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# A National Urban Employment Guarantee Act (NUEGA)

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**Abstract**

*In order to tackle problems of job creation, skill-employment mismatch and food security in urban areas, an act called the National Urban Employment Guarantee Act (NUEGA) is proposed along the lines of MGNREGA. The act promises to convert unused and fallow government and private land to bring it under 'precision agriculture' which will employ various strategies like aquaponics, fertigation and scientific agricultural water management practices with a direct link to urban markets due to the lands being embedded into the metropolis areas. The employment will guarantee 150 days of work in urban agriculture to people who are registered as low-skill unemployed workers for 6 months or more on the NUEGA web portal or centres. All lands categorised as cultivable waste, urban fallow and lands under some private occupation but lying unused for 20 years or more shall be brought under NUEGA cultivation with proper compensation. One component of the agricultural produce shall be sold at MSP or higher in urban markets and the profits used to purchase farm inputs and pay NUEGA compensation at minimum wages. Alongside this, a separate component of skill training in mechanical operations of modern farm equipment and micro irrigation can be taken up to ensure upskilling of the workers so that they don't permanently rely on the NUEGA for employment.*

*Another component of the produce shall be kept aside for National Food Security Act-based supply for the urban poor. The produce shall thus also help ensure food security for the urban areas and job security for the urban poor. It will also help reduce land use wastage and to better manage the urban landscape. Similar cases from India and other countries shall be studied to examine the viability and use of this scheme. It also looks to provide choices for migrant workers and increase turnover rates to lift multiple people out of poverty over time. An attachment of Urban Agriculture and food security to the aim of job creation means that the results produced by the scheme aren't simply 'economic' in nature but 'embedded' (Gemici, 2007) into the social realities and prior skills that they bring to the urban area.*

**Keywords:** *urban, unemployment, India*

## 1.0 Introduction

Urban unemployment rates in India have been higher than rural unemployment rates for a long time now. Many datasets reflect that the urban unemployment rate has not just been higher, but the gap between rural and urban unemployment rates has been growing in recent

years (CMIE, 2023; Goel, 2022). Even though the rates of unemployment have cooled down from the highs of 2020 during peak Covid-related lockdowns, it has exposed the fact that urban India too has a chronic high unemployment problem. More importantly, it has created the issue of the urban poor facing higher inequalities than the rural poor (Sengupta, 2016).
This leads us to a three-stage exploration. Firstly, the causes of urban unemployment. Secondly, the relationship between urban poverty that is driven by unemployment and food insecurity. And thirdly, the exploration of a solution that sustainably tackles these in an urban environment.

**2.0 Causes and Relations of Urban Unemployment and Food Insecurity**

The exploration of what causes this unemployment always points firstly to the high rates of migration of rural poor to the urban areas in search of employment opportunities. This search adds to the migrant population in the urban areas with little or no skill other than agricultural knowledge that they possess but was forced to migrate due to a lack of remunerative avenues in an already saturated agricultural sector in the villages (Phillip, 2021). Moreover, as over half of the Indian population is projected to be urban by 2030, half of that urban population is expected to be made of rural migrants (Sinha, 2022). Furthermore, a common problem that faces the country's urban governance due to this consistent stream of migrants is that of urban food security. Statistics reflect that urban slum populations have a higher prevalence of anaemia among women, and malnutrition among children, etc are more severe than in rural areas (Chaturvedi, 2021; Jha, 2020; Usmani & Ahmad, 2018; Chatterjee et al., 2012).

At the level of solving the problem of unemployment, the solutions have to also be sensitive to the skills carried by the rural labourers who migrate to the urban areas. A regression-based statistical model showed that a lack of skills was the primary driver of unsustainable urban life for migrant farmers in urban India. Other factors like age and state of migration are not as significant, while even after a long-term stay of over ten years, an uneducated farmer migrating to an urban area was not able to sustain a livelihood (Sravanth & Sundaram, 2022). This makes it imperative to utilise the skillsets carried by the rural farmers to urban areas, by augmenting and complementing them before going for wholesale replacement of skill sets. This might help in aligning a policy with the aim of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) under the Skill India Mission (PIB, 2022).

**3.0 Seeking a Solution within the Carried Skillset in an Urban Setting**

The skillset carried by farmers migrating to urban areas is not just an Indian context but seen all over the developing world. In this context, an intuitive and almost natural solution crafted by communities facing distress and poverty has been urban agriculture. People and communities with prior farming skills have the world over indulged in cultivation and home gardening in order to reduce food insecurity and create a positive 'maker-space' for themselves as a form of expression in such times, whether it was in a war-torn Iraq or peri-urban Beijing (Tomkins et al., 2019; RUAF, 2018).

This program of urban farming has shown positive effects on the community, not just in terms of poverty alleviation. In fact, such members of the community have gone on to become 'facilitators' and 'trainers' for others in their community (Bessho et al., 2020). They have also worked to transfer modern agricultural skills learnt on the urban farm back to their native rural areas, thus helping to reduce distress-based rural-urban migration in their countries (FAO, 2016). This brings us to a design of such a policy for India. Its technical details can be fleshed out with organised pilots, but its contours must be defined so as to carry a blueprint of actionable philosophy at this juncture.

**4.0 Havana – A Case Study**

Near the collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, support for the Cuban economy and its oil demands suddenly stopped being met by the Soviets. This led to a food shortage, with an impending 'doomsday-like collapse' of food systems in the country. Central to this crisis was the capital and the largest populated city – Havana.

A solution to the crisis was found in Urban Agriculture (UA), with 30% of the city's area being cleared and expanded for cultivation (Altieri et al., 1999). New sustainable practices and training programs were also put in place (WWF, 2012) –

- Fostering organic agriculture by, for instance, prohibiting the use of chemical pesticides inside city limits and supporting and training extension workers
- Even in the most crowded parts of the city, like Old Havana, applied UA with ingenuity and vigour to cover as much ground as possible
- Formal allotment of farmland in urban areas
- Reliable infrastructure for UA's freshwater usage

- Integrated pest management has been a major concern in the municipal provision of high-quality compost, seeds, and saplings research and development: labs and field-testing locations
- Providing compelling incentives for urban agriculture, such as the creation of farmers' markets for the sale of vegetables

Despite low initial yields due to a lack of farming experience and inputs, the movement received thorough government support and reached a positive growth rate in the years to come. This approach yielded multiple benefits for Havana (FAO, 2014) –

- Improved food supply chain resilience
- Increased access to food, fresh vegetables that are more readily available, and less expensive, and better water and waste management all contributed to enhanced public health, especially in terms of nutrition
- Conservation of biodiversity: rarer plant species that were previously a staple of Cuban cuisine but are no longer prevalent in rural agriculture were conserved via urban agriculture. Examples include the fruit tree capul, the yam (Dioscorea alata), and the arrow root (Maranta arundinacea L.) (Muntingia calabura Lin.). Policy on food-species biodiversity conservation for resilience was part of the quest for food security
- Lowered the consumption of energy
- Employment generation for 40% of the urban population
- Decreased the use of fossil fuels
- By the 1990s, Havana had achieved self-sufficiency in fresh vegetables and potatoes produced for the city and had gone on to supply grains to the rest of the country’s population

Adopting such a model for Indian urban areas would require concerted support from the governments of central and local areas to an employment guarantee act that would focus on the urban agricultural skillset, upgrade it, and link it to food security and diversified crop farming.

**5.0 Urban Employment Guarantee Acts– Propositions and Policy Gaps**

An urban employment guarantee scheme is not an entirely novel proposition per se. Proposals

for a NUEGA have come from both, the public (Express News Service, 2022) and civil society organisations (APU, 2019; Paliath, 2021). All these proposals look at the problem of urban unemployment through the lens of 'urban governance' as the solutions proposed are derived from the functions devolved to municipalities under Schedule 12 of the Indian constitution (GOI, 2021).

A skillset mismatch and fund shortage mean that municipal bodies remain incapable and unable to address the job demand, leaving urban unemployment rates high despite many efforts (TNN, 2016; IANS, 2022). Some states have tried implementing their own urban job guarantee schemes modelled on the MGNREGA for rural India (Dhasmana, 2022). These have yielded some results but remain low-skill and ad-hoc solutions that employ people in temporary works like park maintenance and illegal encroachment removal (ZeeBiz, 2022).
This brings us back to the framework that recognises prior skill sets that are carried by migrant farm labourers who move to the city. It must also create permanent infrastructure for the absorption of the workforce, provide upskilling opportunities and increase turnover rates so that people don't keep availing of the scheme benefits repeatedly and can find employment or establish entrepreneurial ventures of their own moving forward (Narayan, 2022).

**6.0 Towards a NUEGA Linked to Urban Agriculture**

Here, we explore the feasibility of linking a NUEGA with Urban Agriculture (UA) and RPL for rural migrants to urban areas. The first step in its formulation would be the identification of suitable lands for UA. An estimate based on the 2011 Census places the target of 5% area of cities to be kept aside for UA. This comes down to roughly 11,000 square kilometres of arable land (Jha, 2022). This land can be availed from 3 sources – peri-urban cultivable wastelands, government lands with agricultural potential and properties lying under legal disputes for over 20 years without development. The Municipal corporation or state government can make a provision for the repossession of such lands with suitable compensation to the judicial bench, and bring the area under UA.

The second step is the identification of land fragment usage and technologies for agriculture. One-third of such land could go towards rainwater harvesting and storage to allow sustainable farming. Other parts could go towards new technologies of UA. For constructed

properties, Plant Factory with Artificial Light (PFAL) for indoor agriculture can be used (*Wh*at PFAL Means to Urban Agriculture. - Free Online Library, n.d.). This can also be augmented with Vertical farming, closed-loop aquaponics, micro-fertigation, etc. This will move to become a skilling component of the scheme. The first 50 days of the NUEGA work may be spent on training on one of the above technologies, with certification under RPL carried out on the last day of accepted work.

The third component is the identification of beneficiaries through NUEGA centres or portals which can be created online or on the Municipal Corporation website. Migrants to the city can register for 150 days of work, of which 50 days shall be the training module. Water resource management would mean all year-round agriculture with 2 cohorts per annum. It can also allow people to allow for specific skill sets required in specific farms and cohorts – people wanting to study water harvesting or aquaponics, precision agriculture and organic fertilizer use, can be given those specific skills on the farms under UA.

Calculating the maximum possible turnover using Jha's earlier estimate – if the 11,000 square km of land can be brought under NUEGA-based urban agriculture, **it will lead to an arable land area of approximately 2.75 million acres** (Jha, 2022)**.** Assuming 2 people for each acre for farming and 2 for water conservation practices, it can employ roughly 11 million people per cohort – leading to a maximum of **22 million jobs generated each year across 2 cohorts.**

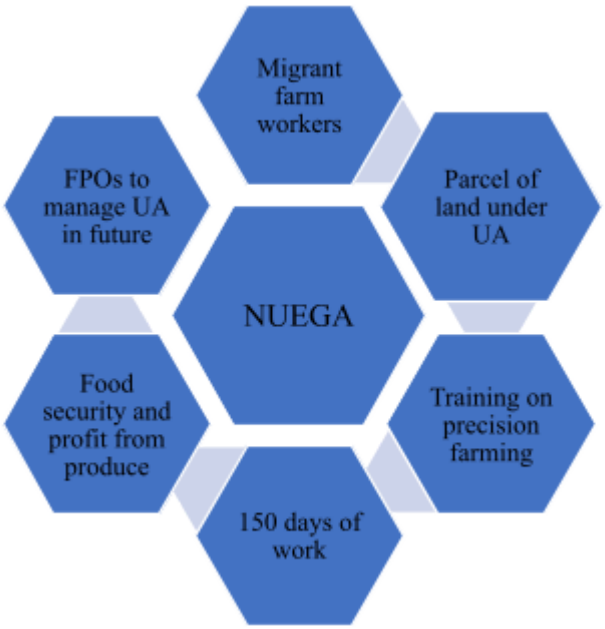

Fig 1 – National Urban Employment Guarantee Act (NUEGA) – Structure and Cycle

**7.0 Urban Food and Job Security and Profits from the Scheme**

The produce made on such farms can then be divided into 2 components –

1) To be sold at Minimum Support Prices (MSP) on the urban markets. This component shall serve to generate wages for the employed persons and trainers required by the government in the initial cohorts.
2) To be used to supply food to ration shops and outlets serving migrant worker families in the urban area, thus ensuring food security

Furthermore, a repeated application shall not be considered for consecutive cohorts and only 5 maximum cohorts can be applied for by a single person. This will ensure better turnover and newer migrating families and persons getting a shot at guaranteed employment.

**8.0 Ultimate Pathways for the NUEGA Beneficiaries**

Four major pathways shall be available for transitioning out of NUEGA benefits for the families –

1) After skill upgradation, they can be employed in farms and private companies working on precision farming technologies. They can also become entrepreneurs themselves. An option of forming women-led Self Help Groups (SHGs) post-NUEGA with credit access for trained female farmers can be set up.
2) As trainers on the same farm that they worked on as beneficiaries in the past. This can also reduce the government's requirement for trainers externally, which will mean cost and time savings.
3) On returning to their respective rural areas, they can adopt these practices on their own farmlands or pass the skills to people living in their rural areas or future generations. This has the indirect benefit of preventing future distress migration from rural areas.
4) Farmer-Producer Organizations (FPOs) consisting of farmers trained using NUEGA can be formed and given collective ownership of NUEGA lands to ultimately give control into the hands of the community members themselves.

Benefits Targeted through the Scheme

- Reducing urban unemployment, but keeping in mind the prior skill sets that migrant workers carry from agriculture in their native areas
- Establishing urban agriculture as a model for absorption of the migrant labour force, and augmenting the land use in peri-urban areas and cultivable wastelands in cities
- To ensure skill upgradation and food security for the urban poor
- To ensure job security and reduce permanent dependence on the job guarantee scheme without a chance to move out of bare minimum survival cycles

**9.0 Conclusion**

The aim to create a scheme to address multiple problems of modern urbanism in India has led to this proposal of a NUEGA. More importantly, it rests on two major pillars –

The first one is seeing the citizen as an active participant and controller in the process of governance rather than a simple beneficiary to be 'manipulated' (Arnstein, 1969). This aims to push for an end goal of citizen-led citizen-controlled service delivery of employment in the urban agricultural sector. The second one is to look at a bottom-up solution to unemployment which respects the skillsets carried by citizens as they migrate rather than trying to replace them with something more suited to an already saturated market or giving them 'ad-hoc' employment that does not yield any skill base.

It also looks to provide choices for migrant workers and increase turnover rates in order to lift multiple people out of poverty over a period of time. An attachment of Urban Agriculture and food security to the aim of job creation means that the results produced by the scheme aren't simply 'economic' in nature but 'embedded' into the social realities and prior skills that they bring to the urban area. It can also help us tackle multiple Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) like SDGs 1, 2, 8 and 11 together (UNDESA, 2019).

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