

17– 05 – 2022

News: New systems delay MGNREGS wage payments

- The mandatory implementation of a national mobile monitoring system for the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee (MGNREGS) without addressing various technical issues has led to payments to workers being held up in Kerala. After the system was made mandatory this week, reports have come from most districts in Kerala regarding inability to process wage payments.

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act Scheme (MGNREGS)

- Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) of 2005 was enacted to give form to the **Article 41** of Indian Constitution. Article 41 of Directive Principles of the State Policy states that **State should strive to secure the right to work and to public assistance in cases of unemployment.**

- Mahatma Gandhi Employment Guarantee Act 2005 is an Indian labor law and social security measure that aims to guarantee the 'right to work'. This act was passed in September 2005.
- It aims to enhance livelihood security in rural areas by providing at least 100 days of wage employment in a financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work.
- Any rural household willing to do manual work is eligible under the Act.
- NREGA was scoped up to cover all the districts of India from 1 April 2008. The statute is hailed by the government as "the largest and most ambitious social security and public works program in the world". In its World Development Report 2014, the World Bank termed it a "stellar example of rural development".
- Recently, Central government updated that; MGNREGA will be updated with inflation index CPI- Rural, instead of older CPI- Agricultural Labourers. The base wage will be set as previous year's national daily wages (179 in Rural).
- The revised wages are applicable from 1st April every year.
- CPI-Rural (CPIR) calculation involves more non-food items such as healthcare and education compared to CPI-Agricultural Labourers (CPI-AL) involves more food items in consumption market.

- The Union Ministry of Rural Development's rules on Social Audit of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) state that the **State Government shall facilitate conduct of social audit** of the works taken up under the Act in every Gram Panchayat **at least once in six months** in the manner prescribed under these rules.
- Social audit is an accounting tool which **measures, evaluates, identifies gaps in service delivery and elicits promises to rectify these gaps with the direct participation of intended beneficiaries**. In its essence, **it empowers citizens to gauge the effectiveness of a scheme by looking at its overall impact**. A realisation of what one is entitled to by law and the empowerment that comes along with demanding this rightful entitlement is a by-product of a social audit.
- **A summary of findings of such social audits conducted during a financial year shall be submitted by the State Government to the Comptroller and Auditor General of India**. A Social Audit Unit will be set up by the State Government to facilitate conduct of social audit by Gram Sabha.
- In 2017, **Meghalaya became the first State to pass and roll out a social audit law to cover all departments**.
- **Employment is to be provided within 5 km of an applicant's residence, and minimum wages are to be paid. If work is not provided within 15 days of applying, applicants are entitled to an unemployment allowance**. That is, if the

government fails to provide employment, it has to provide certain unemployment allowances to those people. Thus, employment under MGNREGA is a legal entitlement.

- MGNREGA is to be implemented mainly by gram panchayats (GPs). The involvement of contractors is banned.
- Apart from providing economic security and creating rural assets, NREGA can help in protecting the environment, empowering rural women, reducing rural-urban migration and fostering social equity, among others.
- Priority shall be given to women in such a way that at least one-third of the beneficiaries shall be women who have registered and requested for work under this Act.
- More than 50% of workforce under MGNREGA is women, says the Economic Survey. For the past 4 years since 2017 – 18, women are the majority beneficiaries of MGNREGA, although the percentage of women in MGNREGA has decline from 54.5 in 2019–20 to 52.4 in 2020–21.

News: Report flags risk of fortified rice for some

- Distribution of iron fortified rice through government schemes as a “silver bullet” to curb anaemia must stop in States such as Jharkhand which have large tribal populations that suffer from sickle cell anaemia, thalassemia, and tuberculosis, warn activists. For such people, an overload of iron can create adverse health issues.

Food Fortification

- Fortification is the **addition of key vitamins and minerals** such as iron, iodine, zinc, Vitamin A & D to staple foods such as rice, milk and salt **to improve their nutritional content.**
- These **nutrients may or may not have been originally present** in the food before processing.
- Food fortification is a “**complementary strategy**” and not a replacement of a balanced & diversified diet to address malnutrition.
- Department of Food and Public Distribution under the Ministry of Consumer Affairs recently approved **a centrally-sponsored pilot scheme on fortification of rice and its dispersal through the Public Distribution System (PDS).**

- Food Safety and Standards (Fortification of Foods) Regulations, 2018 has prescribed standards for fortification of various food products such as all fortified foods must not fall below the minimum level of micronutrients.

Mandatory food Fortification

- Some food items are to be compulsorily fortified in India.
- Last year, FSSAI considered it mandatory to fortify edible oil with vitamin A and D ‘so that people of India can enjoy better immunity with good health’.
- The country is also considering ‘compulsory’ fortification of rice with Vitamin B12, Iron, and Folic Acid from 2024 to address malnutrition and anaemia crisis in the country.
- The Union Government has also started distributing fortified rice through the mid-day meal scheme and Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) programme citing widespread nutritional deficiencies.
- The central government has also initiated a three-year pilot scheme on rice fortification and supply via public distribution (PDS) in 15 districts across the country.
- Recently, experts have flagged issues against mandatory food fortification.
- In the letter, the signatories including Right to Food Campaign, a non-profit working for food rights, and the Alliance for Sustainable and Holistic

Agriculture, an informal network working to strengthen food diversity and nutrition, pointed out that the **mandatory fortification is detrimental to health** and “it would bring socio-economic impacts such as market shifts in favor of large corporations, loss of livelihoods for small and informal players, monocultures in diets and reliance on packaged foods.”

- Experts also pointed out that **in undernourished populations such as India’s, the key problem is protein inadequacy** as a result of monotonous cereal-based diets along with low consumption of vegetables and animal source foods such as meat, poultry, eggs, and fish. **The fortification can lead to toxicity, including gut inflammation**, they say.