

Social Audits — Tracking Expenditures with Communities: The Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) in India¹

Against the backdrop of rural Rajasthan, the largest state in India, an organization called the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) has, in a little over a decade, developed into one of India's most potent social justice movements. The organization is a union of peasants and workers and has successfully demonstrated the power of information as an effective tool to enable citizens to participate in governance. The MKSS uses innovative forums called public hearings — also called social audits — to facilitate structured and focused discussions among residents on government expenditures of public development funds in their communities.

MKSS-sponsored public hearings have had a significant impact in limiting corruption in public works projects in rural Rajasthan. The success of MKSS social audits has even influenced the state government of Rajasthan to introduce aspects of social auditing within local governance processes. The state government now requires that a social audit be held annually within each village; as part of this process, all village residents must be given an opportunity to vote on a resolution verifying that the projects in their village have been successfully completed. While this process has its limitations, it represents a radical change in the institutional space provided to citizens to *audit* public funds.

Typically, a social audit conducted by the MKSS includes five stages:

Gathering Information: MKSS members start by gathering all documents that are maintained by the public agencies on development projects. These include some relatively easy-to-understand documents, such as cash books, muster (pay) rolls, and expenditure voucher files with bills showing materials purchased for project work. MKSS also gathers records that a layperson seldom encounters, such as project engineer measurement books and utilization certificates providing complete details of the project's expenditure. In the initial public hearings, the MKSS depended upon sympathetic officials who provided them with the information they sought. Later, after a right to information law was enacted in the state of Rajasthan, the MKSS uses the provisions of the law to request documents.

Collating Information: Initially, MKSS members faced a major challenge in deciphering and categorizing the details contained in the records that they had obtained. Over a period of time, they became familiar with the management systems in public agencies and the project documents maintained by them. MKSS members developed a simple methodology for collating the information into matrices that summarized the different kinds of information obtained from the project records. Thus, one matrix was prepared from pay rolls that detailed for each worker the days in a year that he/she had received employment in a particular project site. This matrix was very useful as it identified cases of fraud in which a single worker was shown to have been working on two different project sites on the same day. Similarly, a matrix summarizing and re-

¹ Ramkumar, Vivek. "Case Study, Part 2: The Right to Know Movement in India." Making Change Happen. Just Associates. 2004. Retrieved 19 March 2005. <<http://www.justassociates.org/MKSS%20Case%20Study%20Section%20II.pdf>>. This section has been adapted from the above case study.

classifying materials used in a project was developed. Volume measurements presented in official records as ‘metric tons’ were translated into camel or bullock cartloads.²

Distributing Information: MKSS members and other volunteers involved in the social audit make several copies of the project documents and the matrices developed. Teams of volunteers then go from house to house in the villages in which public hearings are to be held and distribute and explain this information to the residents. Residents who have worked on project sites become valuable resources for verifying the accuracy of project documents. The copies of the pay rolls, for example, become sources of enormous excitement as residents identify names of dead or fictitious people in the rolls. This verification process also helps to identify workers who have received smaller sums than those shown to have been given to them in the pay rolls. Bills drawn in the name of camel cart owners are shown to be false when the person in question verifies that he has never owned a camel all his life.

This information distribution process can take from one week to a couple of months and provides an opportunity for MKSS members to build momentum within communities prior to the day on which the actual public hearing is held. Using creative media like songs, street plays, banners and posters, MKSS members and community volunteers encourage residents to scrutinize project information and to attend the forthcoming public hearing.

The public hearing: Public hearings sponsored by MKSS have a very festive atmosphere around them. There is a lot of anticipation among residents of the village in which the public hearing is being held about the possible outcomes of the day’s events. The hearing is normally held on an open field in the village. Special efforts are made to ensure that the location of the public hearing is in a place that is conveniently accessible by all residents, such as an open field in the village. The hearings are attended by public agency officials, local elected representatives, the media, and residents of the area. A panel comprised of eminent citizens of the area is set up to administer proceedings.

MKSS members control the flow of discussions so as to enable residents and public officials to systematically provide their opinions on the project/program under discussion. Often, discussions in the public hearings bring out explosive findings in the conduct of public projects. Instances of corruption and inefficiency in the utilization of public funds, and poor planning within public agencies may be uncovered in the testimonies provided by speaker after speaker. Workers and residents may identify false information contained in public records. Discussions become especially animated when the public officials try to defend the projects that they supervised and village residents point out lies in their statements. The process is so effective that in some public hearings, family members of corrupt officials have testified against them. In some instances, public officials have even confessed their wrongdoings. In front of an audience of 200-300 village residents, officials have handed over cash – the proceeds obtained through the corrupt use of project funds – to the panel adjudicating the public hearing.

² As the villagers are more familiar with measurements expressed in terms of bullock cartloads they are able to comment on whether the material had been delivered to the project site or not. Many instances of corruption in billing by over-charging materials supplied to project sites are disclosed by villagers and workers during the public hearing.

Follow-up to the public hearing: A formal report is prepared by the MKSS following each public hearing. Copies of this report are sent to senior state government officials, the media, and other groups engaged in anti-corruption campaigns. The report contains details of the proceedings and the findings resulting from the public hearing. These findings include recommendations to the state government regarding action that should be taken against errant officials, as well as changes that should be implemented in official programs and policies to make them more effective and more responsive to public demands.

Realizing that its dependence on the intervention of sympathetic officials to obtain records remained a significant barrier to broader engagement in public discussions of official programs, the MKSS launched a massive state-wide campaign in 1995 demanding a law on right to information for all citizens. The campaign achieved success when in 2000 the state government of Rajasthan passed a right to information law. Spurred by its success, the campaign was replicated in other Indian states too and led to the formation of the National Campaign for People's Right to Information (NCPRI). The NCPRI demand for a national law on right to information is currently being considered by the Indian Parliament.