

A happy tale from two states



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Back in 2004, when the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) first made headlines, many including some of the Act's most ardent supporters predicted that corruption and poor delivery structures would together undo any benefit that the scheme could bring to the poor. Two and a half years on, early analyses of NREGA suggest things are not quite as bad as most had predicted. In some parts of India, almost 95 per cent wages have reached the poor. Of course there is corruption and wasted expenditure — Orissa is now infamous for the bungling of crores of NREGA funds. But, the Act has also been a catalyst for some state governments to develop innovative systems for ensuring transparency and accountability in its implementation.

Andhra Pradesh is one such state. In 2006, the Andhra government embarked on a process to institutionalise social audits for all NREGA programmes in the state. To do this, the government collaborated with civil society organisations for building up a 35-member team that facilitates and manages the audit process. This team is responsible for identifying and training educated village youth who conduct the actual audit. Andhra now holds an average of 64 audits a month. Details of government expenditure on NREGA are verified, assets developed are assessed and information on the NREGA is shared with village communities. The audits culminate with a public meeting — attendance varies between 500-1,000 people — where audit findings are shared in the presence of local government officials and politicians.