

MUSTER ROLL WATCH

Guidelines for Verification of NREGA Muster Rolls

(Simplified, February 2007)

How to verify muster rolls, prevent fudging, and protect people's right to work under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act.

PREVIEW*

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) came into force on 2 February 2006 in 200 districts. In spite of its limitations, this Act is a ray of hope for working people in rural areas. However, the survival and success of the Act depends on preventing the spread of corruption in NREGA.

Many safeguards for transparency and accountability are built into the Act, and also in the NREGA Guidelines. For instance, the NREGA Guidelines require muster rolls to be available at the worksites, displayed at the Panchayat Bhawan, and submitted to the Gram Sabhas. This can go a long way in preventing corruption in wage payments, since it makes the muster rolls available for public scrutiny and social audit. However, public vigilance is required to ensure that these and other transparency provisions are implemented.

Fudging of muster rolls is the principal means through which funds have been embezzled from public works programmes for many years. This practice must not be allowed to persist under NREGA. One way to prevent it is to conduct public verifications of muster rolls. This booklet has been written to facilitate this process.

A “muster roll” is essentially a labour attendance register, pertaining to a particular worksite and a particular period (e.g. two weeks). It is also used as a receipt, to claim funds from the Programme Officer for the payment of wages. Typically, the completion of a particular work would involve several muster rolls. For instance, in Rajasthan each muster roll covers a period of two weeks (called a “pakhwada”) and has space for up to 20 labourers. Thus, if a worksite has 50 labourers and lasts six weeks, 9 muster rolls would be involved.

This booklet explains how to verify muster rolls for *one completed worksite*, i.e. a worksite where work has come to an end and wages have been paid. This involves four steps: (1) obtaining the muster rolls; (2) “consolidating” the different muster rolls to find out how many days each labourer has worked at this worksite, and how much he/she has been paid; (3) checking this information with the labourers themselves, and (4) checking the information from their job cards, if available.

In the Appendix, we present a sample of *Verification Sheets*. Careful design of the Verification Sheet is essential for the success of the exercise. If these Verification Sheets do not suit your purpose, or if they require modification in the light of special administrative arrangements in your area, you should revise them carefully. And in any case, the Verifications Sheets should be field-tested before the actual verification exercise. Good luck!

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Guidelines for Verification of NREGA Muster Rolls

Below are some simple guidelines on how to verify muster rolls, using the appended “Verification Sheets”. Don’t worry if some of these guidelines sound a little complicated. Actually, this is a simple exercise, but it has to be done carefully. “Learning by doing” is the best approach. After you conduct a test verification exercise, the issues will be much clearer.

A. Obtaining the Muster Rolls

1. The first step is to obtain all the muster rolls (hereafter MRs) for the selected worksite. Both the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act and the NREGA Guidelines clearly state that MRs should be available for public scrutiny, and that anyone is entitled to request a copy of the MRs.¹ Further, fees charged for this purpose should not exceed photocopying costs. In short, it is your right to ask for a copy of the MRs. Any officer who denies this information to you is liable to be fined under the Right to Information Act.
2. In spite of this, you may find it difficult to obtain the MRs. If you face resistance, don’t give up: this may indicate that the MRs have been fudged. If necessary, make a formal application under the Right to Information Act.
3. In principle, you should be able to obtain the MRs from the relevant “implementing agency” (e.g. the Gram Panchayat, or the PWD, or the Irrigation Department). If that fails, you can approach the Programme Officer at the Block level, or, if necessary, the District Programme Coordinator at the District level.
4. It is also useful to hunt for the “kaccha muster rolls”, i.e. the notebooks or registers that mates or supervisors often use at the worksite (instead of the official, “pacca muster rolls”) to record the labourers’ attendance. These kaccha MRs are illegal, since the Act and Guidelines clearly state that pacca muster rolls should be available at the worksite. But in practice, kaccha MRs continue to be used in many places. If kaccha MRs have been used at the worksite you are investigating, you should try to get hold of them, because they are likely to contain very useful information. Indeed, the attendance details in the kaccha muster rolls are often accurate, while the pacca MRs are fudged. (Do you

¹ The term “NREGA Guidelines” refers to the Operational Guidelines issued by the Ministry of Rural Development in January 2006. They are available (in English and Hindi) at www.nrega.nic.in.

understand this “trick”? If not, make sure to hold a group discussion about it before you start the verification exercise.)

B. Consolidating the Muster Rolls

Note: No “field work” is necessary to consolidate the MRs. All you have to do is to fill the relevant columns of the Verification Sheet (see Annexure 1) using the MRs themselves.

5. Once you have obtained the MRs, arrange them “pakhwada-wise”, from the first to the last pakhwada in chronological order.² For instance, if each pakhwada lasts a fortnight, and if the work lasted for two months, you will be dealing with four pakhwadās. Within each pakhwada, keep the MRs in the original order, so that serial numbers follow in sequence across MRs.
6. Fill the general details at the top of the Verification Sheet (name of the worksite, village, Panchayat, etc.).
7. In the first panel (Columns 1a-1e), write the names and related details (village, sex, etc.) of *all* the labourers who have been employed at the worksite, *as they appear in the MRs*. For this purpose, start by listing all the labourers who worked in the first pakhwada, in the same order as in the MRs; then look at the second pakhwada and continue the list by adding any extra names (i.e. names of labourers who worked in the second pakhwada but not the first), again in the same order as in the MRs; and so on with the other pakhwadās.
8. If any details in this panel (e.g. Job Card number) are not available in the MRs, leave that column blank.
9. Go back to the MRs for the first pakhwada and fill the “First Pakhwada” panel (Cols 2a-2c): “muster roll number”, “days of work” and “wages paid”, for each labourer who worked in that pakhwada. Note that “wages paid” refers to *total* wages (for that pakhwada), *not* daily wages. If daily wages are given in the MR, and not total wages, you can easily calculate total wages by multiplying “daily wages” by “days of work”. Don’t forget to write the MR number in Col 2a: this will help you during the verification exercise, and may also be useful later on if you submit a formal complaint against fraud.

² *Pakhwada* literally means a “fortnight”, and is the reference period for a particular muster roll. In many states, the pakhwada lasts two weeks, but in other states it may be one week, or ten days, or whatever. Make sure that you are clear about the local practice in this respect before you start.

10. Do the same with the second pakhwada, third pakhwada, etc. until you have gone through all the MRs for this worksite. (If there are more than five pakhwadass, you will need to use an extra copy of Page 1 of the Verification Sheet as a continuation sheet.)
11. Turn to Page 2 of the Verification Sheet. Copy the “worker’s personal details” from Page 1. Then fill the “Total according to MRs” panel (Cols 4a and 4b) by “adding up” across muster rolls, using the information on Page 1.
12. Make sure that you have covered all the relevant entries in all the MRs, and double-check your calculations to avoid any mistake.

C. Labourers’ Statement

13. After the MRs have been consolidated, the actual verification starts. The main task is to find out from the labourers themselves how many days they have worked on this worksite, and how much they have been paid, and then compare this with the information on the MRs. This requires meeting *each* labourer on the list and recording his or her statement. It *also* involves some “cross-checking” between labourers, to ensure that the information is reliable. Make sure that you are carrying all the MRs with you throughout this exercise.
14. You can start the verification in various ways: by visiting the worksite, by going to the homes of the labourers, or by conducting a public meeting – whatever turns out to be most reliable and effective from your experience in the field. Here again, “learning by doing” is the best approach.
15. Once you have traced a labourer whose name is on the MR, make sure to explain clearly which worksite you are referring to. This is vital to ensure that you are verifying information for the correct worksite, and not for some other worksite.
16. Fill the “Labourers’ Statement” columns in the Verification Sheet (Cols 5a to 5d). Whenever necessary, probe and cross-check carefully before recording the statement. The “Labourers’ Statement Worksheet” (Annexure 2) is available for this purpose. You may find it convenient to fill this worksheet before transferring the relevant entries to the Labourers’ Statement on the Verification Sheet. But if you are able to fill Cols 5a to 5d of the Verification Sheet “directly”, without the help of the Worksheet, that’s fine.

17. Compare the Labourers' Statement with the corresponding information in the MR (i.e. compare Cols 4a and 4b with 5a and 5b), and fill Col 5c using the codes provided at the bottom of Page 2. There are three major discrepancies to watch:

a. Fake name: The person listed in the MR did not work at the relevant worksite during the relevant period at all. In such cases, try to note in the "Remarks" column at the end any further details that may help to interpret this case (e.g. "fictitious name", "brother of the sarpanch", "lives in Dubai", "in hospital").

b. Days of work: The days of work recorded in the MR may be inflated. For instance, the MR may say that a labourer worked for 10 days while he/she actually worked for 5 days only.

c. Wages paid: Labourers may have signed, knowingly or unknowingly, for a larger amount than they actually received.

18. If there is any discrepancy between the Labourers' Statement and the MRs, look for any evidence of "tampering" of the MRs. For instance, ask the labourer whether he/she signed the MR or used his/her thumbprint. If the labourer signs, but the MR has a thumbprint, that would be evidence of tampering. Similarly, if you find that the same thumbprint appears for several labourers on the MR, that would also indicate tampering. Note any evidence of tampering in the "Remarks" column at the end.

19. If the Labourers' Statement is missing for any reason, note the reason in Col 5d, using the relevant Codes. (If the statement is *not* missing, enter code 6 - "not applicable".)

D. Job Card Details

20. Record the corresponding details from the labourer's Job Card (if available) in the "Job Card Information" columns (Cols 6a-6e). Make sure that you record information *for the relevant worksite only*. Compare with the MR (i.e. compare Cols 6c and 6d with 4a and 4b) and fill Col 6e using the relevant codes.

E. Remarks

21. Use the last column for any further remarks, esp. information that may help to interpret the inconsistencies. For instance, if you are unable to trace one of the labourers, and

his/her neighbours tells you that this person has been living in Dubai for the last 14 years (as we found in Valota Panchayat in Dungarpur), note this in the last column.

22. At the bottom of the Verification Sheet, recapitulate carefully any evidence you may have found of fudging or tampering of the Muster Rolls. If you run out of space, continue at the back of Page 2.

Har Haath Ko Kaam Do

Kaam Ka Pura Daam Do

Appendix

Annexure 1: Verification Sheet for Completed Worksite (two pages)

Annexure 2: Labourers' Statement Worksheet (one page)

Note: The Verification Sheets printed below are "reduced" to size A4. However, much larger sheets (with adequate space to record the relevant details) are required for effective work. You can produce larger Verification Sheets either by retyping them on larger pages, or by downloading and printing the A3 version of these sample sheets, which is available (in English and Hindi) at www.righttofoodindia.org.

