

Interim Report of the Fact Finding Investigating Stoppage of MGNREGA Wages in West Bengal

Based on the findings we put forth the following demands:

1. All the documents pertaining to correspondence between the Central Government and the State Government on MGNREGA since 2019, including the reports of central team visits and action taken, should be made public.
2. The Labour Budget for West Bengal for the FY 2022-23 has to be approved immediately by the central govt, so that MGNREGA works can resume without any further delay.
3. The pending wages for all MGNREGA workers need to be released immediately along with the delay compensation at the rate of 0.05% per day for the entire duration of the delay as per Para 29 of Schedule II of the MGNREG Act, 2005.
4. All active job card holders should be paid unemployment allowance from 1st April 2022 till the date the works resume, as per Section 7(1) of the MGNREG Act, irrespective of whether the workers have demanded work. The workers have suffered due to stoppage of works, and should be compensated for the same.
5. Ongoing and previously sanctioned works should be started immediately so that employment can be provided. In addition, certain works like embankments and irrigation channels are critical to the livelihoods and environment.
6. The social audit unit should be made independent from bureaucratic and political interference. It needs to be strengthened to encourage citizen oversight, to enable them to highlight anomalies and irregularities in the implementation of MGNREGA to ensure that such issues do not crop up in the future.
7. Along with periodic social audits concurrent audits should be conducted, given the seriousness and scale of corruption allegations.
8. The State Government should ensure strict action against the perpetrators and the recovery of funds in all cases where corruption has already been identified and established.
9. The State Government should create a separate revolving fund, of at least Rs. 1,000 crores, for MGNREGA to ensure timely payment of wages, in the event of future delays or complications in receiving money from the Central Government.

Background

From **25.07.2022** to **27.07.2022**, a fact-finding team consisting of members from CSOs, unions and organisations working on MGNREGA from all over the country, visited West Bengal to report on the stoppage of work and wages under MGNREGA in the state. Prior to the West Bengal visit, some of the team members met the senior officials from MORD to understand their point of view on the issue. Three teams visited three different districts – Purulia, South 24 Paraganas and Nadia. We interacted extensively with MGNREGA workers and government officials in order to get a full picture of the ongoing crisis caused by the stoppage of work and wages.

The objective of the fact-finding is to understand the impact of stoppage of both MGNREGA wages and works on the workers. We tried to document how workers' livelihoods are getting impacted, how they are coping with the income loss etc.. Based on the observations from the fact-finding visits, we have listed some demands that have to be fulfilled so that workers no longer have to bear the brunt of the complications between the Central Government and the State government.

No Work Or Wages

- A majority of the workers we met complained that despite their willingness to work no work has been provided in FY 2022-23 under MGNREGA. Even those who received work have gotten only 6-12 days of work.
- The workers have not been paid for the work they have done since 26th December, 2021. On average workers are owed Rs. xx-xx for xx-xx days of work done.
- Most workers do not know why they have not been given work or wages in the past seven months.

Impact on food security and debt

- Many workers, especially single women, reported that non-payment of wages have impacted food security. They often have to skip meals due to lack of resources.
- Workers have stated that they have had to take loans from private lenders or micro-finance institutions that lend at high interest rates to deal with the current crisis situation.

Impact on employment and migration

- Absence of MGNREGA work, has also led to increased migration. In some villages, men and women in more than half of the households have migrated for work, even ones who didn't migrate earlier.
- Non availability of MGNREGA works has resulted in workers resorting to foraging, even at personal risk, and taking up employment at rates lower than the MGNREGA wage rate.
- Non-availability of MGNREGA work has also resulted in increased unemployment in villages especially among women workers who cannot migrate for work. These difficulties are compounded in the case of single women or widows.

Effect on the Village Economy and Environment

- Works that had already begun when MGNREGA work was stopped have come to a halt. This has led to their dilapidation.
- The stoppage of works that are important for the village economy and the livelihoods of workers has caused immense losses.