and PMIUPEP. The union government launched the Urban Wage Employment Programme [UWEGY] under the SJSRY to ensure wage employment for those under the poverty line and within the jurisdiction of towns or cities with a population under 5 lakh as per the 1991 census (Ibid.). The aim was to use the labour to construct public assets, but it eventually failed for several reasons. First, development in technology replaced manual labour in several cities and towns. Along with that, asset creation was overstretched. The relaxation of the labour component by 10 points beyond the already existing 40% material to labour ratio limited the scope of employment further. All these along with the creation of bureaucratic and contractor nexus had together failed to generate the expected level of employment (Ibid.). Finally, SJSRY was replaced with the National Urban Livelihoods Mission [NULM] which removed the UWEGY component. NULM and its subsequent versions focused on self-employment and entrepreneurship rather than wage employment (Basole et al., 2019). Nonetheless, all these employment guarantee programs were limited in their scope as only a set of identified beneficiaries could avail them (Ibid.).

MGNREGA: A Pioneer

The world's most extensive job guarantee programme, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act [MGNREGA], guarantees rural households 100 days of work in a given year. Unlike the various schemes discussed above, MGNREGA is unique in its demand-driven approach to creating employment in rural India. Following the pandemic-induced lockdown and an influx of workers to rural areas, NREGA work experienced a considerable increase in demand. An analysis of the policy discourse from during this time shows emphasis was put on direct targeted transfers such as those under Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojna, Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojna, etc. However, considering the large scale loss of livelihood and wave of migration to rural areas, a greater emphasis on job creating welfare programmes such as MGNREGA was suggested by several experts. The central government also changed its discourse and invested an additional 40 thousand crore, which is 65% over the budgeted amount (Verma and Aanchal Magazine 2020).

Despite the positive impacts, the programme has received criticism several times due to issues related to leakages, delayed payments, and inadequate funds. However, those who support the programme hail it for its far-reaching contributions in strengthening participatory democracy, caste and gender upliftment, increase in incomes, asset creation, etc. Nevertheless, the demand-based programme in the pandemic has been able to function as a fallback for the rural economy. In terms of person-days, there was a 25% greater execution of work under NREGA between April and July, than the rest of the fiscal year, thereby aiding rural income. The states that otherwise experienced massive out-migration, such as Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Bihar, West Bengal, and Odisha, saw work allocation increasing more than 50% on-year in the first four months (CRISIL 2020).

Job Guarantee Programs Taken Up By The Various State Governments

Ayyankali Urban Employment Guarantee Scheme

The Kerala Government launched the AUEGS during their 11th FYP between 2007-2012 to mitigate poverty and unemployment in its urban areas. While the programme is quite similar to MGNREGA, AUEGS is supply-driven instead of the demand-driven approach of NREGA. The urban local governments are entrusted with the duty to allot work under AUEGS. Such a programme aims to ensure 100 days of work to adult members of a family who are willing to do manual work as fallback employment, thus creating a social safety net for the urban workers in the state (Chathukulam et al., 2021). Beneficiaries receive job cards within 15 days of registration, and the scheme ensures equal wages to genders and medical treatment in an accident. A grievance redressal system is in place, and an online information system helps to manage the scheme. As per Kerala's Department of Urban Affairs, 2,26,776 households have been issued job cards until FY 2019-2020. However, only 45% of those are active job cards (Ibid.). While the scheme highlights a vision, there are issues of budget crunch and scarcity of work for beneficiaries (Chathukulam et al., 2021). However, since

2018-2019, there has been a spike in the allocation of budget and work. The primary reason for this is the convergence of AUEGS with Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (Urban)- LIFE Mission Project (Ibid.). However, despite the recent shift in approach towards the scheme, certain issues continue to persist. The problems arise due to a poorly maintained Management Information System [MIS] filled with discrepancies and the limitation of the scheme in addressing the issue of unemployment among the educated (Chathukulam et al., 2021). Further, despite the decade-long presence of such a scheme, there is minimal literature on how it has helped build more inclusivity and ensure social security or any other such development. Regardless, AUEGS presents itself as a potential case study for such programmes in India.

Other Indian States taking up the initiative

Since the AUEGS, several other states have taken up the initiatives of urban employment. In 2019, the Madhya Pradesh Government launched Mukhyamantri Yuva Swabhiman Yojana, which guarantees 100 days of employment every year to urban youth from economically weaker sections [EWS] (Press Trust of India 2019). Under the scheme, each beneficiary is supposed to get a lump sum of INR 13,500 for the 100 days period.

After the pandemic induced crisis, the Government of Jharkhand also announced an urban job guarantee scheme for the urban unemployed in the state and enthusiastically went ahead with it. On the anniversary of the launch, the state urban development department stated that the new flagship scheme by the state government - Mukhyamantri Shramik Yojana for urban poor, created over two lakh person-days of work (Times of India 2019).

During COVID-19 lockdown, the Government of Odisha had also launched a temporary initiative to provide employment to the urban poor who had returned to the state. Under this initiative, 4.5 lakh urban poor families received sustainable livelihood opportunities. The government allocated INR 100 crore towards the initiative. Currently, this temporary employment initiative is being ramped up and converted into a full-fledged scheme called Mukta Yojana (Sharma 2021). Under the initiative, more than 6000 projects have reached completion so far, which cost INR 70 crores and generated 13 lakh person-days of work. The initiative has benefitted 3.5 lakhs workers so far, of whom 40% were women (Ibid.).

Recently, the Government of Tamil Nadu also announced that the state would soon have an urban employment scheme on the lines of NREGA (Special Correspondent 2021). How all these schemes perform in different states remains to be seen. Still, nonetheless, the enthusiasm of the various states in launching their version of an urban employment guarantee scheme only strengthens the case for its demand.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS AND THE WAY FORWARD

As mentioned above, the post-pandemic world has seen a renewed interest in the issue of urban unemployment. In this section, we will discuss some of the existing policy recommendations from experts in recent times. We mainly refer to Basole et al.'s (2019) State of Working report designed in the pre-pandemic world and Drèze's (2020a) Decentralized Urban Employment and Training Scheme policy brief.

Basole et al. (2019) propose an urban version of the NREGA that will ensure the legal right to work for urban workers and initiate infrastructural developments. The programme aims to strengthen small and medium-sized cities instead of major cities that have been disproportionately focused upon over the years through initiatives such as the Smart City Mission and Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission. Such a programme aims to create work and sustainable cities by improving the quality of urban infrastructure and services and restoring urban commons and ecology. The programme can be carried out through a bottom-up approach that empowers urban local bodies [ULBs] by increasing financial and human capacities. Democratic decentralisation can ensure that the funds reach the relevant local bodies such as the Nagar Panchayat, Municipal Council and Corporation at the beginning of each financial year upon an estimation of workers. These ULBs shall be responsible for administering the programme and for timely disbursement of wages. Independent bodies can carry out public hearings, mandatory and periodic social audits, and establish grievance redressal mechanisms to maintain transparency. Any such programme cannot simply be an extension of the ethos embedded in MGNREGA but should build on extensive research incorporating the unique needs and aspirations of the urban economy. Jean Drèze also gives an alternative suggestion of a 'Decentralized Urban Employment and Training' scheme (2020a). The proposed idea is to release 'job stamps' which the worker can take to public institutions which the government approves. Workers can convert these job stamps to one person-day of work within a specified period with an approved institution finding work and the government paying wages. The process will follow the direct transfer of payments with a due-form work certificate from the employer. The employees will be chosen from a pool of registered workers by the approved employer or through an independent agency, a third party, in order to avoid collusion in placements (Drèze 2020b).

The proposed alternative also lays down the rationale of such a policy which is not merely creating employment opportunities but also ensuring decent work through provisions of minimum wage, protection from exploitation, and arrangement of social benefits. Another crucial component is training, where hiring a skilled worker is mandatorily accompanied by hiring an unskilled worker for skill formation. This proposal is similar to Service Voucher Schemes [SVS] found in several European nations. Belgium, for example, has a very popular SVS for domestic services.

CONCLUSION

We see through this discussion how the pandemic brought invisible migrants to the centre of the policy discourse. Although the pandemic has only exacerbated the issues plaguing the Indian economy, the crisis followed by the nationwide lockdown has renewed several conversations related to the informal sector and its workers. MGNREGA's impact during periods of distress has been positive and refreshed the debate on extending such a programme to the urban centres. Although there are several potential ways the programme can be made more efficient in the rural sector, the potential of such a programme as an urban alternative is immense. Along with creating jobs, such an initiative can also make aggregate demands, pushing the economy towards a path of recovery. Further, it can help build infrastructure in the urban areas which are inclusive and sustainable.

Based on the discussion so far, in our way ahead, we should not limit our analysis of the two proposals mentioned above in isolation of each other. We can think of a programme which is a synthesis of the two proposals discussed above where the first focuses on small and medium cities and the second explores the context of major cities with a considerable population of daily wage workers who may benefit significantly from such a scheme.

In the way forward, the heterogeneity of socioeconomic factors around the populace needs to be considered at all times. It is crucial to recognise the marginalisation and exploitation of the working class due to their identities, lack of access to social security, poor working conditions, huge gender pay gaps, the invisibility of work, and other such perennial issues in the informal economy. Further exploration of mechanisms to address these differences among urban areas, among the composition of migrants, whether they are from a different state or district, is required.

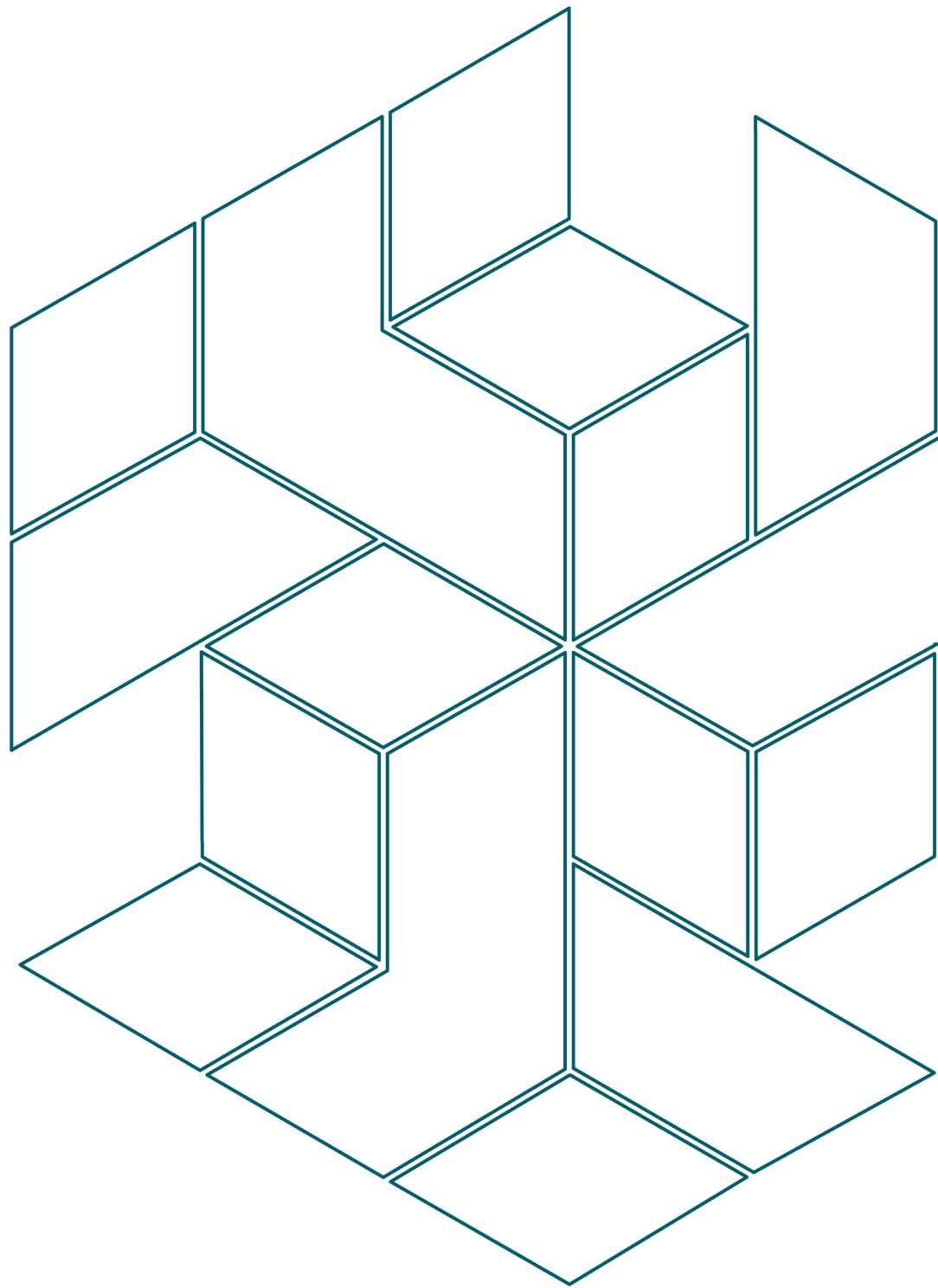
We must also note here that the employment guarantee programme strengthens one's 'right to life' under Article 21 of the Indian Constitution, including the 'right to livelihood' and the 'right to live with dignity' (Basole et al., 2019). In this regard, an extension of a legally enforceable employment programme to the urban areas can be seen as a natural extension which has been delayed. Considering the potential of such a programme, it is important to not only learn from the experiences of the various states in the way ahead, but also imagine a national level urban job guarantee programme which can adequately address the issues of urban unemployment.

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