



SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY SERIES

SOUTH ASIA SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) is a social safety net program that provides employment to over 35 million households and has an annual budget of Rs 39,000 crores/about US\$8 billion for 2009–10. Despite its statutory mandate for social accountability at all levels of implementation, NREGS does not reach intended communities because of low awareness of their entitlements under this program. In 2007, the CUTS Centre for Consumer Action, Research & Training (CUTS CART) in Rajasthan introduced a social accountability intervention in Sirohi District to evaluate the implementation of NREGS and inform higher levels of policy making. This accountability intervention has triggered a series of behavioral and institutional changes within NREGS wage seekers and service providers as well as various levels of government agencies, including heightened wage seeker awareness of NREGS entitlements and increased government initiatives to improve work measurement standards and recruit more women as field supervisors.

CASE STUDY 7

Improving the Public Expenditure Outcomes of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) through Social Accountability Interventions in Sirohi District, Rajasthan, India

CONTEXT

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA),¹ enacted by the government of India in 2006, recognizes employment as a universal legal right for every rural household. Breaking from earlier employment schemes and development programs, NREGA is significant in that it is “a regime of rights” for poor rural communities. NREGA provides a comprehensive set of entitlements that not only outline judicially enforceable terms for employment but also give citizens a central role in all stages of implementation. NREGA is the first major act to institutionalize a system of social audits in all stages of its implementation, with clauses on public monitoring and transparency² embedded in the act. NREGA is also coupled with the Right to Information (RTI) Act of 2005, another unprecedented act that endows citizens with the right to access

information on the activities of all levels of government. Thus, entitlements in the program are explicitly linked to a system of accountability and transparency.

Although employment is legally guaranteed, awareness among NREGA-eligible households about right to work entitlements under the act is often low. This lack of awareness is the largest challenge to ensuring that rural poor communities are fully exercising this right to work. In addition, weak accountability practices in program implementation have resulted in poor service delivery and, in turn, poor public expenditure outcomes.

1. NREGA is the legislation that establishes basic employment as a universal and enforceable legal right. NREGA mandates each state to prepare and implement a Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (REGS). The act is national while the schemes are state specific. In this paper, NREGS refers to the program implemented in Rajasthan under NREGA.

2. Section 17 and Section 23, respectively.

Entitlements under NREGA

- Legal guarantee for 100 days of employment in every financial year to adult members of any rural household willing to do unskilled manual work at the statutory minimum wage within a five kilometer (km) radius of the applicant's residence.
- Minimum wage of Rs 100 (about US\$2) per day to a member of a rural unemployed family with a job card.
- Unemployment benefits or a transport allowance if not provided work within 15 days or within a 5 km radius, respectively.

Service Delivery Structure of NREGS

Although the NREGA clearly defines roles and responsibilities for all levels of government, the Gram Panchayat³ is the principal implementing agency. The Gram Panchayat recommends public works projects to be taken up under the NREGS while the Gram Sabha, a village assembly meeting, prioritizes and selects these projects. The Gram Panchayat also monitors and evaluates project implementation. Wage seekers register with the Gram Panchayat to receive a job card that entitles each eligible household to work on demand for 100 days per financial year. A third of these jobs must be reserved for women. The Gram Panchayat is also responsible for conducting social audits of NREGS in the Gram Sabha. The field supervisors of these NREGS-sanctioned works are responsible for providing basic facilities such as medical aid, drinking water, shade, and child care for children younger than six.

Accountability Relationships in NREGS Service Delivery

NREGS under NREGA differs from most conventional programs in that it allows for some form of community participation in all stages of implementation to ensure accountability and transparency. For instance, the Gram Panchayat is required to conduct a survey to identify and register all NREGS-eligible households. This list of registered households should be publicly read in the Gram Sabha, verified in front of the village community, posted at the Gram Panchayat office, and updated quarterly. The Gram Panchayat office should also maintain a publicly available work allocation register and regularly inform the community of new work allocations through notice boards. Wage payments should be made in a public place in the presence of other wage seekers

and the list of wage seekers and their wage payments should be read aloud for the benefit of illiterate wage seekers. Under the RTI Act, NREGS defines guidelines for transparent disclosure of information in the public domain. For example, each Gram Panchayat must proactively display its accounts and update this information twice a year. Finally, NREGS mandates a biannual social audit forum, a special Gram Sabha that allows wage seekers to audit all NREGS works, registers, and payments and to publicly question service providers about any discrepancies.

With respect to monitoring and evaluation, NREGS follows conventional auditing mechanisms. Physical audits by state, district, and block-level officers verify the quality of work undertaken and check if the expenditure incurred has led to the creation of durable assets. Block-level officers are expected to carry out inspections at 100 percent of the project sites, district-level officers at 10 percent, and state-level officers at 2 percent. In addition, mandatory financial audits are carried out each year by local fund auditors at the district level or by the chartered accountants appointed by the state government. Continued funding of the projects is contingent on satisfactory audits.

In Rajasthan, the NREGS grievance redress system allows wage seekers to take to the Gram Panchayat any complaints related to the performance of field supervisors and issues concerning job cards, the presence of muster rolls at worksites, and procedures for making payments. At higher levels, the District Program Coordinator is responsible for taking cases against the Program Officer and the state government takes cases related to District Coordinators. Table 1 describes the various roles and responsibilities under NREGS in Rajasthan.

Assessing NREGS in Sirohi District

To evaluate the performance of the NREGS, the CUTS Centre for Consumer Action, Research & Training (CUTS CART) in Rajasthan, in partnership with the World Bank, introduced a social accountability intervention in Sirohi District. Sirohi was chosen because it is one of the poorest districts in Rajasthan, with about 31 percent of the population living below the poverty line and 82 percent living in rural areas (2001 Census). The aim was not only to look at the implementation of NREGS

3. The broader goal of the 73rd amendment to the Constitution of India is to encourage a greater role for communities and the Panchayat Raj Institutions in the entire cycle of development programs. India has adopted a three-tier Panchayati Raj model of democratic decentralization under this amendment. The district-level rural local government is known as the Zilla Parishad, the block level is the Panchayat Samiti, while the village-level local government is known as the Gram Panchayat.

Table 1 Roles and Accountability in NREGS Implementation

Central
Develops guidelines and conducts independent monitoring and evaluation of NREGS, bears 75 percent of the costs of wage seekers' wages and materials and all administrative expenses
State
Develops guidelines and regulations for NREGS, facilitates resources for implementation, bears 25 percent of the costs of wages and materials and 10 percent of the unemployment allowances, monitors 2 percent of the total project worksites, carries out mandatory annual financial audits, handles complaints related to cases against District Coordinators
District
Pramukhs ^a and District Program Coordinators prepare annual district plans based on village plans, monitor 10 percent of the total project worksites, carry out mandatory financial audits, handle complaints cases against Program Officers
Block
Pradhans ^b and Program Officers identify works based on the feasibility and technical assessment of village plans, design and implement village plans and evaluate work, execute a complaint redress system, monitor 100 percent of the total project worksites
Gram Panchayat
Sarpanch ^c and Gram Panchayat Secretaries prepare village plans; register workers; issue job cards; receive applications for work; identify, design, and implement at least 50 percent of the work; provide facilities at the worksites; ensure work measurement; distribute wages; conduct a social audit; redress grievances for complaints related to field supervisors and issues concerning job cards, presence of muster rolls at worksites, and procedures for making payments

Source: CUTS 2008.

Note:

- a. Elected representative at Zilla Parishad level.
- b. Elected representative at Panchayat Samiti level.
- c. Elected representative at Gram Panchayat level.

but also to feed the understanding gained by doing so into policy design through dissemination of results and consultation with government officials at various levels, while at the same time building joint ownership of the findings. This is the first such accountability intervention conducted in Rajasthan for NREGS.

THE SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY PROCESS IN SIROHI DISTRICT

The overall objective of this social accountability intervention was to assess NREGS implementation, identify lacunae in program implementation, and build ownership of the findings of this intervention within all levels of government. A hybrid of two social accountability mechanisms—Citizen Report Cards (CRCs) and Community Scorecards (CSCs)⁴—was introduced in Sirohi.

CRCs Gather Feedback from Key NREGS Stakeholders

With the help of local civil society organizations, CUTS prepared a set of questionnaires targeting four different stakeholder

groups. The CRC process surveyed a total of 1,050 stakeholders including (1) 825 registered NREGS wage seekers from 165 villages, (2) 30 Sarpanch, (3) 60 Panchayat Secretaries and Assistant Secretaries, and (4) 75 field supervisors from 125 Gram Panchayats. In addition to this survey, CUTS conducted focus group discussions with NREGS wage seekers and interviewed local government representatives. The CRC was used to meet the objective of gathering feedback from these stakeholders to inform and guide higher levels of government and policy.

Community Monitoring of Service Delivery through CSCs

The CSC process included four steps (input tracking, community-generated performance scorecard, self-evaluation scorecard, and an interface meeting). Through **input tracking**,

4. The CRC is a citizen perception survey tool that taps information on users' awareness of, access to, and satisfaction with publicly provided services. It gathers information on the key constraints the poor face in assessing public services, their perceptions of the quality of services, and their experiences in interacting with public officials and service providers. CSCs are qualitative monitoring tools developed and implemented by service users to monitor and evaluate local-level services, projects, and government administrative units. For more details on the CRC and CSC methodology, please refer to Singh and Shah (2004) and Waglé, Singh, and Shah (2004).

the community and service providers collectively analyzed information, such as the budget and costs for materials and wages, for NREGS-sanctioned works. Then, **wage seeker-generated performance scorecards** and **self-evaluation scorecards** were completed by the wage seekers and frontline service providers, respectively. The service providers in this context included field supervisors and Gram Panchayat-level government officials. Once the scorecards were completed, the two groups came together in an **interface meeting** to discuss differences in the scoring and to jointly devise solutions to improve the implementation of NREGS. The interface meeting assisted in meeting the objective of creating a structured space for dialogue between NREGS wage seekers and frontline NREGS service providers. The CSC was conducted in select Gram Panchayats in Sirohi District.

Feedback to Higher Levels of Government for More Responsive Planning

A number of workshops and dissemination meetings were held with officials at various levels in the government to strengthen ownership of the findings of the CRC and CSC processes. CUTS also conducted a visit to Andhra Pradesh, one of the more progressive states, to learn how to adopt Andhra Pradesh's social accountability practices in the implementation of NREGS in Rajasthan. Table 2 describes the specific accountability interventions introduced by CUTS.

Table 2 Key Social Accountability Interventions

Stage	Key interventions	Effects
Citizen Report Cards	Stakeholder meeting with local government functionaries, NREGS wage seekers, and local nongovernmental organizations	Awareness and ownership of the accountability intervention and its findings
	Developing, testing, and finalizing CRC questionnaires	Survey design and findings reflect expressed needs of wage seekers and key NREGS components
	Selection and orientation of surveyors Primary and secondary data collection	
Community Scorecards (in select Gram Panchayats)	CSC orientation and input tracking	Remove asymmetry in information about NREGS-sanctioned works
	Performance scorecard conducted by wage seekers	Active performance monitoring by wage seekers
	Self-evaluation scorecard conducted by service providers	Sharpened understanding of problems
Post-CRC and CSC	Interface meetings between service providers and community	Constructive dialogue between users and service providers
	Stakeholder meetings at various levels to discuss and finalize results, disseminate findings; exposure visit to Andhra Pradesh	Strengthened bureaucratic will and ownership of CRC and CSC findings; responsive planning

Source: Authors.

KEY FINDINGS

The CRC survey and CSC process yielded a large amount of data and observations on NREGS that were widely disseminated and communicated to higher levels of government. CRC results indicate that NREGS wage seekers generally had satisfactory perception levels of indicators such as employment during lean seasons (97 percent), worksite facilities (94 percent), increase in income (98 percent), and reduction in migration (93 percent). The CRC also identified some gaps in wage seeker awareness of NREGS entitlements and NREGS implementation and monitoring. Table 3 provides a summary of the CRC findings.

Low Awareness of NREGS Entitlements

Low wage seeker awareness of various entitlements is the main barrier to NREGS implementation. The CRC survey found that while 88 percent of the wage seekers were aware that employment of 100 days is a right under NREGS, only 28 percent knew of the unemployment allowance provision and only 19 percent were aware of the 60:40 labor-to-material ratio that must be maintained in all NREGS works. The CSC process also revealed that many wage seekers did not understand the process for receiving work under the scheme. Table 4 provides a summary of wage seeker perceptions of NREGA entitlements.

Table 3 Key Findings of CRC NREGS Wage Seeker Survey (percentage agreeing with statement)

Highlights	
NREGS provides employment in lean seasons	97
Worksite facilities have improved	94
NREGS reduces migration	93
NREGS helps in increasing monthly income	98
NREGS improves women's decision-making capacity within households	75
NREGS creates assets, resulting in sustainable livelihoods	85
Key gaps in NREGS implementation	
Awareness of NREGS entitlements	63
Participation in the work selection decision-making process	42
Satisfaction with the process of work measurement	50
Availability of an effective grievance redress mechanism	39
Transparency and accountability mechanisms in place	48

Source: CUTS 2008.

Work Measurement Not Standardized or Transparent

The CRC survey found that 87 percent of the wage seekers were satisfied with the allotted work under NREGS and 87 percent were satisfied with their increase in income. However, only 50 percent of the wage seekers were satisfied with the process of work measurement. NREGS work measurement factors include the monitoring of absenteeism, individual work allotment, and nonperforming workers, as well as information about work measurement methods. Focus group discussions revealed that dissatisfaction with the work measurement process arose from insufficient field staff to fully carry out work measurement responsibilities and lack of wage seeker awareness of measurement methods.

Low Awareness of and Dissatisfaction with Grievance Redress Mechanisms

The CRC survey found that 86 percent of the respondents denied any manipulation of job cards by field supervisors and 91 percent reported the regular presence of muster rolls at worksites. Although wage seekers were generally satisfied with the transparency afforded by these systems, their lack of awareness and use of grievance mechanisms limited the use of these mechanisms. The CRC survey found that 39 percent were either not aware of the grievance redress process or were dissatisfied with how grievances were handled. Focus group

Table 4 Wage Seeker Perceptions of NREGA Entitlements (percent)

Provision	Yes	No	Can't Say
Is the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme running under the Act?	76	20	4
Is 100 days' employment a right under the scheme?	88	9	3
Is there any provision for an unemployment allowance?	28	30	42
Is there a ban on using machines or contractors under the scheme?	59	22	19
Should the 60:40 (labor-to-material) ratio be maintained?	19	21	60

Source: CUTS 2008.

discussions revealed that many wage seekers were afraid to register a complaint against government officials out of fear of retaliation and not being able to secure NREGS jobs.

Minimal Monitoring by Higher Levels of Government

NREGS has a system of continuous external monitoring and verification to curb corruption and maintain quality implementation. The CRC survey found that 56 percent of the project worksites were visited fewer than three times by upper level government authorities.

KEY IMPACTS

This accountability intervention has informed higher levels of NREGS implementation through the CRC survey and created a space for communication between NREGS wage seekers and service providers at the village level through the CSC process. The introduction of this accountability intervention has led to behavior changes within NREGS wage seekers, field supervisors, and local government, and several institutional changes at various levels of government in Sirohi District and Rajasthan. This section describes the behavior and institutional changes this accountability intervention initiated. Table 5 provides a summary of these results.

Awareness of NREGS Entitlements, Responsibilities, and Decision Making

Wage seekers claim their rights and service providers claim their responsibilities. The CSC process increased wage seeker

Table 5 Key Social Accountability Impacts

Behavior changes	<p>Increased awareness of NREGS entitlements and provisions among wage seekers</p> <p>Lower level government functionaries assume their roles and responsibilities as NREGS service providers for the first time</p> <p>Local government and field supervisors sensitized toward problems in NREGS service delivery and develop more responsive management processes and systems</p>
Institutional changes	<p>Institutional platform for continuous dialogue and feedback between wage seekers and service providers through CSC process</p> <p>Weekly, open training for NREGS wage seekers and capacity building of field supervisors on work measurement standards</p> <p>Increased initiatives to recruit and train female field supervisors</p> <p>Intermediary agency between the government and contractual staff removed</p> <p>Broadened scope for social accountability in other government departments</p>

Source: Authors.

awareness of various aspects of NREGS-sanctioned works through information on budgets and costs for materials and wages of the works undertaken in the area. This information in itself was empowering because wage seekers often had

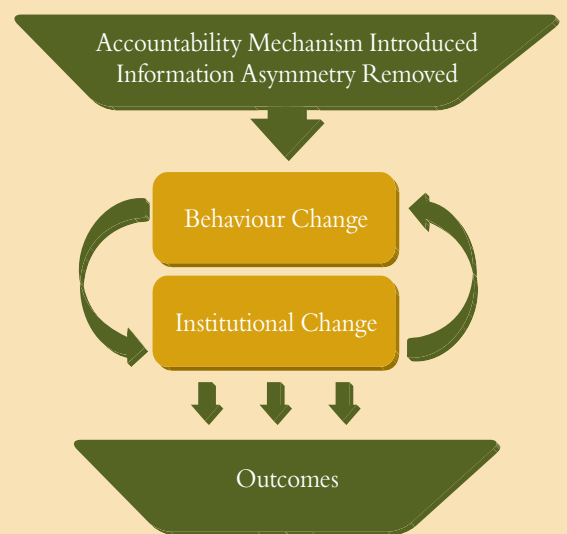
little knowledge of these resources under NREGS before the intervention. This initial stage of the CSC process also helped wage seekers to understand the roles and responsibilities of service providers as well as their own right to monitor and evaluate service providers' performance. Before this accountability intervention, wage seekers felt that Gram Panchayat officials had the discretion to create and remove NREGS jobs, rather than understanding that work under NREGS was a legal entitlement. Fear of losing work prevented wage seekers from reporting instances of malpractice to higher authorities.

This increase in information and awareness initiated a series of behavior changes on the part of wage seekers. In the CSC process, wage seekers openly expressed their concerns about certain aspects of NREGS. Work measurement issues, the lack of a quick grievance redress system, and the sometimes antagonistic behavior of field supervisors toward wage seekers were common concerns. Wage seekers also openly questioned service providers about these concerns, a substantial behavior shift on their part.

The combination of the CRC and CSC also initiated a new form of awareness among service providers. This accountability intervention found that the Sarpanch and Gram Panchayat Secretaries dominated NREGS decision making. Through the CSC process, lower local government functionaries understood for the first time that they were also considered "service providers" and had clear responsibilities in NREGS implementation.

Assessing Impacts of Accountability Interventions

Behavior changes are changes in the practices of individuals and the community. Specifically, the introduction of an accountability intervention and key information on resources and entitlements first initiates **information-seeking behavior** (individuals seek out information that they normally would not), then **accountability-seeking behavior** (individuals begin to question and challenge information, service providers, and government), and finally, **entitlements- and rights-seeking behavior** (individuals seek to access specific rights to which they feel legally entitled). Behavior changes that are iterated over a period then inform the practices of government and service providers, and eventually become internalized as norms and established as **institutional changes**. Institutional changes include **process changes** (shifts in the functioning of management systems, including how data are received and how decision making takes place) as well as **policy changes** (changes in budget allocations and legislation). These institutional changes then lead to outcomes, which, in this context, are related to the quality and quantity of services delivered under NREGS.



Social Accountability in Action at the Gram Panchayat Level

In describing various impacts of this social accountability intervention, Chandrakant Vaishnav, the Sarpanch of Watera Gram Panchayat, stated that people in his Gram Panchayat have become more aware of and interested in the implementation of NREGS. They are increasingly vigilant about its implementation, asking questions of him and other service providers. They have begun to question not only the quality of work but also to gather information on the money allocated and expenditure made for any particular project. He admits that the CSC process helped him develop an understanding of accountability issues and problems wage seekers face in any service delivery context. To that end, he has become more accountable to the people in Watera Gram Panchayat.

Gram Sabha strengthened for increased wage seeker participation in decision making and monitoring. The CRC survey revealed that wage seekers and villagers rarely knew when the Gram Sabha was scheduled to meet, leading to minimal community participation in decision making for NREGS project selection and a lack of information on the availability of work under NREGS. Service providers' claims that wage seekers were well aware of their rights and entitlements under the provisions of the NREGS were challenged. As a result of this accountability intervention, Gram Panchayats have introduced new measures for disseminating information on NREGS entitlements and Gram Sabha meetings. Job application forms are also now available in accessible, public places in the village.

NREGS Implementation and Monitoring

Measurement of work process standardized. The CRC surveys and the CSC process revealed that the implementation of various aspects of the NREGS lacked standardization, contributing to greater discretionary power for the Gram Panchayats and local government officials. A few institutional changes have occurred as a result of the findings of the CRC survey. NREGS staff now provide wage seekers with their own measuring tapes and conduct weekly training on how to properly measure various types of work output. NREGS staff also conduct capacity-building training sessions for field supervisors to teach them how work measurement must take place under NREGS. As a result, work outputs are now required to be measured daily and in the presence of at least five wage seekers.

Active recruitment of female field supervisors. Although 53 percent of NREGS wage seekers in Sirohi were women, the


CRC survey found that only 5 percent of the field supervisors were women. In rural areas such as Sirohi, NREGS wage seeker women often do not feel safe voicing their concerns to male field supervisors. As a result of these findings, measures to appoint and train more female supervisors were initially taken up by the Gram Panchayats and then later by the district administration. Specifically, the Gram Panchayats have begun recruiting girls who have graduated from high school to undergo field supervisor training.

Broadening the scope of social accountability. The findings of the CRC survey and CSC process also prompted the Sirohi District government to conduct training programs for field supervisors and district-level staff to convey a better understanding of how to integrate social accountability into their work. In addition to these institutional changes, this intervention has also encouraged government departments in other sectors to explore the use of social accountability interventions. The evaluation cell of the Department of Planning in Rajasthan is now working with the HCM Rajasthan State Institute of Public Administration and CUTS to conduct a training of trainers program on the CSC process. The Rajasthan Health System Development Project (RHSDP) is also working with CUTS to conduct a CSC process to assess RHSDP performance.. The RHSDP CSC process will be piloted in a few of the districts in Rajasthan, and will be extended statewide in the future.

Policy Recommendations for More Targeted Resources

CUTS has made policy recommendations to address remaining gaps in NREGS policy and implementation. The CRC survey and CSC process revealed that NREGS implementation in Sirohi suffered from limited resources, both physical and personnel. For instance, the absence of certain worksite facilities, such as day care, severely restricted mothers from seeking NREGS employment. Administratively, there was no provision for funding to provide certain facilities at more-remote worksites. State- and district-level authorities have since issued directives to ensure that all required amenities at worksites are made available; however, the lack of committed resources remains.

Meetings with project staff also revealed that staff often suffered from inadequate capacity, low salaries, and limited decision-making power, resulting in weak accountability in the system. Before the introduction of this accountability intervention, the technical staff members appointed on contract were exploited and charged a heavy fee by the intermediary agency through



which they were deployed. The findings from this accountability intervention led the government to remove the intermediary agency between the government and staff employed under contract. The district government now directly recruits technical staff and appraises performance according to NREGS guidelines. Despite this institutional change, NREGS capacity issues remain. Technical staff is often in short supply. In many cases, one Gram Panchayat Secretary handles more than one Gram Panchayat. In meetings with district- and state-level officials, CUTS has communicated these findings and recommended more-targeted funding to alleviate these staff and resource constraints.

IMPLICATIONS FOR REPLICATION

While physical and financial audits form an integral part of most programs of the government of India, these measures do not always result in greater accountability in project management. Programs such as NREGS have multiple development goals. Although it is important to monitor the physical progress of projects, ensuring that the benefits of the program are consistently reaching targeted wage seekers is just as important. The poor in India face many barriers to accessing public services intended for them. Services such as health care, education, and NREGS work entitlements are critical for the poor but are vulnerable to leaks in delivery, reinforcing the importance of greater accountability in public programs.

Although biannual social audit hearings are required, the CRC survey and CSC process found that social audits were only a superficial exercise in Sirohi. Since the introduction of this accountability intervention, the government of Rajasthan has set up a Social Audit Directorate for the state, making it the second state after Andhra Pradesh to have such a government body, a noteworthy institutional change. The Office of the Auditor General in Rajasthan has also set up a committee to combine formal audits with the findings of these participatory social audits.

The multidimensional accountability intervention introduced in Sirohi has not only gathered feedback from key NREGS

stakeholders to inform higher levels of government and policy, it also created a structured space for dialogue between local-level project functionaries and wage seekers. Thus, channels of accountability have been created both upward and horizontally. In states that have not been able to fully implement a social audit process, these types of accountability interventions can supplement supply-side efforts to audit the implementation of NREGS by gathering direct feedback from wage seekers and other key stakeholders.

A district like Sirohi had a budget of approximately Rs 757 million (about US\$18 million) in 2007–08 to implement NREGS. This accountability intervention costs approximately Rs 1.3 million (US\$30,000) and represents less than 1 percent of the total district budget for NREGS in Sirohi. In the absence of an institutionalized social audit process, a small investment in an accountability intervention such as the one introduced by CUTS can precipitate a series of behavior and institutional changes to improve the implementation of large-scale, national social safety net schemes like NREGS.

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