

ISSUE BRIEF

A Comprehensive Overview of Departmental Convergence Under MGNREGS

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Key Highlights

- Convergence can occur and may be required even without a common goal or broader outcome. For Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), convergence can be defined as strategic and coordinated policy decisions and programme actions in multiple relevant sectors, with or without a common goal.
- Unified guidelines for processes and actors haven't been created. Rather, guidelines for specific schemes have been developed, reflecting silos of governance. Joint work and tasks are not mentioned in various convergence guidelines. There is a lack of clarity on how certain tasks can be completed, and especially how synergies across departments can be leveraged.
- Questions on the barriers and facilitators of convergence for MGNREGS need to be explored further. This can support the improvement of convergence processes and be applied to other multisectoral challenges like reducing malnutrition, mitigating climate change, or dealing with pandemics.

Introduction

Many of today's pressing social and global challenges including food security, nutrition, climate change, unemployment, etc. cut across sectoral boundaries, governance levels, and policy domains. Convergence across government departments and levels presents itself as an emerging solution (Candel, 2016; Ved and Menon, 2012). However, issues include compartmentalisation, fragmentation, incoherent objectives, policy under- and overreaction, competing priorities and attention (Candel, 2016).

While government departments work in silos, there is potential to synergise effort, finances, and technical expertise to plan and implement programmes and achieve holistic objectives. This can benefit scheme delivery by ensuring tasks are coordinated and conducted in timely fashion; fewer net resources are allocated towards one objective; and there is scope for increasing reach and coverage, ensuring smoother monitoring, and stronger feedback and accountability mechanisms.

This issue brief aims to highlight how convergence is understood by the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) in various government documents including guidelines, letters, and circulars.

What is MGNREGS?

MGNREGS is the Government of India's (GoI's) flagship rural employment programme and social protection scheme, which aims to provide 'at least 100 days of wage employment per financial year to every rural household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work', based on demand (Operational Guidelines, 2013). Wage seekers have the right to gain unemployment allowance, in case employment is not provided within 15 days of submitting the application, or 15 days from the date of desired employment for advance applications (ibid). The scheme also aims to build durable assets, with an emphasis on 'improved water security, soil conservation, and higher land productivity' (ibid).

MGNREGS has its roots in the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), passed by the Parliament in 2005. The scheme was launched in 2006. It is the largest Centrally Sponsored Scheme (CSS) of the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD). In FY 2022-23, it accounted for 16 per cent of the GoI's total CSS budget and around 53 per cent of the MoRD budget, with ₹73,000 crore allocated by GoI.

What is convergence and how does MGNREGS define it?

In public policy, convergence is defined as the movement of several actors, decision-makers, and groups to achieve a common goal. However, convergence can still occur and may be required even without a common goal or broader outcome. The MGNREGS administration and machinery coordinates with multiple departments to build durable assets relevant for various schemes. For example, MGNREGS coordinates with the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) to help construct Anganwadi Centres (AWCs) for the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), now subsumed under Saksham Anganwadi and Poshan 2.0, and another scheme under MoRD, the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Gramin (PMAY-G) to construct houses.

This coordination occurs while maintaining an outlook towards different outcomes. Therefore, for MGNREGS, convergence can be defined as strategic and coordinated policy decisions and programme actions in multiple relevant sectors, with or without a common goal.

Under the scheme, across India, of a total of 1.16 crore works approved in FY 2021-22, 43 lakh or 37 per cent were envisioned as works converging with other services. Of these, only 11 per cent had been taken up and a total of ₹3,217 crore was spent on these works.

Methods and Frameworks

To unpack convergence between MGNREGS and other schemes, this issue brief conducts an extensive policy content analysis. A total of 37 publically available policy documents such as circulars, guidelines and presentations published by national ministries were sources. The ministries were chosen based on those listed in the recent annual circular for MGNREGS published by MoRD tasked with implementing the scheme (MoRD, 2019). The ministries and their respective schemes converging with MGNREGS which have been evaluated are as follows:

1. Ministry of Rural Development - MGNREGA, Deendayal Antayodaya Yojana - National Rural Livelihood Mission (DAY-NRLM)
2. Ministry of Textiles - Catalytic Development Programme (CDP)
3. Ministry of Agriculture - Watershed programme and horticulture programme
4. Ministry of Women and Child Development - the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS)
5. Ministry of Jal Shakti - Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM)

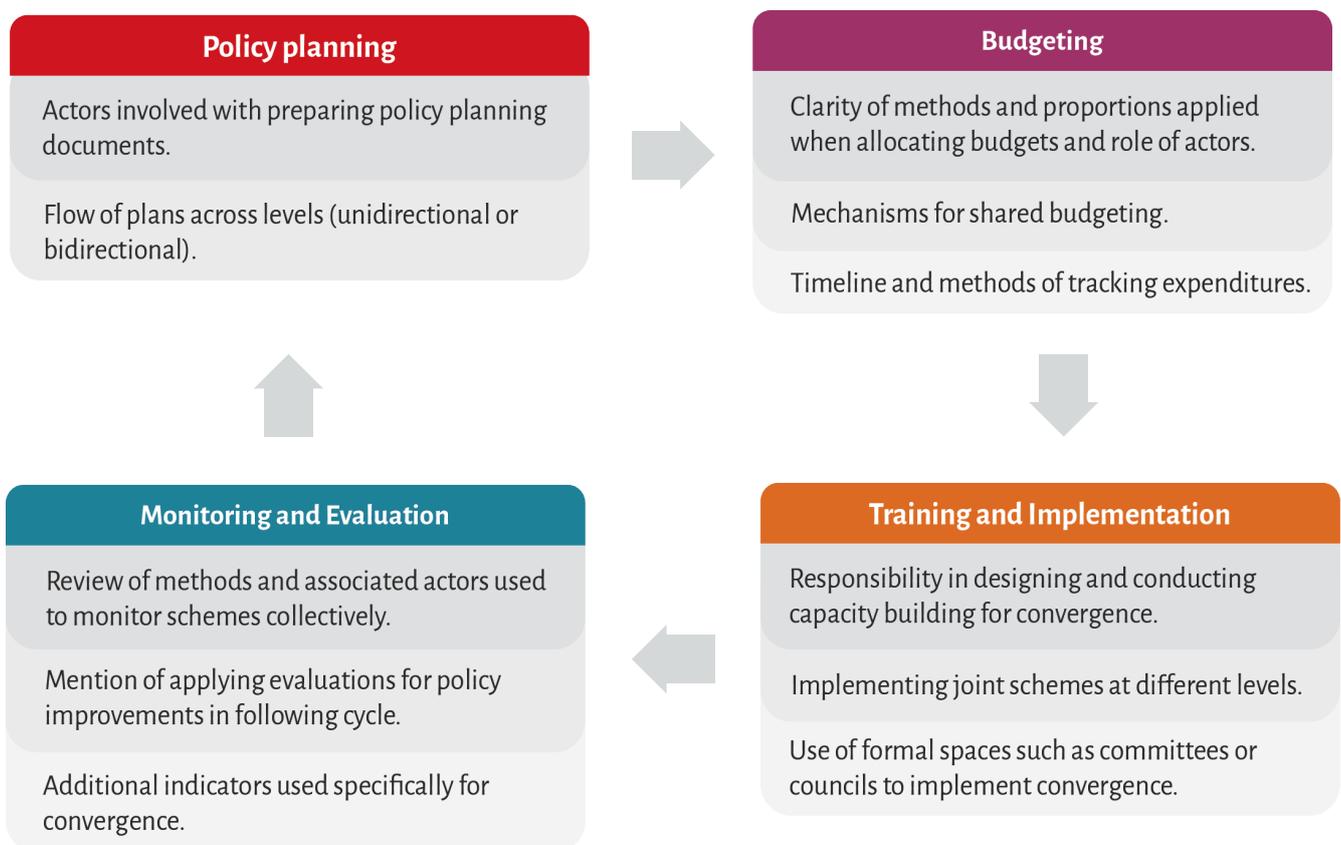
To ensure consistency and exhaustiveness in sourcing documents, a list of keywords was maintained.

The combination of keywords used for the web review included 'convergence', 'MGNREGS', 'guidelines', 'operational' and individual scheme names.

An analytical framework was used to evaluate the articulation of convergence in these documents. This framework applies and builds on Ved and Menon's framework (2012) used to evaluate the convergence of nutrition schemes dedicated to eradication of child undernutrition in India. The framework ensures cognisance of convergence being a process as opposed to pure policy outcome. The process consists of phases such as policy planning, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation. Actors involved in making decisions and resulting actions are analysed for each of these phases to unpack the status of inter-sectoral convergence.

This issue brief applies the framework for the policy content analysis by first identifying the clarity in the description of roles and responsibilities of different actors involved with delivering MGNREGS in convergence with different schemes. These are then analysed within each phase. The framework also extends to include budgeting along with planning, implementation, and monitoring. Actors analysed are limited to those within national and sub-national departments in-line with policy guidelines.

Figure 1: Guiding factors within the policy cycle



To further summarise the analysis of policy articulation, each scheme's policy guidelines are categorised as 'clear', 'ambiguous' or 'not mentioned' across phases of the policy implementation cycle. Table 1 describes the status of articulation of the objective, context and extent of process detail for convergence.

For example, a scheme would be coded green if the objective and context of convergence is articulated sufficiently. Further, the action each functionary has to take would be clearly defined. This may differ across different phases for the scheme where it receives a red code when evaluations conducted through convergence are weak or not mentioned altogether.

Table 1: Categorising status of articulation through objectives, context and action of convergence

Status of articulation	Understanding of objective	Understanding of context	Extent of process detail
Clear	Extremely objective	Sufficiently objective	Well developed
Ambiguous	Marginally objective	Marginally objective	Marginally developed
Not mentioned	Weak or no mention of objective	Weak or no mention of context	Not mentioned

Table 2: Analysis of articulation of convergence through a categorising exercise

	Planning	Budget	Implementation	Monitoring	Evaluation
MoRD (MGNREGA)	Green	Green	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow
DAY-NRLM	Green	Red	Green	Yellow	Red
PMAY-G	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow
AYUSH	Yellow	Yellow	Green	Yellow	Red
Horticulture	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Red	Red
CDP	Yellow	Yellow	Green	Green	Red
Building AWCs	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red
SBM	Yellow	Yellow	Green	Red	Red

Convergence is articulated clearly	Green
Convergence is ambiguous	Yellow
Convergence is not mentioned	Red

Findings

In this section we present findings from the policy content analysis for each phase of the policy cycle. For each phase, the clarity of articulation on convergence is unpacked with core areas that are mentioned in the framework. For example, budgeting is understood through the core areas of how methods and proportions are applied when allocating budgets specifically for convergence. The table below categorises the status of articulation of convergence.

Planning

- For planning, there is limited specificity in the documents surveyed with regard to the process, apart from a few cases, such as drumstick cultivation and horticulture. Further, guidance documents for policies are made by individual ministries as opposed to being created jointly. For example, the annual master circular of MGNREGS (2021-22), a document which lists out guidelines and a roadmap for the scheme, is made by MoRD as against jointly, even though it mentions convergence.
- A noticeable trend is that the Gram Panchayat (GP) plays a significant role in most cases. Planning for most MGNREGS activities begins at the GP level where the Labour Budget is prepared under MGNREGS and is part of the Gram Panchayat Development Planning (GPDP) which is a single integrated planning process. At the end of the planning process GPs should have a plan indicating items or work and sources of funds. The GP has to approve projects to be included in the 'Shelf of Projects' which is later to be included in Annual Action Plans of the state. For example, the GP identifies locations for AWCs (2016 guidelines).
- The GP sometimes approves plans made by various departments such as for DAY-NRLM, when it is the programme implementation agency and the plan is proposed by the State Rural Livelihood Mission at the GP level. For drumstick cultivation, the District Programme Manager of DAY-NRLM or equivalent posts proposes the plan to the intermediate level Panchayat (Block level).
- Participatory planning with different departments is rarely mentioned. Joint planning exercises are not mentioned. Typically, one ministry or department makes a plan, which is approved by the Panchayat machinery. An exception is the second phase of the SBM - wherein National Scheme Sanctioning Committee (NSSC) is constituted for specific periods to approve or revise the Perspective Plan called the Project Implementation Plan (PIP) for the states/UTs, and the Annual Implementation Plan (AIP) as and when received from the state/UT governments. It includes senior officials from four Union departments, state officials, and experts.

Budgeting

- While there is no joint budget, costs of asset construction are split between relevant programmes and MGNREGS. Convergence follows the 60:40 ratio between wage and material costs at GP level. During planning, budget must be decided and included in the Labour Budget. Some examples of budgeting convergence are given below:
 - For the construction of AWCs under ICDS, upto ₹5 lakh is to be paid by MGNREGA and after that ICDS bears costs of upto ₹2 lakh. Other sources of funding include State Finance Commission (FC), 14th FC, Tribal Sub Plan, Scheduled Caste Sub Plan.
 - There is little mention of budgeting for DAY-NRLM and AYUSH programmes, but guidelines state that the cost of material components including wages of skilled and semi-skilled workers should not exceed 40 per cent at the district level.
 - For the Catalytic Development Programme (CDP) by the Ministry of Textiles, budgeting is mentioned partly. Financial sanction under MGNREGS approved by Gram Sabha is issued cluster wise by the District Programme Coordinator, MGNREGS and for CDP support in plantation and onward integration for cocoon production through state sericulture department concerned. MGNREGS is to spend 100 per cent of unskilled labour cost and 75 per cent of material costs and wages of skilled and semi-skilled workers.
 - For the first phase of SBM, Individual Household Latrines (IHHLs) were partially funded through MGNREGS (amount unspecified). For the second phase of SBM, funds are being dovetailing with MGNREGS where MGNREGS is meant to fund Solid Liquid Waste Management (compost pits, tricycles/other vehicles, storage for plastic waste, setting up of segregation, storage and compost premises), greywater management (soak pits, greywater management systems, etc.), drainage channels. However, the amount is unspecified.

- o For PMAY, 90/95 persondays for construction of the house have been provided over and above the financial assistance given to construct each house. There is also provision of ₹12,000 for toilets through SBM and/or MGNREGS.
- The MGNREGS annual master circular identifies two methods for converging funds. In the first method, the converging department deposits funds in the State Employment Guarantee Fund (SEGF) from where funds are spent collectively. In the second method, funds required to complete planned work must be identified individually by each department and releases take place separately. Despite being referred to as 'convergence', the second method does not practise working together from a common pool of resources.

Implementation

- While MGNREGS does not mandate setting up committees to ensure coordination in convergence works, the guidelines list roles and responsibilities for implementation with good clarity ensuring task specialisation is clear.
- The district level receives most clarity on the dynamics of how functionaries interact with each other to ensure tasks are completed through collective efforts. For example, guidelines detail the role of the District Magistrate in coordinating with nodal functionaries from line departments in ensuring funds are transferred for works undertaken. The guidelines call for meetings coordinated by the District Magistrate to monitor progress.
- Convergence implementation follows a top-down approach. This is poles apart from planning that begins at the decentralised village. For example, in PMAY-G and SBM implementation, decisions for the Block were decided by district functionaries as opposed to planning where the village and Block feed plans up to the district.
- Guidelines fail to highlight how capacities of functionaries must be strengthened (through training programmes for example) to implement convergence effectively. Guidelines of other schemes, such as that of Indira Awas Yojana (now PMAY-G), depend on MGNREGS guidelines for implementation as against highlighting clear methods of implementation designed together. Guidelines of schemes such as PMAY-G, DAY-NRLM and CDP were observed to be merely suggestive as against being affirmative.



Monitoring and Evaluation

- Guidelines emphasise on the need for thorough documentation of the schemes at every stage to support evaluations but articulation on how the evaluation is to be conducted remains poor. For instance, while the guidelines highlight what kind of data should be collected for monitoring, they do not mention the manner in which it should be collected or how the functionary can be better trained to collect it.
- Documentation is to be uploaded (or directly recorded where possible) on NREGASoft, a local language enabled workflow-based e-Governance system by NREGA implementing functionaries.
- Base indicators monitored under MGNREGS include monies allocated and spent, persondays and assets constructed. Other indicators monitored differ with schemes. For example, the number of houses sanctioned and constructed are documented in PMAY-G and status of saplings planted is documented in DAY-NRLM.
- Social audits conducted as per MGNREGS guidelines are to track progress of convergence as well. Civil society organisations were initially encouraged to participate through formal collaborations but this has decreased as states have set up their semi-autonomous Social Audit Units (Veeraraghavan, 2021).
- Proactive disclosure of data was observed on the Management Information System, which is regularly updated. However, it is unclear how this information is used and how it feeds back to the policy cycle.

Conclusions

Policy convergence is a multi-dimensional, ongoing process and may have elements that don't move at the same speed (Candel, 2016). This is especially true of convergence for MGNREGS.

The analysis of guidelines found that unified guidelines for processes and actors haven't been created for all schemes together. Rather, guidelines for specific schemes have been developed, reflecting silos of governance that continue to persist. Collective processes that cover multiple schemes and ministries have not been generated, and processes have largely been created for specific schemes.

Consequently, joint work and tasks are not mentioned. While certain roles and responsibilities have been made clear, such as the role of the GP, activities like planning are still conducted by one actor such as departments, ministries, or implementation agencies, and then approved by another, such as the GP. The same is true for budgeting.

Moreover, in multiple documents, there is a high dependence on MGNREGA guidelines with other policies saying 'check MGNREGA guidelines' in many instances. There is also a lack of clarity on how certain tasks can be completed, and especially how synergies across departments can be leveraged.

Many questions remain unexplored in understanding convergence that goes beyond policy content to understand ground realities. The issue brief recognises the need to evaluate the de facto operationalisation of the process and actions highlighted in policy documents. Furthermore, this includes a deep understanding of each process across phases of the policy cycle. Questions on the barriers and facilitators of convergence for MGNREGS also need to be explored further. An analysis along these lines can support improvement and streamlining convergence processes where successful examples of effective convergence can be used as best practices. Learnings from convergence in large scale livelihood schemes like MGNREGS can then be applied to other multisectoral goals like reducing malnutrition, mitigating climate change, dealing with pandemics like the COVID-19 pandemic among others.

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