

# How does asset selection in a public works programme influence impact on livelihoods? The case of India's Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) | Text Transcript | CIRCLE

This is a text transcription for the recorded event “How does asset selection in a public works programme influence impact on livelihoods? The case of India's Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)” presented by the Canada India Research Centre for Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at the University of Guelph. The event was recorded on May 17, 2023, and was moderated by Helen Hambly. The guest speaker was Dr. Mondira Bhattacharya.

Transcript:

## Helen Hambly

Thank you. Recording is starting. I was just gonna mention that there's going to be a recording of the presentation today to share with participants who are unable to join us. So welcome everyone! A particularly bright and cold day here in Guelph, after some lovely warm weather. And I'm Professor Helen Hambly. I'm a programme coordinator of capacity, development and extension. And I'm very pleased to welcome you all today to a shared event with CIRCLE here at the University of Guelph, which I'll explain in a moment, on behalf of its director, Sharada Srinivasan. So just one moment that I'll come back to CIRCLE.

But before getting started, it is our tradition and our expectation here at the University of Guelph to recognize the land on which we all live, learn, and work. This is land held by the ancestral and Indigenous peoples of the Guelph area. These are First Nations, Inuit, and Metis people who have actively maintained and strengthened their relationship with the land on which our University is grounded. But also grounded in the respect, reciprocity, and resiliency of those Indigenous peoples. Our land acknowledgment is really an act of voicing this respect, and recognizing that land is sacred to Indigenous peoples.

Here at the University of Guelph, we're very pleased to be able to have an opportunity to share our learning within this environment. And, we recognize The Dish with One Spoon, an agreement of the Haudenosaunee, Anishinaabeg, and other allied nations from the area that we now know as The Great Lakes Region of Ontario. We all eat together from The One Dish, and we recognize that the Creator has provided us with an opportunity to share resources here. And, with this acknowledgment and recognition of The Jake Thomas Learning Center--that provided this land acknowledgment support--I would like to open the meeting and recognize

that we're all here to live, learn, and respect from one another. So those are the general rules of the webinar today, and I certainly accept any mistakes and errors in the land acknowledgment and in anything that happens today. And I'm also open to any feedback and reactions to today's presentation.

So feel free that it's an open door, and we are so very lucky in this webinar today that we're joined across the Atlantic Ocean from colleagues in Reading, UK. This event is possible out of a collaboration between the UK and University of Guelph here in Canada.

But it's also possible, because here at the University of Guelph, we have a very dynamic centre called CIRCLE. CIRCLE is the Canada India Research Center for Learning and Engagement. It was started in February 2022, to be an interdisciplinary nucleus in Canada for cutting edge research on India, South Asia and diaspora communities; to showcase, advocate, catalyze, and foster an equitable, respectful, and sustained exchange of knowledge between Canadian and Indian scholars on the complex and emerging--and sometimes unexplored--topics related to sustainability, social, and economic well-being. And I invite everyone to check out CIRCLE: the website, its upcoming events and all of its activities, and continue to strengthen and support this unique centre here at the University of Guelph.

So, today's seminar, the format of it is we're going to have some opening words from Dr. Henny Osbahr from University of Reading. She'll explain this unique partnership this year between University of Guelph and University of Reading, and then we'll move to the presentation by our guest speaker. And certainly Dr. Mondira Bhattacharya, is perhaps known to some of you already who have read some of her papers -- but a fascinating case study on the Rural Employment Guarantee Act, known as MGNREGA. A terrible acronym, Mondira. But you're going to explain why India's Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act is so important as a case study, and we're all looking forward to that learning today.

Following the presentation, we'll have some time for Q&A. And then also any follow up questions and suggestions for their webinars. So without further ado, I'm going to invite Henny Osbahr to say a few words of welcome from Reading, England.

### Henny Osbahr:

Hi, everybody! It's a real pleasure to be joining you with this webinar. So, I'm a professor in International Development and Head of Department for the Department for International Development. We are based in the University of Reading, in the UK, just outside London. And, we're part of the School of Agriculture, Policy and Development. And as Helen mentioned, we have an MOU with between the University of Guelph and Reading, and one of the things that has sort of transpired from that is this shared project. Which is funded through the Erasmus

scheme through the EU. And, it's facilitated a lot of staff mobility opportunities for us to share and learn. Particularly around potential future partnerships, but also in terms of our shared teaching and potential online shared delivery that we'll be doing from 2024.

So we're very excited about that. But also, we recently, myself and a colleague, Dr Sarah Cardey, who is a specialist in Gender and Communication for Rural Development. We came to the University of Guelph in order to conduct this sort of visit, and a chance to meet with Ata and Helen. But also, the conference was going on, the AIAEE Conference. And so through that, there was an opportunity for a number of colleagues to share research, ideas, and collaborations.

Mondira, a colleague who I work with, was unfortunately unable to come with us--which was the intention--and, in fact, to kind of be part of all of that. And she was going to be giving this presentation during that visit. So, as she wasn't able to travel, Helen and the colleagues at CIRCLE here, we're very grateful for this opportunity, really, to, in the spirit of the Erasmus programme, to have an opportunity to hear about Mondira's research interests and be able to perhaps get some feedback on that. So yes, this is very much in that spirit of shared learning, and we're delighted at the University of Reading to be able to be part of this webinar with you--this morning there, this afternoon over here. And I can tell you it's lovely and sunny, here in Reading [laughs] So thank you very much!

### Helen Hambly:

Thank you so much, Henny. It's a real pleasure to have you here. We're sorry that Sarah Cardey can't join us. For those of you who are not aware, Sarah Cardey is a graduate of our Masters of Science and Capacity, Development and Extension, here at University of Guelph, and then went on to the University of Reading as a PhD student, and now is a faculty at Reading University. So, it's a real pleasure to have that connection to our alumni. And it's really, through Henny and Sarah, that I was able to meet Mondira. And Mondira, it was such a pleasure to meet you in February in person with Dr. Chowdhury, and to also... [some background noise] sorry, just reminding people to mute--that it was a real pleasure to be able to meet you in person. So today, it's virtual, and I'll pass over the talking stick to you, and welcome your presentation. Welcome, Mondira. Thank you.

### Mondira Bhattacharya:

Thank you very much. I would like to thank Henny, first of all for the introduction, and Helen-- Professor Helen and Professor Sharada. Thank you very much for giving me this opportunity of presenting this proposal to all of you at CIRCLE. And, the idea behind this presentation is basically to get your feedback, your insights, to how to better this proposal--and also to explore potentials for any collaborative work on this. So with this, I begin the presentation. So, the

research proposal is on: "How does asset selection in public works programme influence livelihoods? The case of India's Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act."

Okay, so... right, sorry. So, public works programmes--they're also called workfare programmes--and they have been in operation in developing countries for several decades. They constitute an important subset of social protection initiatives in developing countries.

Public work programmes are basically government initiatives designed to create employment opportunities and stimulate economic activity in a particular region. And, they generate employment at lower wages to needy workers. They also create durable community assets through labour intensive projects. And most importantly, they provide a safety net for--which is required for income & consumption smoothening during shocks such as economic crisis, natural disasters, conflicts, and seasonal variations in demand.

Now, since the turn of the millennium, apart from India, several countries have implemented work fair programmes extensively to address high unemployment rates. So there are programmes--these large programmes--like the Plan Jefes programme of Argentina in 2001, the Expanded Public Works Programme of South Africa in 2003, the Productive Safety Net Programme of Ethiopia in 2005. And also, there are several small programmes. Some of them are the Rwandan Vision 2020 Programme of 2008, the 100-Day Employment Generation Programme of Bangladesh in 2009, then the Food for Work Programme in Karnali, in Nepal.

Now, coming to a history of public work programmes in India, India has had a very long history of employment guarantee programmes to protect against food shortages, natural calamities, and famines. Now, post-independence, there have been several programmes, you know, small programmes like, you know, Rural Manpower Scheme or Crash Scheme for Rural Employment. They got merged into bigger programmes later on, such as the National Food for Work Programme. Again, there were, you know, several other small programmes like Rural Landless Employment Guarantee, or Jawahar Rozgar Yojana--which once again, got merged into larger programmes called Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana, etc. So on and so forth. So, it definitely has a very long history of large scale public works programmes.

Now, coming to the Genesis of MGNREGA. Now, in 1972, the Maharashtra Employment Guarantee Scheme was launched as a result of a grassroot socio-political movement during the 1970-1973 drought. Now this programme, which was limited to this particular state of Maharashtra, it, you know, gave a guarantee of work. And this was enacted in 1977. Now, in 1990s and the early 2000s, India was experiencing a fast rate of economic growth, but at the same time it did not have, you know, equivalent or commensurate growth in employment.

So there was this--this period was known as a period of jobless growth in India. And due to this, you know, taking cue from this jobless growth situation as well as this, you know, Maharashtra Employment Guarantee Scheme--which was giving a legal right to employment. These two, you know, they resulted in the enactment of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act in 2005. Now in 2005, it was implemented in about 200 districts of India. And then in 2008, all the districts of India came under the purview of this act, and the name changed to Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act.

Now, this is a unique rights-based and the world's largest demand driven guarantee programme with an annual outlay of about 7.3 billion US dollars covering around 54 million rural households every year.

Now, what are the salient features of this act? It basically provides at least 100 days of guaranteed wage employment in every financial year to every rural household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work. Second thing is that it creates durable community assets in rural areas which has, its, you know, a resultant multiplier effect on the economy. And the third point is that it targets some of these assets--are basically private assets--towards the most deprived sections of the rural population as per a certain list that the list of beneficiaries--which is called the Para-5 of Schedule-I of the Act--that has got a list of vulnerable communities who are supposed to be given some private assets.

Now, what are the community assets under MGNREGA? There are 3 types of permissible works under community assets. The Category A Works are natural resource management. Category C Works are development of livelihoods. Category D Works are works related to rural infrastructure. Now, some of the prominent activities which are undertaken under community projects are, you know, water, conservation & water harvesting, rural connectivity, land development, drinking water and sanitation, construction of granaries, playgrounds, etc. You know, these assets, as the name suggests, it's used for the whole village community. And the people who are working in these assets, towards the development of these assets, or who are creating these assets, they get remuneration in the form of wages.

Now there is a second type of asset, which are called individual assets--or private assets--and I'm going to be using both individual and private assets, you know, using these 2 terms interchangeably during my presentation. Now, MGNREGA programme, it was enacted in 2005. Since 2014, the focus has shifted towards creation of more of these individual assets. These are called Category B Assets. These are private assets which are created on private land--especially these assets are related to agriculture and allied activities.

Now, who are these vulnerable sections of the society to which these private assets are here? These are a couple of them--there about 10 of them--scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, nomadic tribes, denotified tribes, below poverty line families, women headed households, physically handicapped headed households, beneficiaries of land reforms, beneficiaries of a Prime Minister scheme, scheduled tribes and other traditional forest dwellers act. And, it also includes last--you know, after all these are completed--it includes small and marginal farmers.

Now the share of individual assets has increased from about 18.6% into 2012 to about 20% in 2014, and it has jumped to 60--nearly 61% in 2022-23. So you can see that since 2014, there has been a massive reorientation towards these private assets under MGNREGA. Now, what is the focus of these individual assets? These are of 2 types: First, is income generating assets. And the second, is amenities based assets. Income generating assets are again, of certain types. First is called: improving agricultural productivity. These are work such as dug wells, farm ponds, water harvesting structures. Then there is the second type of asset is called: development of fallow land or wastelands, and bringing it under cultivation. Now both these type of assets--improving agricultural productivity and development of fallow land--there about 30 types of works under these.

Then there is improving livelihoods through horticulture, sericulture, plantations--so all types of plantation works. There are about 7 types of works under improving livelihoods. Then there is promotion of livestock and fisheries through creation of required infrastructure. There are about 5 types of works. So, among these four income generating assets, we have about 42 types of works.

Now, the second type of asset is the amenities based assets. Now, these are under convergence schemes. For example, the house construction--rural house construction--under the Prime Minister affordable housing scheme. So it's a convergence programme. So MGNREGA, with the Prime Minister affordable housing scheme. Then, there is individual household latrine construction under the Clean India Mission. So Clean India Mission is one programme, which is converged with MGNREGA, to build these type of assets. So there are two types of works under amenities based--so total is about 44 types of individual assets.

Now coming to the brief--a brief review of literature--now existing studies, they have mostly focused on the effects of MGNREGA wage income. Now, wage income is coming from community assets. So, studies have focused mainly on wage income--of MGNREGA wage income--on rural market conditions, poverty reduction, improvement in purchasing power.

Implementation of MGNREGA has exerted competitive pressure on private labour market. For example, when MGNREGA wages increased, it also pushed wages in the construction centre in

the per year. The areas. Then the programme led to increase in real income and household consumption expenditure. Then, you know, there are studies which have also looked at the income and consumption expenditure of vulnerable social groups.

Then there are also studies which have shown limited impact of MGNREGA on poverty reduction mainly due to high programme cost or employment rationing, or corruption. These studies are also there. Then, there are studies which reported reduced number of meals foregone in MGNREGA households, improvement in calorie and protein intake. Participant households could cope with drought shocks, protect nutritional status of children. Then there are a few studies, you know, which are focused on qualitative assessment of works carried out under MGNREGA. Assessment of works on MGNREGA household income, agricultural productivity, environmental benefits, etc.

So, one of the studies I had done when I was living in India. This was a very small scale study on these individual assets with a very small sample size across 3 regions in the country. But at the global level, what is missing is the livelihood outcomes among the poor and marginalized. What is the impact of assets on the livelihood outcomes? Most of these studies they have looked at: how wage incomes have improved, reduced poverty, or increased household consumption, etc. What they have not really looked into is how they have affected livelihood outcomes, livelihood strategies, and resilience among the--among farmers. And specifically these individual assets.

Now we come to the research gaps. Now, as we just saw that the direct employment effect and wage effects of public work programmes have received extensive attention in empirical literature. But the impact of public work programmes on livelihood outcomes via the creation of both community and individual assets have received less attention. We need to understand that both types of assets may differ considerably in terms of their magnitude and distribution of effects, and also in terms of its equity implications. Further, how both community and individual assets support livelihood resilience in the event of a disaster, has not been explored.

Equity in asset creation, sustainability and impact on farm productivity, food and nutrition, et cetera needs to be analyzed. It is also important to examine whether these individual or private asset creation has led to the reduction in participation of household members as wage workers in the programme--in the MGNREGA programme. Now, what we need to understand over here is that, unlike wage income--which has direct and short term impact on welfare--the impact of private assets, they are expected to take a long time to emerge.

Now, it has been 8 years now since there has been a reorientation towards individual assets under MGNREGA, and this period is long enough to assess their impact on livelihood outcomes. Now based on this, the objective of this research would be to develop approaches and

methods, both quantitative and qualitative for systematic and rigorous assessment of livelihood and well-being effects achieved through different types of asset creation under MGNREGA. First and foremost is to understand the mechanism of asset allocation among beneficiaries. There are so many vulnerable groups.

And, we have talked about nearly 44 types of assets. So what is this mechanism of allocation among all these people? Whether it is allocated to all of them or not--or what is the process of allocation of these assets? This is an important thing to understand. Then, to analyze the impact of select individual and community asset on rural household livelihood outcomes and examine its interactions with livelihood strategies.

To examine the equity issues in asset creation. That is, analyze how it affects the general wellbeing across the different vulnerable social groups that we spoke about. Even within social groups, there are different classes of people. Some may have land, some may not have land, so how it is influencing--how it is affecting the different asset classes within these social groups, then the research will also build a gender dimension where we will see the influence of assets on the intra-household distribution of income, intra-household decision-making process as well.

It can be hypothesized that there exists a positive relation between the individual asset creation, household investment, and consumption. It is hypothesized that individual asset beneficiary households have greater access to diverse food baskets compared to non beneficiary households. Individual asset creation has led to less reliance of participant households on the MGNREGA wage employment.

Now this is a diagram of a pathway through which MGNREGA assets impact livelihoods. Now this is a typical rural household in India. We'll have MGNREGA assets. They will be working under community assets, and may have an individual or private asset. So when they work on community assets, that household is getting wages.

If the household has got a private asset also, they have a permanent, you know, a steady stream of benefits. But households don't depend only on coming on MGNREGA assets. They have other sources of income as well. They also have benefits receiving from other social welfare schemes. So, we have a very important public distribution system in India, where, you know, beneficiary households--they get food grains at very cheap rates.

So all these sources together, they result in an increase in household incomes and savings. And when household incomes and savings, they increase, they result in increasing investments. Like, for example, better agricultural--they use better agricultural inputs, there is irrigation intensity,



they get more livestock herd, for example. All these results in higher crop yields and crop diversification. They result in diversified food basket, increased availability of food, reduced vulnerability, and increased resilience--and improve food security & nutritional situation.

Again now, what we have to understand over here is that assets created--these assets, they do not directly increase household income. They basically provide opportunities to enhance the income indirectly through other investments. Now the nature of impact of assets will be conditional on the extent of interaction with these other investments, the geographical context, and the socioeconomic characteristics of households.

Now based on this, how do we look at the livelihood outcomes? One of the ways could be to look at the sustainable livelihood framework. Where, you know, we try to understand how MGNREGA is generating and strengthening the different livelihood assets. So the different livelihood assets--they're also called capital. There are so many--there are different kinds of these--so we would like to see how MGNREGA is affecting the natural capital, the economic & financial capital, the human capital, the social capital, the physical capital.

Now, all these capital, they pass through transforming processes and structures. What are these? These are like government and private laws, then policies, the culture. And from these, emerge the different livelihood strategies. It could be agricultural and intensification, or extensification, or livelihood diversification, or migration, or other sources of income. So what do these households--who have the different types of assets--what kinds of capital do they have? What kind of transformative processes affect them? And what ultimately, strategies they kind of... what strategies they formulate, right? And these will end up in the different livelihood outcomes. So the outcomes could be poverty reduction, increasing number of working days, well being and improved capabilities of people, then adaptation to climate change, a sustainability of natural resources. So this is one framework of analyzing livelihood outcomes from MGNREGA assets.

The other could be to look at the MGNREGA assets--influence of MGNREGA assets on each of the Sustainable Development Goals. So, how it is affecting poverty, hunger, health and well-being, quality education, gender equality, clean water and sanitation, affordable and green energy, decent work, innovations, reduced inequality. So, a few sustainable development goals can be taken up, and one can see the impact of asset creation--differential asset creation--on these goals.

Coming to the methods: Now, both quantitative and qualitative approaches will be followed to collect data and information from the service. But, there are methodological challenges. The first thing is that there is lack of systematic disaggregated secondary data on assets in the public

domain. By public domain, we mean the MGNREGA website. It is a website which gives comprehensive data about anything and everything related to MGNREGA, including community and individual assets. But the problem with individual assets is that data is given groupwise. So we do not have data for dug wells, and farm ponds, and bore wells in each village. We have that data clubbed under improving agricultural productivity. Land levelling, or farm bunding work, we have it clubbed under development--development of fallow lands.

So those 44 kinds of works that we talked about, they are all clubbed under, you know, bigger sections. Whereas we would have preferred to have each, you know, village level data for each of these--that would have been easier. But that is not available. So one of the tasks would be to identify the level of discrepancy between the secondary data and the actual field observation of assets.

Now, functional assets in the study region will be enlisted from the secondary data available on the MGNREGA website--which is like the group-wise data--and the presence of assets on the ground will be actually checked out against the assets listed on the website. This is one task that can be done. I'll just show pictures from a previous fieldwork that I had done on this. So, for example, these are assets for improving agricultural productivity: we have dug well, bore well, field bunding, farm pond, development of fallow land--land levelling work under development of fallow lands--then fruit orchard (it's a plantation under livelihoods). Then there are lots of, you know, boat shelters, cattle shed, fish ponds. They come under promotion of livestock and fisheries--the other kind of works.

Now the second issue with data is heterogeneity in individual asset creation. So there are, as we said, 44 types of assets. Now, these assets, they are not randomly assigned to people. Right. The factors that affect the intervention--the factors that affect the allocation of individual assets--are likely to affect the outcome. So, for example, a person who has got land: if he gets an asset, his outcome will be different from a person who is not landed. Therefore, this non random assignment of intervention--or the asset--would be a source of selection bias. So the challenge is that, how much of the change in outcome, that we are looking at, they can be attributed to the intervention alone--different from the effect of the other factors.

How do we do that? So a strategy could be to compare the households exposed to the intervention of individual assets with households not exposed to the intervention. Which is a counterfactual situation. And we--I mean, this is going to be a cross-sectional data--and we take single differences in mean outcomes between the beneficiary and the non beneficiary household. So we do a: with asset, without asset, kind of comparison.

What are the expected outcomes? This research will provide an enhanced knowledge base on how individual assets created under public work programmes build resilience among households. The research will bring about greater understanding of ability of vulnerable social groups to cope with and recover from stress and shocks. The study results will help in the formulation of region specific policies for strengthening the asset position of vulnerable social groups. The study will evidence the role of assets under public work programme and analyze the value of their sustainability. Thereby making an important contribution towards the achievement of the sustainable development goals.

There are some risks and suggested mitigation strategies. First, is that private asset allocation is a very sensitive issue. A person, I mean, who gets the asset? It is very difficult to, you know, understand. Or it is very sensitive--because a person who maybe perhaps beneficially, you know, he has got a--he's in close proximity to a political leader. He may have got an asset, or a person, or well of household could have got two assets instead of one.

So, you know, leaving--deserving a beneficiary without support. So, people may be reluctant to answer such questions directly. So, it would be based on a lot of observation about how these assets are selected. What is the process of this selection? Then, it may be difficult to find functional assets. So the MGNREGA data--which is available in the public domain--they have got completed works. They have got an asset under completed works. Now, whether that work may be completed, but is it functional? It may be a dry dug well, or you know, dry pond. So, which is not functional--so to find functional assets, one has to move around more.

So it's difficult to find the function--that we would be interested in the functional assets, not the completed assets alone; and the third and the most important thing to understand over here is that--to keep in mind over here--is that the research may be perceived as, you know, simply comparing livelihood strategies of community versus private assets. Or, within private assets between the different types of private assets.

Yes, it is going to be a comparative study. But, it will not be promoted in a way that we are kind of judging one against the other. That is not the idea. The idea is just to see the livelihood strategies, the outcomes from the different types of assets. But not to kind of give a judgment as to which asset is better. We cannot, you know, give a statement saying, "if you see that the incomes or the livelihood outcomes of private assets are better than community assets." We can't say that, "hence private asset is better than the community asset," because community assets and private assets, both are unique, both are required. So we have to take care, while doing that. Similarly, between, I mean, within the private essence also, the comparison has to be--the comparison needs to be done carefully, because all different private assets--they are, again, very unique in nature. So one cannot compare dug well to livestock shelter.

Then, I have discussed this proposal with the National Institute of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj, which is an apex national institution for rural development in India, under the Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India. And, they have agreed to support this proposal. The University of Reading has recently concluded an MOU with the NIRDPR. The NIRDPR will provide facilitation for the study, especially for field work, survey, establishing contact with communities, government officials, and other stakeholders, etc. So, if we want to get a project on this, so there is a supporting organization.

Now, I just wanted to show you some data that is available in the public domain. Now, this is actually looking at different kind of individual assets. So there's work for improving land plantation work, infrastructure work--sorry, livestock promotion for livestock infrastructure and rural housing works. So, across the 3 trianions, 2016, 2019 and 2022.

We see the top states for work--for improving productivity of land. Then, the top states for plantation related to works, so on and so forth. So, if we were to get a project, or if we were to write a proposal, then what would be the entry point? Like, should we take one state from each of these big individual assets, and do the study there? Or should we take one state--one state which has got all of these, and do a study for that? Or you know, we cut across the country so north, south, east, west. Take one state from each of these, based on this data, and do separate studies for each of the 4 or 5 regions that we select. So that is something that we can discuss.

And I have given it to a 3 year timeline. So the first year is like developing our FGD, the survey protocols, and ethical clearance, and identifying the investigators, training field investigators--doing the initial prep work, the literature review, etc. Then the second year is entirely for the field work, the FGDs, the surveys. And the third year would be for our tabulation analysis, a large seminar or brainstorming session. Then, you know, project revisions based on that and paper writing. That's it. Thank you very much.

**Helen Hambly:**

Thank you so much, Mondira. It's so fascinating to all of us as researchers to have this wonderful opportunity, and I can see the applause coming in now to hear about how you've built this really remarkable study. And all I can say is that there must be a future seminar.

After moving through this study and sharing those experiences. But at this time, you can see everyone, the exciting opportunity here to share questions or reflections on this work in relation to your own work, your own interest, as well as past research we've done here at University of Guelph. So thank you so much, Mondira. I'd like to now open the floor for questions. And the process is, I will look for a show of hands, for anyone who has questions, and I will--it will start with questions one by one, to begin. So, please show me your hands up. Raise your hands, if

you have a question for Mondira. And welcome to Sarah Cardey, who has--I see has joined us as well. Just take a few minutes for everyone to formulate their questions.

Maybe I could start with one, Mondira, just as we're still recording, and we have this Q&A opportunity. It is about scale of your study. You explained that the--at the top of the presentation--that MGNREGA is actually supporting around 54 million households in India.

And--[unintelligible] Sorry?

Mondira Bhattacharya:

Per year--54 per year.

Helen Hambly:

54 million per year. And so, when we talk about scaling development outcomes and scaling progress--say towards improved livelihoods and sustainable development goals--this is really a remarkable case study. Can you talk about working at scale like this as a researcher and the challenges that you've encountered with that scaling dimension of your work?

Mondira Bhattacharya:

Yeah, there are challenges, but I think it is possible to do it. I am currently working with Henny on a very large scale project on plasticulture now, which is spanning 5 countries. And we have about 300 households per country. And in each of these countries, the survey areas are right across the country--not south, east, west. So, we are partnering with several organizations across these countries for this project. And so far, so good.

So, I have the experience of working with a large--on large projects. So, this can be done. Not a problem. And I've already spoken with an NIRDPR about this. I have walked with an NIRDPR before on a couple of occasions. So I think, in terms of logistics and handling, this shouldn't be a problem.

Helen Hambly:

Okay, and how did you--maybe just to follow up on that--how did you design your study to ensure that you can speak to scale for those 54 million households annually? You mentioned about the sampling strategy that you may have used. But what aspects of research design did you take into account in regards to that large scale of your work?

Mondira Bhattacharya:

See, the sampling strategy is like, I just showed you this table, you know? This is giving a snapshot of the proportion of individual assets across each of the states over the different years. So this is giving us an idea as to which are the top states where--which have got the large number of assets. So we pick up one state or two states, or whatever--it depends upon the kind of funding that we also get. Whether we want to do something very large scale across, say five, six states, with around on an average 300 households per state. Whether we want to do that, or we want to, you know, narrow down to one single state and a couple of districts in that state and do it.

It all depends upon this data which is coming in. Even within these--the data--we have similar data for district and village level. So we can actually narrow down to those and see which are the regions which have got large number of individual as well as community assets. And pick it up from there. The sampling strategy will be based on the secondary data that we are having in the public domain.

Helen Hambly:

Yeah thank you for that. So I'm just reminding people that you can either come off mute and ask a question, raise your hand, or post a question in the chat. And I see that Dr. Kabir has a question, so please go ahead Kabir.

Khondokar Kabir:

Yeah, thank you Helen. Thank you Mondira for this presentation. It's really useful. Like, it's a big project I think. And it's ran over, I think, more than 30 years right now. It's just started before--I don't know it's 1970 is what I understand?

Mondira Bhattacharya:

No, no. 2005.

Khondokar Kabir:

Okay, 2005. So it still, it's almost 15 year--15 years. So, I was wondering about your framework that you adopted in this project. So it's the IFD sustainable framework, so it's also widely used in development, water projects. So it is started, I think the proposed framework from 1991. So, did you find this framework suitable, or is, or you are looking for some other, you know, suitable framework that can also support your works? So I found some critics about this frameworks already, because this framework's will be 1991, and over the time there are many thing

changes. So how this framework actually feed your works? Or do you have any plan to, you know, integrate some other components into this frameworks?

Mondira Bhattacharya:

Yes, yes, thank you very much. Totally. It cannot be just the way it is given over there. That is a skeletal kind of framework. But we have to add many more things into that. For example, the gender dimension that I spoke about: how it is impacting household in distribution of incomes or decision making. These are not part of that framework, but that skeletal approach is there, and we add more things inside to develop.

But one is that framework. The other thing is that you just to look straight away at the sustainable development goals. So we select some seven, eight goals that kind of fit into this research--this kind of research. And we look at how it is affecting in each of these sustainable development goals. So it is quite open-ended. That is what I have come here to discuss with you. Like, which could be better to take? In my opinion, sustainable framework is great, but it is just not to be taken the way it is. Not many new things have to be incorporated in that. And the other way is to look at the--simply into the SDGs.

Khondokar Kabir:

Okay, thank you. So one maybe follow up things? I was also thinking about--because some point I was confused about your research objective. So, I will also be going to look at the process of this, you know, project. So, how we actually select the participants, how we invest, provide the support to the participants. So I will also look at the mechanisms of this, you know, projects. Or only you are going to focus on the latitude outcome? So where's the plan?

Mondira Bhattacharya:

Both, both. Because you see, what has happened so far--it's been nearly two decades since MGNREGA has been in India, and there have been scores of studies on MGNREGA. Scores of them. But all of them--rather not all, I should say most of them--they have focused on the wage effects, you know, community assets and wage effects. And wage effects on incomes, on poverty reduction--those kind of things.

Individual assets, you know a project which is looking at the effects of individual assets on all--not only on poverty or consumption--but also resilience. These livelihood, outcomes and strategies are all about resilience: what is the farmer doing to adapt to climate change? For example. So those kind of things from individual assets have not been looked into, and this project, the aim is not only to look only at individuals. So we do a counterfactual study

comparing both of them. But at the same time, as I said, there are a lot of sensitive issues in this.

The first thing that I mentioned was selection of, I said, that is a very sensitive issue. So that has to be gauged, you know, through observations. It's a very qualitative work over here. To go to visit the field, to talk to people generally, and try and understand how people are getting these assets--because once they get an asset, it is for life. It's supposed to be for a lifetime. Okay, then even once people get assets, they are supposed to be getting it free of cost, so to say. But more often than not they may be paying, you know, paying out of pocket payments for construction of that asset. So, for example, there's a dug well, the government gives x amount of money. And this guy, he puts in out of pocket payment as well. So what is the proportion of that which is going into that? So these kind of things have not been looked into at all. So it is qualitative based. It's going to be qualitative based, and these quantitative elements will come in into it as well.

Khondokar Kabir:

Can I ask one more question, Helen? Because I can't see any hands. [laughs]

Helen Hambly:

Yes, that's quite okay Kabir. Go ahead.

Khondokar Kabir:

Yeah. So now I'm thinking about, you know, as you were mentioning that you are going to look at the process as well. So, I was thinking I'm from Bangladesh. So I know one issue is very, you know, dominant in development projects. It's about governing challenges, like corruption, like good or crazy, and other things. So, do you have any plan to look at those issues as well?

Mondira Bhattacharya:

Yeah, well see, that is why I said, these are very sensitive issues. So we can't, you know, ask very direct questions about these. But as researchers, I think we have been trained to, you know, gauge things to understand by talking indirectly with people. Lots of focus group in depth, key informant interviews. That kind of exchange is going to give us the answers. Another thing which I wanted to point out about the sensitivity. I did mention earlier as well.

Now, when people have disposable income--say, for example, these private assets--if the income from private assets is higher compared to say, community assets. When people have disposable income, they tend to buy food grains from the market instead of the PDS. So if we



make a statement at the end, saying that, "okay, you know, individual assets is resulting in higher income, and therefore PDS is not really required," that would be a very, very wrong thing to say because there are millions who are dependent on the PDS. So the inferences that we are getting out of it--out of these--have to be analyzed with a lot of sensitivity. This PDS thing, and again, you know, when people get private assets, they may not go in for community wage programme.

Okay, if they get private assets, they are getting relatively better off income from here, or they are getting more resilience. So they won't go in for community wage assets. So if you make a statement at the end that, you know, "private asset is better than community asset, and the people are moving out of community wage employment," that statement would be very insensitive to make because community assets are very much needed. So, although it is a comparative--it has to be a comparative study, because you will really not be able to understand the magnitude of--effect of private asset, unless you compare it with a counterfactual. But at the same time, the influences that we derive out of it have to be analyzed very carefully.

Khondokar Kabir:

Thank you so much.

Helen Hambly:

Thank you so much, Kabir. Thank you, Mondira. There's a question in chat posted by Henny. It's actually back to everyone who is in the call: "Is there any particularly interesting lens or frameworks that others might see as useful or complimentary to this study?" And then the other point was that, "this is not an evolution of the scheme per se, but understanding the processes and implications of the findings. That's what makes this study very novel." So Henny, have I captured those? Well, you've come on camera...

Henny Osbahr:

You've captured them perfectly. But I typed incorrectly. It should have said "evaluation." Yes, sorry, I think it was just a point that I wanted to mention that it's easy to sort of look at these big high scale programmes and big high scale national level analysis and sort of assume that it's just going to be able to reveal like, whether the scheme is working. But I think there's something more novel there, and that is sort of really looking at, like Dr. Kabir was just saying, those processes. And starting to reveal how the scheme has been working or not working for certain types of people. Particularly with this sort of shift to the private assets, and whether that really does build opportunity as a result. So I think there's some really interesting implications there. That was, I think--yeah, that was the point that I was trying to make. I don't know whether Mondira, you wanted to speak to that further?

Mondira Bhattacharya:

No, that's it. I think you have summarized it quite well.

Helen Hambly:

Yeah, thank you, Henny. Thanks very much. Great points.

On the point about additional lens or frameworks in which to look at this particular study. I think, as Kabir was saying, the livelihoods framework and stones work from the nineties in particular, the impact that had on deficit. If it is certainly relevant to the UK, as a Reading University researcher. I mean, you're steeped well in that tradition--within that deficit work. But I think it's good to look at the adaptations of sustainable livelihoods.

Including through a gender lens, but also through other adaptations that questioned the extent to which the development of particularly physical capital and sort of technology push, as well as technology demand models within the livelihoods literature. Really, have led to so-called sustainable development. And so in this regard, I think as a researcher, I'd encourage you to look at the socio-technical systems literature and other systems frameworks that have challenged, say, an assets or capital building type of approach used in the livelihoods frameworks. To question about whether or not simply adding assets--especially hard assets, physical assets and technologies being pushed or responding to technology demand--has really created a sustainability over longer terms. So that's questioning those physical assets.

So, it's a nice query because you're looking at both the community assets and the individual assets--and especially on the individual assets, things like fish ponds. These are technologies. Ultimately, these aren't just assets. These are technologies. These are technological change processes. So it would be fascinating to see, for instance--whether or not women, for instance--had access to technological technologies and physical assets that men didn't or vice versa: men accessing individual assets or technologies that women didn't have access to. So they're certainly in the SDS world, I think some very interesting elements. And then, just finally, on that, I think it's good that you track to the SDGs.

Because ultimately, India, like Canada, like the UK, we are responsible for, you know, managing and responding to the SDGs. We've signed on to this, and I think more outcome mapping to SDGs just makes good policy sets. So from a policy perspective, this study would contribute well with that outcome mapping to the SDGs. I see Ataharul's hand up. So please, Ata, go ahead.

### Ataharul Chowdhury:

Mondira, it was a great presentation. It's nice to see, like, more detail about, you know... So, in relation to the discussion about the framework, I think this framework is definitely [audio falters] but, my understanding is that a sustainable livelihood approach--I think there are a couple of limitations that will be pointed out. But one limitation is definitely looking at more macro scale, right?

So it sounds to me you're looking at more cross state kind of data--which sounded a little bit regional, you know, development in India. So I'm just looking at, you know, maybe you could think about, like, looking at more rural sociology--kind of some framework from rural sociology, for example. Their concept of agency actually into the approach, right? And like power. I think it's called "Force Field Methodology" that you can use, like looking at how different, you know, power dynamics play in terms of actually utilizing individual asset, you know? For the livelihood outcome.

This is just, you know, something came to my mind. I mean, based on my education in Wageningen. And because I just keep recalling, you know, some of the discussion regarding a sustainable livelihood approach. So this is just a suggestion. Maybe you can also look at more quality in depth to that study. Selecting some of the cases which is successful, you know. Some might not be, you know, successful, you know. And which will help to interpret your data in like more quantity. Yeah, I just, you know, want to share some of my suggestions. [laughs]

### Mondira Bhattacharya:

Thank you, thank you for the suggestions. That was the idea of this presentation--for getting to understand new approaches. Thanks, Helen, for the socio-technical approach that you spoke about, and Ataharul, for the rural sociology framework. I'll definitely look up these.

### Helen Hambly:

Okay, thanks, Ata and Mondira. This is one of the nice opportunities where--when we have a webinar like this--that we recognize, like, we don't always have the answers, right? This is the nice thing about research design is that we have opportunities explored, and I certainly would not lose the livelihoods framework. I think it's certainly an important framework to test again and again--and to look at its adaptation with some of these new elements. I think it's an exciting opportunity. And I can see some of our students are here in the room as well. And I can say that, in here at Guelph, livelihoods frameworks, and sustainable livelihood framework--it's still very popular among our graduate students as a conceptual framework. There's certainly some advantages, and in the way that the various capitals and assets can be examined. So it still has a tremendous benefit from that.

Yeah, anyone else want to come in? Questions? Comments? Reflections on the study? If not, I have another question for you, Mondira.

Mondira Bhattacharya:

Please.

Helen Hambly:

You spoke about the effect of the individual assets--say, for instance--and focusing on the individual assets effects as opposed to previous work that looked at the community assets and inventorying them, and the wage effects, etc. And, one of the things that I would think about as a--and I'm going to put my hat on as a gender analyst--is to ask the question about property rights. What type of contractual or contract is involved in the MGNREGA's individual assets? Who gets title to these assets? Is there a legal document? And is there a paralegal or legal capacity building, so that individuals understand their rights to the assets, their ownership?

And you mentioned that this could also be important because some of these individual assets might have to be maintained, or improved, or upgraded by the individuals over time. So what is the legal dimension? And why is that an important aspect of, perhaps, some of the capacity building that might be done in programmes like this? Maybe it doesn't exist yet. I don't know.

Mondira Bhattacharya:

Yeah. So these are, you know, questions that have to be looked into, frankly speaking. Legal rights to land--for example, in India--legal rights to land for women is very low. Especially in the northern part of India. Southern part, still relatively, you know, women land rights are slightly better off compared to the North. So, when I had done a smallish kind of exercise on individual assets a couple of years back, it was very clear that in Southern India, women headed households--they were getting some assets.

But typically, they have very small portion of land. But in Northern India, we didn't come across any women headed household with land. Nothing. So, now the next thing is that even if women headed households, whether at all, they are getting any asset--irrespective of whether they have land or not. So Southern India, for example, they got some women headed households who got livestock shelters in their homestead lands.

So we didn't find any in the northern part where we had done our survey. So, this is definitely an issue that needs to be studied in depth to understand what is actually coming up. We did a very small thing, but a large kind of survey will give us a clearer picture. But once these assets

are given to people, then it is documented. Then it's a legal document that they have--that this asset is theirs. So that is there for sure.

### Helen Hambly:

That's very interesting, because that also opens up a potential piece of data. So, legal agreements would have a lot of the segregated data that you could potentially use for analysis, and maybe a legal, or, you know, property ownership specialists in the team is also good to--I'm not one of those--but would be interesting. I have a question in from Sharada. She's thanking you for your presentation, Mondira, and she's asking you a question: "Could you please share a bit about the caste dimensions of the impact of MGNREGA? And how have the programmes affected the livelihoods of the most marginalized positions--or populations, rather--including the position of Dalits, for example? Just, you know, this may be more anecdotal rather than empirical; but if you could just reflect on the caste dimensions, and then these particularly marginalized groups, like the Dalit. How--what these programmes have meant for them?"

### Mondira Bhattacharya:

Yeah. So, in the beginning I had mentioned that there are a couple of studies which have looked at the caste dimensions of how marginalized sections of the population have benefitted from the MGNREGA programme. But once again, it was limited to the community assets and the wage effects from community assets. Which was showed up kind of positive effect.

But these individual assets, they are meant only for the vulnerable sections. So we are here to see how it is improving their livelihoods. But at the same time, the small survey that I had done earlier--it showed that, you know, even within the vulnerable groups, there are different asset classes. So people who have better, you know, links with the political leader--the proximity to a political leader. They may be getting an asset. Or a relatively better off person--even within these vulnerable groups, you know--they may be getting two asset instead of one.

Then, there are marginal and small farmers which do not come under any caste category as such. But they are supposed to get the asset when all the other different groups have been given. It's only whatever is left behind goes to them, the marginal and small farmers. But what is also seeing that it is, these people who do not come under any caste group as such, they get the asset. Whereas the low caste person may not be getting it. So there are such kind of things that are there. But, as I said, you know, the survey--a large scale survey will give a clearer picture.

### Helen Hambly:

Yeah, very true. Very important impact of that empirical work. Thank you, Sharada, for the question, and Mondira. Anyone else? Any other questions? Comments?

Some of the students in this call are designing their own studies. This might seem a little bit overwhelming. But, Mondira, you've provided such a clear and insightful approach to your research design, I thought. I'd like to see very much the schema--the conceptual framework visualized in your schema--and I think that that particular flow diagram, it was a wonderful example for student researchers to look at as an example. And also, just the setting of your hypothesis. I think the hypothesis was very clear.

And we often have some discussion, like qualitative researchers don't use the term hypothesis. But, in fact, we do. We can talk about hypothesis as qualitative researchers. Any reflections on research design, Mondira, that you might share with any of us today?

Mondira Bhattacharya:

Ah. Well, the thing is that since this work has--this is a research gap that we are talking about. So, instead of doing a very large scale research, we begin small. So we like, do it in a small area with just a few households, say a hundred households. And again, picking it up from this tabulation which we have done. This goes to the village--at the village level. So if you come something very close to the National Institute of Rural Development in Andhra Pradesh. And we begin the work over there. With small number of households. And then, based on that--based on the results--we scale it up.

Helen Hambly:

It's exciting. So I didn't make a last call for any other questions, and I don't see any hands up for any questions. Any other reflections, Mondira, that you'd like to share before we wrap up?

Mondira Bhattacharya:

Well, I mean, if anyone is interested in this, and if there is a potential for collaboration, I will be very happy to be part of it. To develop this project further, to be submitted for joint fund or something--that would be great. I mean, I'm absolutely open to suggestions for such kind of proposal drafting.

Helen Hambly:

That's great, and I think this is where CIRCLE can also receive that message. And also put that out as a call for collaborators here in Canada, who may be interested--including Masters of Science students, Masters of Art students, or PhD students potentially. And I may have mentioned more in terms of preparing for this seminar that we have had a couple of students work with Shastri funding in the past in Indian--on a social assistance type projects.

And it would be exciting if maybe we could also approach Shastri for some collaboration, Mondira. And these are funding organizations here in Canada that many of our Indian-based scholars are familiar with. And there's a huge potential to do sub studies connected to your larger study.

As a post doctoral researcher, all I can say is congratulations on your work. I'm sure it's going to be interesting and successful way ahead. We would love to have you back again at some point, and I think without further ado... I'm just going to thank you very much for a wonderful presentation today--and thank you everyone for joining us in your questions. So lots of applause. Yes. Everyone's coming on camera here, if they like to just say hello and thank you.

Sultana Yeasmin:

Thank you.

Mondira Bhattacharya:

Thank you. Thank you.

[End of transcript]