**Multidimensional Policies for Rural Climate Resilience**

*By Sahil Mathew.*

The COVID-19 pandemic brought on unprecedented adversities for rural populations worldwide, endangering livelihoods and causing psycho-social impacts. These catastrophic effects have been further exacerbated by climate change, with a disproportional impact witnessed among the most vulnerable populations.

Unidimensional policies do not address the complexity of crises in rural settings and may no longer be impactful in the 21st century. As countries grapple with healthcare, economic, and environmental crises simultaneously, there is a pressing need to formulate development policies that offer multiple co-benefits, particularly for the susceptible sections of the society. For the Global South, it is also imperative that policies for rural areas address climate concerns while enhancing the dignity, agency, and adaptive capacities of its vulnerable populations.

In India, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), the world's largest public works programme, is a case in point. It is a rights-based, demand-driven initiative providing 100 days of unskilled manual labour to adult members of any rural household. According to a circular for the Natural Resource Management Framework under MGNREGA, the Act expends nearly 65% of its budget on the natural resource management component, with an aim to generate livelihoods while conserving (and enhancing) local natural resources.

Although MGNREGA is not a climate-centred policy, it provides significant adaptation and mitigation co-benefits through its implemented works. For example, a horticulture plantation can concurrently sequester carbon (*mitigation*), protect from floods (*adaptation*), and provide non-timber forest products (NTFPs), thereby improving rural incomes (*adaptive capacity*).

Survey-based studies in India have revealed a net-positive benefit from MGNREGA works. A report by the Institute for Human Development found that the construction of wells in Jharkhand significantly augmented agricultural productivity, resulting in a 190% increase in net incomes. Further, a study by the Indian Institute of Science covering districts in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan reported increased water availability in surface and groundwater sources, leading to a higher crop yield, greater crop diversification, and increased area under irrigation. Moreover, horticulture and forest plantations exhibited increased soil organic carbon and provided NTFPs, especially during rainfall deficit years, thereby increasing farm incomes.

Demand-driven policies like MGNREGA have the potential to enhance local climate resilience, along with socioeconomic resilience. To mobilise climate action and implement sustainable development programmes concomitantly, countries must focus on developing a multidimensional framework for devising cross-sectoral strategies to mitigate the complex challenges within their borders.

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