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ABSTRACT

The social protection policies have been the oldest instrument used by national states to deliver welfare services to the poor and weaker sections of society. NREGA as a social protection program was implemented in Kashmir like other states of India in 2005 to overcome the growing rural livelihood risks and vulnerabilities. How far has this policy been successful in achieving its anticipated objective has remained out of the spectrum of evaluation? Considering these limitations this study tried to understand the impact of NREGA on poverty in rural HHs and the influence of local institutions, politics, and political fragility shaping the policy implementation and outcomes at local level. The study used social protection framework. It is descriptive in nature based on cross-section design in which it compared two population groups (High and Low performing) from one of the poorest and first implementation districts of the region. The sample is drawn by using both the probability and non-probability sampling. Total sample consisted of four blocks, eight panchayats, 200 HHs and 40 bureaucratic and non-bureaucratic administrators equally distributed between two population groups. The study used mixed-method but was predominantly quantitative in nature.

The HH level wellbeing outcomes show that the impact of the policy as a surrogate unemployment insurance is marginal because there is 60 percent leakage to non-poor and more importantly 45 percent participation of HHs who had an alternate choice available on equal or higher wage to that of NREGA. These leakages have led an involuntarily exclusion large number of poor and choice-less sample HHs, who were willing to work but remained out due to rationing. Notwithstanding, the distribution within the policy once a HH has got a chance to work doesn't show any exclusion towards any particular income, occupational, and landholding group. With the exception of outliers, the number of average yearly workdays and maximum workdays in a particular year are almost similar across all the groups.

Likewise is the impact on HHs income, the gross income difference between the NREGA and non-NREGA HHs is about Rs. 13 thousand, out of which average earning from NREGA is about Rs. 7500, which constitutes about 13 percent of total yearly income of NREGA HHs. However, considering forgone income of about 44 percent, the average earning from NREGA comes down to Rs. 3402, which constitutes only about 6 percent of NREGA HHs yearly income. As a result of this increase in the economic condition of HH because of NREGA is reported by only 64 percent of the NREGA HHs. Owing to the small amount of earning, like most of the other PWPs the impact is mainly observed in meeting the short-term income consumption needs. Notwithstanding the overall impact, when we look at the group specific outcomes and impact. The net labor market and income enhancement outcomes are much higher for choice-less HHs whose forgone employment and income is close to zero, compared to choice-based HHs whose forgone income is close to 100 percent.

Fragmenting of outcomes at the cross-sectional level shows that even within the derailed implementation system increase in work supply reduces the rationing of poor and marginal groups and increases the net

income and income multiplies impact for these groups. As out of the total 100 HHs in HPA 92 percent have worked under NREGA compared to 52 percent in LPA. Out of total poor in HPA 88 percent have participated in NREGA compared to 52 percent in LPA.

The outcomes on questions of how has policy derailed from its path, and what differentiates the outcome between High and Low performing areas, show that the policy has taken a wrong orientation at the regional government level of being a development policy rather than a social protection to be available only at times of livelihood crisis. Owing to the non-existence of desired implementing institutional system the bureaucrats have colluded with traditional informal leaders with main focus being to fulfill their economic motives, rather than community wellbeing.

At cross-sectional level political economy has played little differently in two areas. During the *informal system* (pre-panchayat period) the higher performance in HPA is determined by three factors – higher number of willing informal leaders to take NREGA work, increased bureaucratic support due to close accessibility of VLWs, and close bureaucratic-local leader lobby system. The political motivation was not very strong during this time because there was no hope of local election due to conflict, therefore, no direct political opportunity. With the coming of *formal systems* in 2011 leaders in both HPA and LPA continued to prioritize their economic interest over the provision of social protection, however, their level of using NREGA for political interests varied. While the political rivalry is inherent in a competitive political system, in LPA bias, exclusion and manipulations of opposition party plans by Sarpanchs party for fulfilling their political economic interests have resulted in huge *political contestation*. In contrary, though political rivalry also exists in HPA, the distribution of NREGA for political interests with exclusion of opposition is marginally evident. Therefore instead of political contestation, there is more of *political cohesion* because either the entire panchayat belongs to one political party, or there is very small opposition, which didn't report any exclusion on political grounds. This political cohesion works as positive reinforcement for NREGA, which is evident through its better performance.

Based on these outcomes of the study, the thesis contends and adds to the literature of PWPs that a legally guaranteed self-selective employment guarantee program in a fragile region works little differently than any other social protection program. Because of lack of trade-off between governments priorities and actual needs and policy design, weak institutional capability, endemic institutional corruption fueled and sustained in persistent fragility, and prioritization of self political and economic interests of implementers over human wellbeing in the implementation who enjoy impunity under poor transparency and accountability system. While the guaranteed self-selective employment based social protection is a very relevant idea to the regional livelihood crisis and vulnerabilities particularly of the job scarce and weaker sections. However, in a derailed implementation system, this self-selective targeting system is works as a cover for these institutions, who justify their not reaching to poor and needy by counterfeiting documents and showing that policy is self-selective whosoever, came for work got it. Railing such policies back on the track needs a lot of political commitment on the part of regional government in strengthen the feasibility and wage design and providing separate and adequate institutional mechanism and transparency measures as provisioned under guidelines.