

# MGNREGA Employment in Telangana during the Pandemic

A Comparison between the employment generated in April, May 2020-21 and 2021-22.

COVID-19 outbreak has affected the health of lakhs of people in the country. The virus is causing an unprecedented public health crisis, affecting all aspects of public life. The immense shock to the economy caused by the Covid-19, was captured by Azim Premji University's "State of Working India-2021", according to which 10 crore people have lost their jobs over the April-May lockdown last year. While the average income of a family of 4 has dropped to ₹ 4,979 October 2020, from ₹ 5,989 in Jan, 2020. The report also shows that during this time rural poverty has increased by 15%. Even today the economy is reeling from the impact of the lockdown last year. Telangana is no exception to this phenomenon.

Last year, financial schemes issued by the central and state governments during the lockdown softened the economic impact of Covid-19 on the rural citizens to some extent. This year, no such schemes have been issued, making Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGA), the only fall-back option for the poorest and most vulnerable rural citizens.

Telangana has about 1.2 crores workers from 54.2 lakh families registered under MGNREGA and last year 95% of all the employment has been generated by scheduled castes, tribes, backward castes and other minorities. Many workers from Telangana usually migrate to the neighbouring states of Maharashtra & Karnataka for work. The unprecedented events like the pandemic, sudden lockdown & curfews had triggered off a process of reverse migration in March and April last year and a similar process has been observed in the current year as well. This additional workforce also is largely dependent on MGNREGA for work. In this context we analysed MGNREGA employment trends in Telangana during April and May months and the findings are as follows:

The number of persondays generated in Telangana during the lockdown and right after it, in the previous year i.e. during Covid-19 first wave. Contrary to that rise, this year persondays generated has fallen from 8.27 crores to 5.85 crores only.

The data shows that in April this year (2021-22) the employment generated is higher than that in April of the previous year (2020-21). Around 17 lakh households received employment through MGNREGA during April, 2021-22, whereas in April, 2020-21, when 15 lakh households were employed. Similarly 3.2 crores of persondays were generated in April, 2021-22, compared to 2.2 crores in April, 2020-21.

The month of May shows a different picture. Contrary to the increase in persondays employed in the growth rate of April, there has been a drastic drop in employment provided in the month of May. Only 2.6 crore persondays have been generated in May 2021-22, which is way less than the 6 crore persondays generated in May, 2020-21. Similarly the number of households employed also have reduced from 10 lakhs in May, 2020-21 to 4.3 lakhs in May, 2021-22.

## Persondays Generated in Telangana for the First Two Months of FY 2020-21 & 2021-22

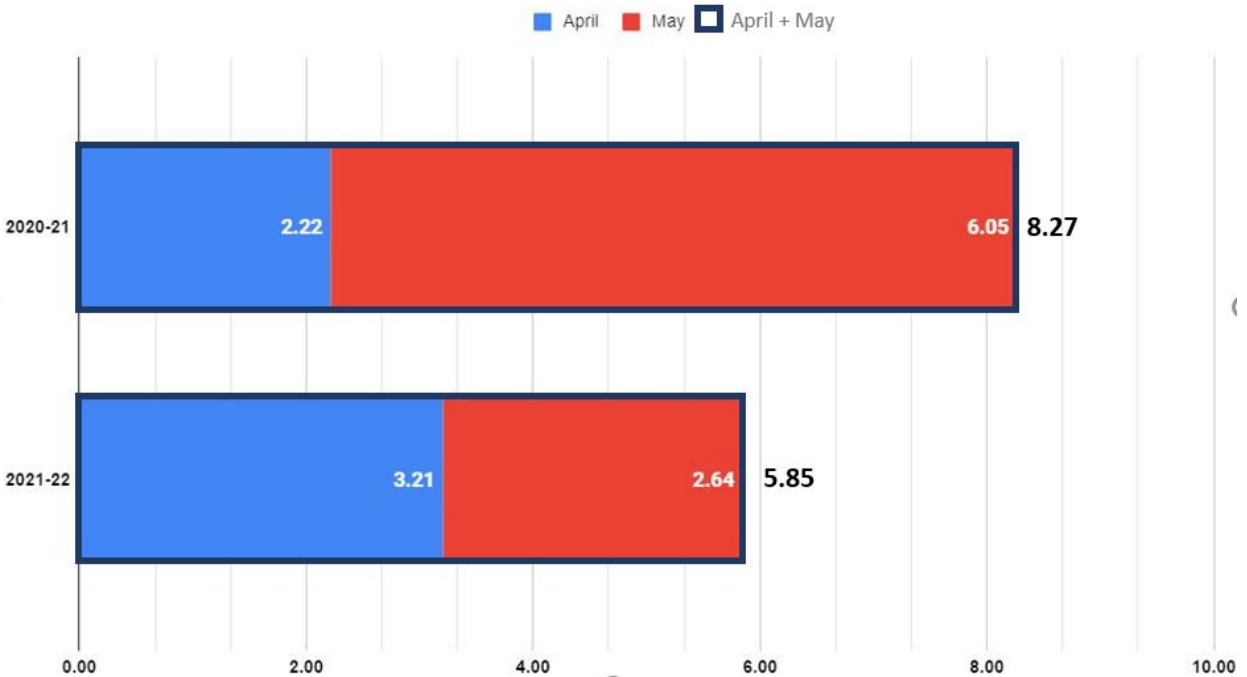


Figure 1: Persondays generated under MGNREGA in Telangana in the first two months of 2020-21 and 2021-22

A similar situation is observed in the majority of the gram panchayats. Of 12,779 gram panchayats, 8400 have seen a growth in the persondays generated in April this year compared to the same period in the previous year. But in the month of May, 2021-22, more than 85% of Grama Panchayats(G.P) (11,000) have seen a decrease in the persondays generated, compared to that of May, 2020-21.

In the wake of the second wave of Covid-19, the office of the Commissioner of Rural Development, Government of Telangana, issued a Government Circular No. 189382 on 17-04-2021, with guidelines for local authorities to implement MGNREGA. While it mentioned several vital precautions and types of works to be taken up during these difficult times, there was no word about provision for free face masks and hand sanitisers at workplaces that are essential for the workers to stay safe during work.

There were reports that in several gram panchayats, works were unilaterally halted by the local governments. As the government laid off the field assistants in 2019, there are no field functionaries to persuade and counsel the workers to take up work during the pandemic. Field Assistants are crucial in MGNREGA implementation, especially in these difficult times to boost employment.

The loss in income is pushing people closer to food insecurity and hunger. Several measures should be taken on priority to improve MGNREGA works

- Unemployment allowance must be paid to each work as per Section 7(1) of MGNREG Act, in all the G.Ps, where works are stopped by the local governments.

- Guarantee payment of full wages to workers that may contract COVID-19 during MGNREGA work.
- New jobcards should be issued while prioritising migrant workers returning home.
- Delivery of wages through banking correspondents should be immediately facilitated at worksites, as the closure of banks is preventing MGNREGA workers from accessing their hard earned cash.
- Reinstate all the field assistants unconditionally.
- Set up a special helpline to record demand for work via phone and issue guidelines to record demand for work at village/panchayat level.

Fair implementation of MGNREGA has never been this important before. The government's steps towards this will enhance livelihood and food security for millions of households in the state, and prevent a disaster.