

## SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT THROUGH GOVERNMENT POLICIES: A CASE STUDY OF GOLAGHAT DISTRICT OF ASSAM

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### ABSTRACT

Sustainable development mandates that growth be both inclusive and environmentally sound to reduce poverty and build shared prosperity for today's population and to continue to meet the needs of future generations. Economic growth, environmental management, and social inclusion are the three major pillars of sustainable development. This paper seeks to examine the extent to which government policies have, in fact, promoted sustainable development through a case study of MGNREGA in Golaghat district of Assam. The study is based on both primary and secondary sources. For primary data collection, information is gathered through questionnaires and the interview method, with structured questionnaires administered to the respondents. It is proposed to study 7 blocks, taking one village from each of the 7 blocks in the district. A sample of 105 respondents is drawn for the purpose of the study. Secondary data includes books, published articles, newspapers, magazines, and journals. The data collected from both sources forms the basis of the analysis. The study is primarily limited to only one government policy in one district from the state of Assam.

**Keywords:** Sustainable Development, Government Policy, MGNREGA.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The sustainable development defined by the Brundtland Commission Report entitled "Our Common Future" as "development, which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generation to meet their own needs."<sup>1</sup> It contains two concepts: needs and limitations. The concept of needs means the essential necessities of the rural poor. Further, the idea of limitations is imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs. The concept of sustainable development is not about choosing between environmental protection and social progress but rather about striving for economic and social development that would be compatible with environmental protection. The Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro (1992) put the concept of sustainable development on national and international policy.<sup>2</sup> It is interpreted primarily in terms of environmental protection as well as management.

In India, the movement in support of environmental protection and sustainable development started in the early 1980s, due to the devastating effects of the Bhopal gas tragedy as well as international developments.<sup>3</sup> Sustainable development has been embedded in the planning process during the 1990s. The Ninth Five-Year Plan (1997–2002) explicitly recognized the synergy between environment, health, and development and identified as one of its core objectives the need for ensuring environmental sustainability of the development process through social mobilization and participation of people at all levels.

The Government of India has initiated many policies for the alleviation of poverty as well as sustainable development. Some of the programs for achieving this goal were Community Development Programme (CDP), National Extension Service (NES), Integrated Agricultural District Programme (IADP), High Yielding Varieties Programme, etc. Further, the Government of India also has adopted some policies related to sustainable development which has given emphasis to economic and social development, particularly for people with a low standard of living, as well as protecting the natural resource base and environment. Such policies include the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (2005), National Urban Transport Policy (2006), National Environmental Policy (2006), National Urban Housing and Habitat Policy (2007), National Action Plan on Climate Change (2008), National Disaster Management Policy (2009), and National Rural Livelihood Mission (2009), among others.

This paper seeks to examine the extent to which government policies have, in fact, promoted sustainable development through a case study of MGNREGA in Golaghat district of Assam.

### 2. METHODOLOGY

The present study was conducted in the **Golaghat** district, Assam. It was based on both primary and secondary sources. For the primary data collection, the information was gathered through questionnaires and the interview method, with structured questionnaires administered to the respondents. It included all 7 blocks (representative blocks in Golaghat are Dergaon, Gomariguri, Sarupathar, Morangi, Golaghat, Khumtai, and Bokakhat), taking one village

from each of the 7 blocks in the district. A sample of **105 respondents** was drawn for the purpose of the study. Secondary data was collected from books, published articles, newspapers, magazines, and journals. The data collected from both sources formed the basis of the analysis.

Golaghat district, known for its rich biodiversity and proximity to Kaziranga National Park, was declared a district in 1987. The total population of Golaghat district as per the 2011 census is approximately 1,066,888. Agriculture, particularly tea cultivation and rice farming, is the largest source of livelihood for the majority of the rural masses. Like many other districts in Assam, Golaghat also grapples with issues of poverty and inadequate rural infrastructure, making employment generation and asset creation programs like MGNREGA vital.

MGNREGA was implemented in Golaghat district in the second phase of implementation in Assam (2007-08). The significance of the Act lies in the fact that it creates a right-based framework for wage employment and makes the government legally bound to provide employment to those who seek it. It provides a legal guarantee of one hundred days of employment in every financial year to an adult of any rural household. An innovative feature is the social audit, which allows for participation of the primary stakeholders in monitoring the implementation to ensure transparency and accountability. The crucial aim of the Act is to create durable assets as well as strengthen the livelihood of the rural poor. The works undertaken through the Act address causes of chronic poverty like drought, deforestation, soil erosion, etc., focusing on increasing land productivity, recharging groundwater, and increasing water availability.

### 3. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

#### 1. Employment Generation and Asset Creation

MGNREGA created assets have contributed towards improving the quality of rural life. Through employment generation, MGNREGA creates durable assets to strengthen the livelihood of the rural poor. According to Mihir Shah, MGNREGA is a good way to invest in projects that are both productive and labor-intensive, with the long-term aim of drought and flood-proofing.

**Table 1.** Employment Generated Days-Wise during the Financial Year 2013-14 (Hypothetical Data for Golaghat)

Block	1-10 days	11-20 days	21-30 days	31-40 days	41-50 days	51-60 days	61-70 days	71-80 days	81-99 days	100 days
Dergaon	800	1400	950	360	140	40	15	35	5	2
Bokakhat	400	950	900	550	350	300	135	100	70	15
Golaghat	1100	1550	400	130	60	30	5	3	4	3
Sarupathar	350	650	550	270	180	140	60	15	20	8
Morangi	600	1250	1050	480	380	190	130	90	65	10
Khumtai	1500	1400	950	300	250	100	65	35	50	25
Gomariguri	700	780	500	180	130	45	30	25	40	30
Total	5450	7980	5300	2270	1490	845	440	303	274	93

Source: Hypothetical Data based on Golaghat DRDA structure, 2014

The table shows that the average number of households obtaining a job is primarily concentrated between 1–30 days. While a large number of households were issued job cards, only a few received sufficient work. This indicates a significant shortfall in achieving the scheme's core promise of 100 days of guaranteed employment.

The main objective of the Act is to enhance livelihood security by providing at least 100 days of guaranteed wage employment. However, it is observed that a very few households could complete the norm of 100 days. As per the hypothetical financial year 2013-14 data, only **93 households** from Golaghat district achieved the 100-day target. For example, Gomariguri block recorded the highest completion (30 households), while Dergaon recorded the lowest (2 households).

The analysis of employment generated by category (SC, ST, Women) suggests that while women's participation is a significant feature, the overall percentage of employment provided to the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) is often lower than the overall percentage of job card holders, indicating potential gaps in targeting the most socially disadvantaged groups as intended by the Act.

**Table 2.** Completed Work under MGNREGA during the Financial Year 2013-14 (Hypothetical Data for Golaghat)

Name of the Blocks	Rural connectivity	Flood control	Water conservation and Harvesting	Renovation of traditional Water bodies	Drought proofing	Micro-Irrigation	Land Development	Total
<b>Total Completed Works (Hypothetical)</b>	<b>580</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>370</b>	<b>1150</b>

Source: Hypothetical Data based on Golaghat DRDA structure, 2014

MGNREGA asset creation—such as rural connectivity, water conservation, flood control, and land development—promises to contribute greatly to the economic and ecological development of rural areas. The analysis suggests that the majority of work done under the Act in Golaghat district focuses on **rural connectivity** (e.g., roads, culverts) and **land development**. This is especially crucial in Golaghat, which experiences annual flood challenges. Rural connectivity is a high priority for villagers, allowing access to markets, schools, and essential services. The construction of new roads is shown to be changing the lives of villagers, providing a double benefit: creating rural infrastructure and offering livelihood security through temporary employment.

## 2. MGNREGA: Its Impact and Possibilities

**2.1 Impact on Local Economy:** The major impact of MGNREGA is providing employment opportunities to the rural poor and helping to revive the local economy. Especially, women's participation, often limited due to patriarchal values, is enhanced by the Act, directly raising the total size of the labor force and improving livelihood security.

**2.2 Improved Quality of Life:** The development of rural infrastructure facilities under MGNREGA is a good way to improve the quality of rural people's lives. The construction of roads improved connectivity for villagers, such as access to markets and other facilities, which increases people's access to livelihood options and health service centers.

**2.3 Impact on Agriculture:** Agriculture is the main occupation of the people in the district. Through the enhancement of MGNREGA projects related to water conservation, flood control, and watershed development, the scheme contributes to the growth of agricultural production. This is particularly relevant in flood-prone blocks like Bokakhat and Gomariguri.

**2.4 Improvement in Rural Environment:** MGNREGA assets have made a potential impact on reduced environmental degradation through natural resource management such as afforestation, drought proofing, flood control, water conservation, and land development.

**2.5 Reducing Migration:** During the non-agricultural season, many farmers used to migrate towards nearby cities. After the implementation of MGNREGA, there is evidence of a reduction in distress migration as the program provides an alternative, albeit temporary, source of income within the village.

## 4. CONCLUSION

MGNREGA aims at providing sustainable livelihood through employment to the rural poor. However, the analysis suggests that the overall performance of MGNREGA in Golaghat district is not satisfactory, particularly in achieving the core guarantee of 100 days of employment. The performance is often better in blocks where implementation is strictly monitored.

The primary reason for the low performance often stems from low awareness among the rural population regarding the Act, such as how to demand work, the right to unemployment allowance, types of work, and payment procedures. Even the level of awareness regarding the role of Gram Panchayats is very poor.

Despite the quantitative shortfall in employment days, the scheme has produced positive impacts. MGNREGA has shown the way for sustainable livelihood by successfully creating durable rural infrastructure (especially connectivity) and promoting natural resource management (flood control, water conservation). The enhancement of employment and income opportunities, even for a short duration, helps create a long-term foundation for livelihood security and prevents distress migration. To ensure true sustainable development, future implementation must focus on increasing awareness, streamlining timely payments, and ensuring the full statutory guarantee of 100 days of work.

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