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Title of the thesis: Development Communication in the Digital Age: A Study of Panchayati Raj Institutions and Community Media in the Mewat Region of Haryana

Abstract

In context of the participatory communication approach paradigm this study raises the following questions – is it possible to create more synergies to strengthen the potential of IEC (Information, Education and Communication) activities in the communication component of MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) to empower the village community? Can these synergies be created through community radio?

The study thus proposed to a) carry out an analysis of the priority that the members of the Gram Panchayat in the survey village attribute to various IEC activities for information dissemination, reach and empowerment of the village community; b) evaluate the responses of MGNREGA beneficiaries through focus group discussions on knowledge and extent of capacity enhancement possible about various entitlements under the programme; c)probe the accessibility and reach of rural radio broadcasts and more specifically community radio as a tool for grassroots engagement with the village community.

One Gram Panchayat comprising of two remote village hamlets, Aminabad and Bikti, in Punhana Block of District Mewat (inhabited by the Meos) in the State of Haryana formed the universe of the study. A structured questionnaire was served on all members of the Gram Panchayat to elicit their response to the priority they attributed to various communication tools for generating awareness in the village community. Concurrently,

focus group discussions with both men and women beneficiaries under MGNREGA living in the two hamlets and representing all wards of the village were held.

One of the major finding was that in the ranking of communication tools, the potential of radio as a means of communication was ranked the highest. The Focus Group Discussions held with beneficiaries of MGNREGA revealed that a majority of the latter were ignorant about the purpose and need for a social audit. The women particularly were keen to learn about issues such as the record of employment, fortnightly report on work sites and muster roll details.

An important conclusion of the study was that MGNREGA's future communication and capacity building architecture needed a strong public-private partnership for IEC activities. To set up a community radio station, the Gram Panchayat's role could be limited to funding and creation of infrastructure such as land, construction of building, studio, transmitter etc. On the other hand, the community radio station could be licensed and managed by a village community driven NGO which could also access IEC funds from the Gram Panchayat for purposes of advocacy and community sensitization about the eleven entitlements under MGNREGA.

The study confirms that the synergies to strengthen IEC activities for MGNREGA through community radio cannot be a 'magic bullet' for addressing issues relating to livelihood security for the socio-economically backward community of Meos'. The long term impact will be visible first by effective activity mapping through devolution of funds, functions and functionaries to the Gram Panchayat thus making the principles of subsidiarity and decentralization a reality.