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Accountability Working Paper



Citizen Oversight and India's Right to Work Program: What Do the Social Auditors Say?

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Summary

This is a summary of a longer Accountability Working Paper. The full paper and all other ARC publications can be found at www.accountabilityresearch.org

FACTLY



Summary

Can citizens' voices improve the performance of large-scale government anti-poverty programs? India's national rural employment guarantee program (NREGA) has provided employment to over 50 million households since its launch in 2005. NREGA also includes a transparency and accountability process—social audits—that enables collective action for public oversight. State governments are responsible for facilitating social audits through local governments, or *panchayats*, to prevent fraud and abuse of NREGA funds.

In practice, however, a majority of local governments either lack capacity or are captured by vested interests. So far, only two state governments have created social audit units with the autonomy needed to prevent capture by vested interests. The states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana established a neutral body—the Society for Social Audit Accountability and Transparency (SSAAT)—that is independent both of the state government administration and political patronage networks. Over the last decade, SSAAT has organized over 9,125 public hearings across these two states.

Exploratory Research Strategy

This exploratory study was carried out in partnership with SSAAT-Telangana, and it is the first to examine the performance of the state-run social audits from the perspective of the staff facilitating the audit. This study is based on an anonymized web survey of over three hundred lower mid-level staff involved in facilitating social audits in Telangana (60 percent of SSAAT's full time working staff), as well on ethnographic research and key informant interviews. We ask readers to consider a distinction between the questions that address staff perception of corruption (which can't be verified) and their perception of NREGA processes like demand for work and timely wages (which can be verified with administrative data).

Deterrence Effect of Social Audits

We find social audits contributed to an overall reduction of the problem of corruption via deterrence. Two thirds of the surveyed staff felt that more than 50 percent of the social audits they facilitated helped in deterring corruption.

Social Audits Provide Answerability without Enforcement

More than half of the surveyed staff agree that social audits generate some degree of answerability from social programs to citizens but that formal enforcement is lacking. Social audit findings are discussed in open public hearings, where citizens ask questions and seek clarifications on government actions and decisions. The public hearings are presided over by senior administrators who answer to the public, order inquiries or refer cases to the state government. Follow up to social audit findings of corruption and abuse is limited because the responsibility falls to a different government office that lacks the necessary autonomy and capacity.

Figure S1. Social Audits that Contributed to a Corrupt Politician Not Being Elected

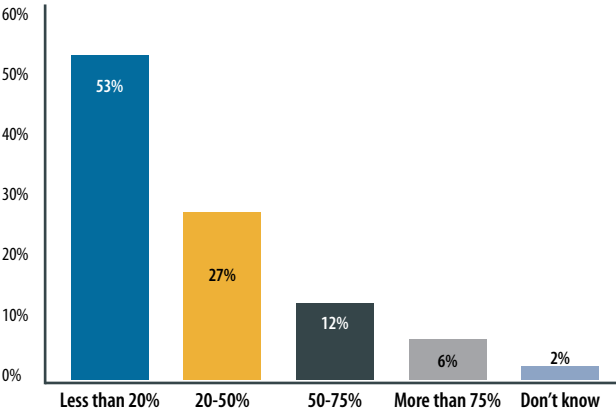
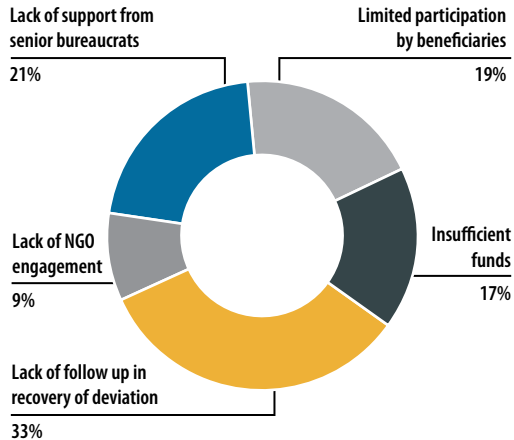


Figure S2. Obstacles in Making Social Audits More Effective



Problem Solving Effects: Beyond Detecting Corruption

Though social audits were expected to expose problems rather than to solve them, facilitators report that in practice, they play a significant role in redressing individual citizen grievances. Publicly available administrative data shows the effects of the problem-solving role: of the 45,448 grievances registered with social audit facilitators from December 2015 to November 2016, 32 percent were resolved through the social audit process. Surveyed staff reported that social audits are beginning to address one of the recurring grievances of many NREGA workers: late and incomplete payment of wages.

Unexpected Indirect Effects: Political Accountability

Despite their lack of enforcement power, the social audits also appear to have indirect accountability effects via local electoral politics. Earlier studies in Andhra Pradesh found collusion between local politicians and program staff to pocket NREGA program funds, but one in five surveyed staff felt that a significant fraction of social audits contributed to a corrupt politician not being re-elected. However, this requires further investigation.

Implications for Future Applied Research

This exploratory research highlights questions for future research and action to inform strategies for deepening the impact of social audits, including:

1. How do social audits contribute to grievance redress?
2. How can the state government bolster the autonomy and capacity of its enforcement unit to investigate fraud, including a proactive information disclosure strategy?
3. How can SSAAT develop a proactive information disclosure strategy that can enable state government and civil society actors to identify bottlenecks and take action to improve the performance of anti-poverty programs?

About the Authors

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About Accountability Research Center (ARC)

The Accountability Research Center (ARC) is an action-research incubator based in the School of International Service at American University. ARC partners with civil society organizations and policy reformers in the global South to improve research and practice in the field of transparency, participation and accountability.

For more information about ARC, please visit the website: www.accountabilityresearch.org.

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Disclaimer

The findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed here are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of SSAAT, Factly, or ARC.

Cover Photo: Social auditors interacting with wage worker to verify information about her participation in India’s National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) work in Telangana state. Credit: ©Society for Social Audit, Accountability and Transparency (SSAAT).