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## **Public Works Programs as a Development Strategy for Marginalized Groups:**

**A case study of tribal MNREGA-participants in Wayanad, Kerala**

*Abstract:*

In recent years, the practice of adopting Public Works Programs (PWP) as a development strategy has increased in developing countries. Successful PWP have the potential to act as a social protection scheme for the poor and stimulate their economic development. In 2006, the Indian government launched the yet largest PWP, as a way to create a more inclusive growth in the country – the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA). As a PWP is most needed by the weakest sections of the society this study has grasped the opportunity to investigate how MNREGA is faring as a development strategy for one of the weakest sections of the Indian society, the Scheduled Tribes. Based on a qualitative field study in Wayanad – the district with the largest tribal population in the South-Indian State Kerala – the study investigates how MNREGA is affecting the personal economic situation of its tribal participants. Through its qualitative approach the study sets out to understand the effects of MNREGA-participation in practice, an important factor to understand in order to understand the overall effects of the scheme. Within the focus of MNREGA as a PWP, three features have been given special emphasis: the wage level, the timing of the scheme and the outcome of 'self-targeting' in relation to access to the created assets of the program. The findings suggest that while MNREGA has succeeded in creating more work opportunities, the program is not optimally designed as a PWP concerning its too low wage level, and that the implementation falls short concerning the current poor timing throughout the year and inadequate creation of productive assets.

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The MFS Scholarship Programme gives Swedish university students the opportunity to carry out fieldwork in low- and middle income countries, or more specifically in the countries included on the *DAC List of ODA Recipients*, in relation to their Bachelor's or Master's thesis.

Sida's main purpose with the MFS Scholarship Programme is to stimulate the students' interest in, as well as increasing their knowledge and understanding of development issues. The Minor Field Studies provide the students with practical experience of field work in developing settings. A further aim of Sida is to strengthen the cooperation between Swedish university departments and institutes and organisations in these countries.

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## 1. Introduction

In February 2006, the Indian government launched the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (now Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Guarantee Act), MNREGA<sup>1</sup> – the largest public employment program ever in history. The Act guarantees 100 working days to all rural citizens and was initiated to create a more inclusive growth in India through its economic support to the poor. The current study will from an economic-historic perspective investigate how MNREGA has affected one of the weakest sections of the Indian society, the Scheduled Tribes (STs).

As the largest public employment program ever, MNREGA provides an interesting opportunity to explore the workings of such a program – an opportunity this study attempts to grasp. A public employment program – or Public Works Program (PWP) - is a program where employment in creating public goods is offered by the state to those who are unable to find other employment, in order to provide a social safety net (McCord 2008:1). PWPs were initially implemented in the Western countries such as the “workhouse relief” in England during the 1830’s and the American “New Deal” program during the Great Depression, but have recently gained importance as a development strategy in developing countries as well. To mention a few Botswana, Kenya, Argentina, Korea, Bangladesh and Pakistan have all implemented a form of PWP in the last two decades (Subbarao 1997:680, Subbarao 2003: 1-2). Previously, the theoretical debate mostly focused on the experience of the Western countries, such as the USA and England, but as the practice of implementing PWPs in developing countries has grown, so has the literature (Kaboub 2007, Subbarao 2003, and McCord 2008). The current study is therefore an attempt to contribute to this growing literature by investigating MNREGA as a PWP in a developing country. Based on the existing knowledge, three features of a PWP have been chosen as the focus of the study: the wage level, the timing of the program and the outcome of ‘self-targeting’ through the access to created assets. Through these features, the study attempts to evaluate how MNREGA is affecting its participants in practice, in order to contribute to the current knowledge of how to design and implement successful PWPs in developing countries in the future.

A PWP like MNREGA is most needed by the poorest and weakest sections of a society. The Scheduled Tribes are one of the most marginalized groups in India, and as such they are the focus of this study. In particular, it is the STs of Wayanad district, Kerala, that are in focus. When the Act was first implemented, it was launched in the 200 districts that were perceived to be the most backward districts in India. Wayanad, a hilly district in the relatively prosperous state Kerala, was one of those. At the time, Wayanad had experienced a period of economic recession and even crisis, so while this

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<sup>1</sup> MNREGA is sometimes also referred to as the MNREG Scheme, and the terms ‘MNREGA’, ‘the Act’ and ‘the scheme’ will be used interchangeably throughout the essay.

national act was not specifically intended for the relief of Wayanad, it was greatly needed. Furthermore, because Wayanad is unique in Kerala with respect to its high proportion of Scheduled Tribes, it is a suitable setting for an investigation of how STs are affected by MNREGA.

In order to explore how tribal MNREGA-workers are affected by the scheme, a field study in Wayanad and Kerala was conducted January-March 2012. The field study provided an opportunity to investigate how MNREGA-participation affects the personal economic situation of the tribal population of the area in practice. This qualitative data collected from the reality of the MNREGA-participants is an important first step to understand the larger effects of the program. To then best utilize the thick empirical data collected from the grassroots, it was inserted in to a theoretical framework of PWPs. Together, the empirical findings and theoretical framework enabled the findings of this study to emerge.

Being the largest public employment program ever, MNREGA has a tremendous potential to transform the lives of many rural households in India. However, the findings of this study suggest that this potential is not being realized. Based on the small field study in Wayanad, the study finds that wage level is too low, the works are not offered during the most beneficial time of the year and the participants are not receiving access to the public goods that are supposed to be created under the scheme.

The study is structured in the following way to best display how the conclusions were drawn: in the coming paragraphs the aim, research questions and limitations will be presented to set the focus of the study. This is followed by the theoretical framework, which provides a deeper account of PWPs and its three important features: the wage level, the timing and the outcomes of 'self-targeting'. These aspects are all thoroughly discussed in this second section. In the next section, a background to the subject is given covering the three main areas of interest for the study: MNREGA, STs and the district of Wayanad. This third section is concluded by a short account of existing research that interconnects the three interest areas, in order to establish where the current knowledge frontier lies. The findings of the study are based on empirical data which is discussed in section 4 and 5. Section 4 clarifies the methodology of the study, which is then followed by the data display and analysis in section 5. This section has been divided into four parts, where each part discusses a theme which connects the empirical findings with the theoretical underpinnings of the study. The whole study is finally concluded by a short summary of the main findings in section 6.

## **Aim**

The aim of this study is to investigate how MNREGA is faring as a development strategy for its tribal participants, in order to contribute to the knowledge of how future PWPs can be designed and

implemented to benefit the most marginalized groups of a society. In order to do so, the study first aims to establish the current economic situation of the tribal MNREGA-participants, and to compare this to the economic situation before MNREGA was implemented. In the next stage, the study aims at establishing the possible reasons for why MNREGA has affected their economic situation the way it has, with reference to the design and implementation of MNREGA. However, as this study is based on a small field study, the study can only aim at contributing to the current knowledge to a very small extent, and the aim of the empirical findings are therefore limited to the Wayanad-participants only and how the scheme is affecting them in a practical sense. The main aim of contributing to the current knowledge is achieved through the help of the theoretical framework, but even so the study's core strength is to be a qualitative, in-depth account of a small research area that can shed light on where further research is needed in relation to PwPs and marginalized groups.

### **Research questions**

In order to reach the aim, the following research questions guided the study:

1. How has participation in MNREGA-works affected the personal economic situation of tribe members in Wayanad?'
2. Why has MNREGA participation had such an impact?

### **Limitations**

It is beyond the scope of this study to undertake an investigation of MNREGA's design and implementation as a whole, and as such the study has been limited both geographically and by focusing the study to one section of the society. Geographically the study is limited to the Indian state Kerala, within which the district Wayanad is the main focus. MNREGA is most necessary for the weakest sections of the society, and therefore this study will limit itself to the Scheduled Tribes in Wayanad as this group represents one such section. By interconnecting MNREGA, STs and Wayanad to one study a quite narrow research area is defined, but given the time and resources of this study it is still beyond the scope of it to reach a full understanding of this situation. Instead the study limits its ambition to trying to contribute to the current knowledge on this interconnected topic, to the extent that the ambition is possible to achieve with qualitative interview data from a small field study.

## 2. Theoretical framework

In order to anchor this study on the effect of MNREGA on Wayanad's tribal population within a theoretical framework, the concept of Public Works Programs (PWP) will be used. A PWP is a government intervention to battle unemployment, just like MNREGA, and the questions of how a PWP affect the economic situation of the marginalized in a society, and why, will serve as the entry point for this study. Within the literature on PWP and its optimal design and implementation, many aspects are reviewed. To be able to move beyond a superficial account of the features of a PWP, the study has been limited to three aspects of a PWP, that have been chosen within this overall theoretical focus. The three aspects are: the appropriate wage level of a PWP, the timing of the program and the issue of targeting PWP-participants. The aspects were chosen for their perceived importance for the general outcome of a PWP, which according to the author exceeds the importance of other aspects<sup>2</sup>. Through the focus of the three aspects the work of evaluating how MNREGA-participation is affecting the economic situation of its tribal participants will be aided, as will the work of exploring why it is affecting them in such a way. Before reviewing the theoretical underpinnings of the wage, timing and targeting aspects separately, a brief introduction to PWP in general is given.

### Introduction to Public Works Programs (PWP)

A Public Works Program (PWP) is a program where employment in creating public goods is offered by the state to those who are unable to find other employment, in order to provide a social safety net. The wage is set at a fixed level and can be in either cash or kind. A PWP can be implemented in a number of different ways with specific desired outcomes, such as short-term employment to offset shocks, longer term government employment programs to battle chronic unemployment and poverty, labor intensification programs to increase labor opportunities or programs that promote employability when the reason for unemployment is lack of appropriate skills (McCord 2008:2). The MNREGA falls under the category of a longer term government employment program, which therefore will be the PWP type in focus of this study. In such a program, the state resumes the role of an 'employer of last resort' (ELR) as it by increased government expenditure steps in to employ those who otherwise would be unemployed (McCord 2008:3). The rationale for such an – often costly – government undertaking may vary from program to program, but includes features of wanting to transfer benefits to the poor, stabilize the consumption pattern for the poor throughout the year, help build up infrastructure and create durable assets that can benefit the poor (Subbarao 2003: 3). PWP have been used as a policy tool to promote both macroeconomic stability and social protection

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<sup>2</sup> Such as the mode of payment (cash or kind), the unit of wage (daily or piece rate), the cost effectiveness in 'cost per job' or the labor intensity of the program.

ever since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and gained increasing importance after the Great Depression and the following “New Deal” programs in USA (Kaboub 2007:2-3). As will be discussed in the background chapter, MNREGA has the two-fold aim of being a social safety net for the rural poor of India as well as creating durable assets for the future, and is in essence a PWP where the state has stepped in as an employer of last resort. As such, the concept of PWP will serve as the theoretical underpinning of this study, through which the study will attempt to research how MNREGA is living up to its role as a PWP for the tribal population in Wayanad.

### **The appropriate wage level**

The wage level of a PWP has a large effect on the outcome of the program, and it is therefore necessary to set the wage at ‘the right level’ for the desired outcomes to be reached. Subbarao (1997: 679-680) argues that this ‘right level’ is when the wage is set to be slightly lower than the ruling market wage for casual labor – even if this is lower than the statutory minimum wage. Keeping the wage level low will ensure that only truly poor will be attracted by the scheme – preventing that the benefits are hi-jacked by the non-poor – as well as serves to keep to total number of participants low. If the wage level was higher, more people would be interested to participate, increasing the probability of people having to be rationed away from the scheme. An interesting example of this can be found in MNREGA’s predecessor, the Employment Guarantee Scheme (EGS)<sup>3</sup> in Maharashtra. This program set its wage at the legal minimum wage which at the initial phase of the program was lower than the market wage for casual labor, but when the minimum wage was doubled in Maharashtra in 1988, so was the program wage. Due to the increased costs, the number of person days generated by the program shrunk dramatically, leading to higher rationing among participants - essentially eroding the work guarantee (Subbarao 2003:6-7). However, Lipton (1996: 45) urges to caution when it comes to classifying either a high or a low wage level as the most pro-poor, as the answer is highly context-specific. A too low wage level might lead to that the ‘poor but proud’ sections of a society chose to rather go hungry than to participate in what is perceived to be a undignified scheme – as was the case of the English Poor Law workhouses after 1834 (Lipton 1996: 48). Also, if the program wage is very low, no or few workers will come and those who do will be the weakest and least competent workers. When that is the case, the ‘durable assets’ that PWPs aim to create, will most probably not be satisfactorily made and yield few benefits for the society (Lipton 1996: 49). An additional aspect of setting the program wage too low is that it would lower the bargaining power of the workers, making it difficult for them to move out of the program. As such, the government would not save money

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<sup>3</sup> EGS was the first large employment guarantee scheme in India, which was implemented in Maharashtra to address the high level of rural distress after a severe drought in the mid 1970’s. EGS created 3,597 million person days of work, during its existence in 1979-2004. The scheme’s main focus was on drought proofing that would lead to tangible results (Shariff 2009: 2).

from the low wage rate as the size of the scheme would remain the same, keeping the public expenditure towards the program high (Ravallion 1987:20).

### **The timing of the program**

The next feature of a PWP design that affect the outcomes is the timing of the scheme; when should the public works be offered? Subbarao (1997:680, 2003:13) argues that the public works should be available during the agricultural slack season, when other employment is scarce. To be able to work during the slack season would lead to stabilization benefits for poor households' spending, smoothing the consumption throughout the year. If work instead is synchronized with the busy agricultural time, less people would be able to participate in the scheme, decreasing the benefits of the scheme. Ravallion (1987:17) on the other hand, argues that letting public works be available during the agricultural peak-season would benefit the poor, as the competition between the program works and the private works would drive up the wages. According to Ravallion (1987:39), the increased wages and higher transfer benefits to the poor outweigh the stabilization effects that slack-season works provide as stabilization effects can be reached more effectively with other anti-poverty measures. Furthermore, Ravallion (1987: 19) sees an additional problem with offering work during the slack season, as it could encourage people to stay in the village during that time instead of looking for productive, private work elsewhere. As such, the scheme itself is creating a dependency for the poor at the same time as keeping the public expenditure high.

As with the wage level discussion, there is no conclusive argument on how to design a PWP when it comes to the timing aspect, but as seen the opinions diverge. It is the aim of this study to consider these aspects in relation to MNREGA and the tribal population, in order to contribute to this ongoing discussion.

### **The self-targeting aspect in relation to created assets**

The last aspect of PWPs that this study will focus on is how the outcomes of the so called "self-targeting" mechanism affect the outcome of the whole PWP. Self-targeting is the most common way of selecting the participants for a PWP, which is facilitated by the PWP's demand for hard manual labor in return for a low wage. When self-targeting is used the gains of participating is designed to be so low that only the poor – which is the target group – would be willing to participate (Lipton 1996:42). The benefits of self-targeting is that when people chose themselves to join or not, it lowers costs for the implementing agency as is does not need to spend resources neither on inviting the intended target group to the scheme nor on trying to exclude others (Imai 2007: 100). On the other hand, self-targeting might also exclude some people in need of the program from the program benefits, as many poor people are not able to do manual labor. Furthermore, if self-targeting is done

by lowering program wage (to make it less attractive to non-poor), it might water down the development initiative as low wages lead to low bargaining power for the poor (Ravallion 1987: 20).

The success of a self-targeting mechanism is based on two criteria: that only the poor people participate and that those same people get access to the assets and public goods that are created within the PWP. The discussion on the first part – the accuracy of self-targeting - is widespread, both in connection to MNREGA and its predecessor EGS in Maharashtra (see for example Jha et al 2009 and Imai 2007). However, as the data at hand for the current study is not suitable for such an investigation it will not be the focus, but instead the study will attempt to discern what the outcome of the self-targeting mechanism has been in relation to the second criteria. This will be done through investigating to what extent the MNREGA-participants are gaining access to the durable assets that is supposed to be produced within the scheme. According to Lipton (1996:43), this is a very important feature of a PWP, as gaining access to such assets is the only way the PWP has the potential to lift the poor out of poverty, more so than the actual cash-transfer. Imai (2007) agrees with this notion, as his study finds that self-targeting has a greater potential to battle poverty than other targeting-measurements, if it ensures that the poor participants are those gaining access to the created assets. As such, this study will investigate what effects the self-targeting mechanism has had on the outcome of MNREGA, by establishing to what extent the tribal MNREGA-participants in Wayanad can access the assets that the public works they do is suppose to generate. If the poor people within the scheme are getting access to useful assets, it would be a sign of a successful outcome of the self-targeting. However, if the poor participants are not getting this access, it severely limits the potential of MNREGA to have an effect on their economic situation, in accordance with Lipton's (1996:43) notion that the cash-transfer alone cannot lift people out of poverty.

The theoretical debate on PWPs show that in order to operationalize a study of the effects of MNREGA, the aspects of what the wage level looks like in the field, how the timing of the works are planned and implemented, and whether the poor gain access to the to the created assets or not, all need to be addressed. By analyzing field level data on these aspects, this study will attempt to shed light on how the wage, timing and outcome of self-targeting has affected impact of MNREGA on the tribal population. However, before moving on to the empirics of the study, a thorough background to the research area will be given.

### 3. Background of the study

In order to proceed with the study, a thorough account of the background to the research area is needed, in addition to the theoretical framework. As a way to connect the theoretical framework with the empirical findings of the study, a background to all the three research interests of the study - MNREGA, STs and Wayanad, Kerala - is therefore given below.

#### **Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act**

The last two decades brought on a remarkable economic development in India, where the per capita income grew at a compound rate of nearly 5 % annually between 1990-91 and 2009-10. However, as the general social development has not improved in the same way, it appears that the economic growth has only benefitted a small segment of the population, not the whole nation (Dreze and Sen 2011). In an effort to spur a more inclusive growth, the Indian government passed the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act in 2005 (renamed Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, MRNEGA, in 2009). The effort was far-reaching and ambitious, evident by that MNREGA is the largest public employment program in human history (Ambasta et al 2008: 41). The act is to guarantee every rural household in India 100 days wage employment per year, as a way to enhance the livelihood opportunities of the rural population. Work is to be provided for every adult who is willing to do unskilled manual labor at minimum wage (Ministry of Law and Justice 2005:1). The minimum wage is set by every State, as stipulated under section 3 of the Minimum Wages Act of 1948 (Government of India 2005). When MNREGA was first implemented the daily minimum wage was Rs. 125 in Kerala and has since been increased to Rs. 150/day, both rates being among the highest in the nation (NREGA 2005, NREGA 2011). The act was first implemented the 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2006 when it was promulgated in 200 of the most backward districts in India – one of which will be in focus of this study, Wayanad. Since then the scheme has gradually been extended to cover all the districts of the country, as the last remaining districts were included in 1 April 2008 (Sudarshan, Bhattacharya and Fernandez 2010:83).

The act is designed to battle the widespread livelihood issues in India in a twofold manner, short term by the extra income that the act provides for the households, and in a longer perspective through the results of the jobs that are to be carried out under the act. The works under the scheme should focus on water conservation and water harvesting, drought proofing, irrigation projects and land development, and the creation of durable assets and strengthening the resource base of the rural poor should be focused on in all works (Ministry of Law and Justice 2005:13).

### **The aim of MNREGA**

The primary objective of MNREGA is to enhance the livelihood security for its participants, meaning to dramatically reduce poverty by providing extra earnings for poor families (Ministry of Law and Justice 2005:1, Dutta et al 2012:2). As mentioned in the theoretical framework, MNREGA is modeled on Maharashtra's Employment Guarantee Scheme (EGS) of 1979, which largely is considered to have been a successful project (Shariff 2009:2, Center for Science and Environment 2008:5). As MNREGA itself is enshrined in law and supported by an extensive set of guidelines from the Ministry of Rural Development, it has the potential to be even more powerful than its predecessor. Through the support of the legal framework, MNREGA is transformed from a mere welfare program to a full-fledge development initiative where the government has made itself responsible for that the act is fulfilled (Ambasta et al 2008:41). Another feature that contrasts MNREGA with other employment schemes is that MNREGA is a rights-based program, where the rights of the workers should be what drive the scheme and its implementation (Dreze and Khera 2009). This empowerment aim of the scheme is coupled with the insurance objective of the scheme, as knowing that the scheme exists will in itself provide some safety for the rural poor – a sense of safety that potentially could contribute to that the people are able to make longer-term economic decisions. Furthermore, the scheme intends to empower the rural poor through increasing their bargaining power. As the scheme provides 100 days of manual labor at minimum wage, the wages for the all jobs of the type that the scheme cover should then by extent be fixed, as the workers always should have the option to work in the scheme instead of taking worse-paid work (Dutta et al 2012:2). In addition to the emphasis on livelihood, empowerment and safety, the scheme aims at being a long-term aid for the rural poor through the focus on creation of valuable assets for the future. As such, the aims of the MNREGA as a PWP are ambitious in every aspect, making an investigation into how these aims are being fulfilled for the marginalized tribal population a worthwhile effort.

### **The implementation process**

While it is the central government of India that passed the act and that carry most of the financial burden for it – the central government cover 90 % of the expenses and the state government cover the remaining 10% - it is the state governments that are in charge of implementing the scheme (Kerala State Planning Board 2010:47). In Kerala the scheme has been implemented under the name Kerala Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (KREGS) and this scheme was first implemented in two districts; Wayanad and Palakkad (Rural Development Department 2005:1). The decentralizing aims of the scheme are evident in the implementation process, as the *Gram Panchayats* (the local self-government institution at village level) and *Gram Sabhas* (the meetings of all those eligible to vote in a Gram Panchayat) have been given prominent roles. The Gram Panchayat is responsible for estimating the demand for work for the coming year, to propose and order works according to

priority, to set up the time frames and to estimate costs for labor and material, which all should be done in accordance with the will of the Gram Sabha (Rural Development Department 2005:6-7).

In Kerala the scheme has also been implemented through the state poverty eradication mission *Kudumbashree*. Kudumbashree is a women's self-help program where women are organized into small neighborhood groups of 8-10 women to engage in economic activity. Per every 30-40 neighborhood group, one person is chosen to be the Area Development Supervisor (ADS) and it is this person who also is in charge of supervising the MNREGA works and worksites in the area. The work of Kudumbashree has been praised by many in the way it allows MNREGA to converge with other development initiatives. As such, some say that Kudumbashree has been able to transform the 100 days of manual labor of MNREGA into a powerful tool towards food security and food justice (Mukherjee 2012). At the same time, there have been some reports that mixing of tribal and non-tribal members within Kudumbashree have not been able to function at all and have had to be dissolved due to mutual mistrust, which further confirms the importance of examining how the scheduled tribes are able to access any benefits of MNREGA (Sudarshan, Bhattacharya and Fernandez 2010:78-79).

### **MNREGA – six years in**

Six years into the scheme it is reasonable to try to discern what impact this ambitious PWP actually has had. While some success stories do exist where MNREGA has enabled a demand driven development process that empowers its participants to take place (see for example Khera 2008), there appears to be many areas where the scheme could improve. The problems relate to understaffing, administrative delays, lack of people's planning, inappropriate wage level and complicated bureaucracy (Ambasta et al 2008), as well as a lack of aligning works with the agricultural and seasonal patterns and lack of awareness of the rights that MNREGA includes (Kamath 2010 and Dreze and Khera 2009). Out of these problems, the current study focuses on the wage level and the seasonal timing, as was accounted for in the theoretical frame and will be further discussed in the data analysis. Furthermore, another problem in the implementation of MNREGA is that it appears that the scheme is in fact not guaranteeing the 100 days of work that it promises. According to Haque (2011: 447), as many as 69 % of the districts in his survey report that only 10 % of the households participating in the scheme can avail 100 days of work per year – the remaining 90 % have to settle for far less. Dutta et al (2012:6) confirms that there appears to be a huge unmet demand for work days, reporting that only 56% of those wanting to work in the scheme actually received work, based on data from the National Sample Survey in 2009/2010. There are also Kerala-specific difficulties with achieving the aims of MNREGA, as it has proven difficult to implement this

national act in the Kerala reality. The public land on which MNREGA should take place is scarce and there are limitations in both plantation and coastal works, as well as problems with corruption in the procurement sector that obstruct any work needing materials. Furthermore, the local wage rate is considerably higher in Kerala than the 150 Rs./day that the act provides, distorting both the incentives to join MNREGA works and the outcome of the money paid, which will be further elaborated on in the empirical sections of the essay (Kerala State Planning Board 2010: 47). All in all, it appears that MNREGA has not succeeded in achieving its goals yet. This study has set out to discover part of the reasons why that is the case, by investigating MNREGA as a PWP in relation to the wage, timing and its ability to create public goods.

### **The Scheduled Tribes in the Indian society**

India is a diverse country where many different social groups live side by side. One of these social groups is the so called 'Scheduled Tribes' (STs), also known as *Adivasis*. A scheduled tribe is a community that has been scheduled in accordance with Article 342 in the Indian constitution. The communities that are listed in that article are identified by what is perceived to be primitive traits, distinctive culture, shyness of contact with the community at large, geographical isolation and socio-economic backwardness (Misha et al 2010: 461). A community identified on those principles will most probably be in great need of a development initiative like MNREGA, which the STs are.

According to the 2001 Census, 8.15 % of the Indian population belong to a ST community, amounting to 83 600 000 people (Kerala State Planning Board 2010:71). Based on poverty levels, these people appear to be the most economically marginalized group in India – both relatively, compared to other social groups, and actually, based on their very low monthly expenditure (Misha et al 2010:464). Furthermore, they repeatedly score lower than the national average in important indicators of living standard, such as literacy rate, nutrition levels, access to sanitation facilities and proper housing, (Institute of Applied Manpower Research 2011:5). Various explanations to these figures exists, such as that they can be attributed to geographical and cultural isolation, possible coupled with a limited access to information (Misha et al 2010:464). Whichever the explanation, it is obvious that a far-reaching development initiative is needed for this group to be able to move on from their current situation. The situation of the STs in Kerala and Wayanad in particular will be further discussed below in relation to the locality of the study.

### **The locality of the study: Wayanad, Kerala**

The district of Wayanad was formed as a district of Kerala in 1980, by merging the North and South Wayanad regions of the neighboring districts (Centre of Excellence 2006:24). It is a hilly forest area and is the least densely populated area in Kerala. Wayanad is an economically backward district in the

otherwise relatively non-poor State of Kerala – possibly due to its high share of STs in the population (Center of Excellence 2006:33, Center of Development Studies 2005: 49). The main economical activity is the agricultural sector, but sectors such as trade, tourism and other natural resource-dependent sectors are increasingly gaining importance. The paddy cultivation has traditionally been an important section of the economy, but this has declined in recent years, leading to issues of food security in the district as well as problems with the keeping the ecological balance of the region (UNDP 2009: 141). Instead of paddy cultivation the agricultural sectors has placed its emphasis in cash crops, as the district is endowed with both the soil and the climate that is suitable for crops such as tea, coffee, cardamom, turmeric, ginger and pepper (Mohandas 1992: 33). The change in focus from paddy cultivation to cash crops has brought on difficulties for the tribal population of Wayanad due to loss of work opportunities (Center of Excellence 2006:7).

### **The history of Wayanad**

Up until a few decades ago Wayanad was in all senses a tribal district – but this has dramatically changed as the tribal population now only accounts for 17 % of the total population in Wayanad. The shift has happened due to a large influx of migrants into the district, starting with the first European settlers in the 1800's and culminating from the mid-1900's onwards when Indian settlers started to move to the district. As Kerala is a densely populated state, people from other regions were attracted by the apparent abundance of land in Wayanad and moved there with the aim to acquire some (Kerala Development Report 2008:358, UNDP 2009: 141 and Mohandas 1992: 33). The effect of the in-migration has not been favorable to the tribal population on Wayanad, as they have been “crowded out” from their own district. As the tribes were socially, economically, politically and organizationally weaker than the settlers, they were not able to protect their own land and rights from the settlers' well organized efforts to overtake the tribal's land. Through a variety of ways, ranging from cash purchases to illegal encroachment, the land was alienated from the tribal population at the same time as the presence of the settlers caused the destruction of the tribal populations traditional life support systems (Mohandas 1992: 43, 106). In 1975 the Government of Kerala passed an Act to return the alienated land to the tribal population to aid their development situation, but this was never implemented (UNDP 2009:132). The aggregate tribal discontent about this culminated in 2003 when tribal activists occupied parts of the Muthanga Wildlife Sanctuary to demand the implementation of the act (Damodaran 2006: 362). Unfortunately the protest did not lead to any returned land or development; instead at least two people lost their lives during this tragic event (Bijoy and Raman 2003).

Through history Wayanad has become a district of the settlers as the in-migrants now control all social structures and institutions. Due to the lack of empowerment, education and knowledge how to

utilize modern institution within the tribal population, their development situation remained stagnant (UNDP 2009:122). As such, the development that does take place in Wayanad does not reach those who are in most need – instead it is the middle class that benefit. As this group is used to dealing with and managing modern market forces it is them who are in the position to benefit from the modernization that Wayanad has gone through in the recent past (UNDP 2009:141).

### **Scheduled Tribes in Kerala and Wayanad**

While the State of Kerala has a relatively low share of tribal inhabitants, compared to the national levels, Wayanad has the largest tribal population of any district in the state. Only 1.14% of the Kerala population are tribal, but of those as many as 37% live in Wayanad, making it an interesting area to look at the issue of MNREGA's effect on tribal communities (Kerala Development Report 2008: 356).

The tribal population in Kerala is mainly a rural population – making them more dependent on access to land resources than the general population on Kerala. While only 19.52 % of the total population depends on agriculture for their living, the tribal population shows an excessive dependence on agriculture at 54.79% (Kerala State Planning Board 2010: 74). As such, they are more vulnerable to events outside of their own control, increasing the importance of an alternative livelihood option such as MNREGA. While the tribal population of Kerala appear to be better off than their national counterparts, as the poverty ratio among them is only half that of the national poverty of STs, the poverty level among them is more than twice as high as the Kerala average (Kerala State Planning Board 2010:75). There are many aspects that has caused this high level of marginalization for the tribal people, such as lack of access to land, lack of employment opportunities and what the Kerala Development Report (2008:358) recognize to be the “state's failure to provide adequate social security safeguards”. While the state has taken up various initiatives to strengthen the tribal population during the last 60 years, it appears that the tribal have not been able to benefit from the program meant for them. Instead this section of the society has remained vulnerable with an extremely weak economic base (Kerala State Planning Board 2010: 70). As such, a study assessing how MNRGEA is affecting the tribal population is important, as a way to discover if this act is more powerful than the other development initiatives that have been implemented.

Within Kerala, the STs of Wayanad are the focus of this study. These tribal people of Wayanad are not one single entity, but are made up of six larger tribal communities, and a few very small ones. Each tribal community has its own developmental character, that all deserve to be looked at separately. The six major communities are: Paniyan (44.77% of the population) , Mullu Kuruman (17.51%), Kurichian (17.38%) , Kattunaickan (9.93%), Adiyan ( 7.10%) and Urali Kuruman (2.69%). Broadly they can be categorized into three different categories – a categorization that has served as the foundation

for this study. The three categories are agricultural laborers, marginal farmers and forest dependants. The largest section is the agricultural laborers, which is mainly made up by the Paniyans and Adiyans. By tradition, these groups were the bonded laborers of the district, a tradition that is still shaping the development path of this group. Also the tribal community of Urali Kuruman – that historically has been defined as the artisan community – now falls under the category of agricultural laborers. The next section of the tribal communities are made up of the somewhat better off marginal farmers, constituted by the Kurichians and Mullu Kuruman. Being the traditional cultivators of the district this section has been able to shape a better development process for themselves, much owing to their traditional access to land. This minority within the minority is developmentally almost on par with the general population in Wayanad, and has through that managed to corner many of the previous development efforts for the tribal people. The last category of the tribal communities in Wayanad is the forest dependents, chiefly made up by the Kattunaickan community. The Indian Government has identified this tribe as a “Primitive Tribal Group” as the members of this community almost entirely depend on the forest for their livelihood – either as forest laborers or by collecting non-timber forest produce. Out of the total tribal population in Wayanad, 55 % are made up by the economically vulnerable group of agricultural laborers, 35 % by the slight better off marginal farmers and 9 % by the last, and very vulnerable, group of forest dependents (Center of Excellence 2006:35-41, UNDP 2009: 122, 125). In operationlizing this study of the effect of MNREGA on the tribal communities in Wayanad, the three categories of the tribal communities have played an important role as a way to be able to investigate how MRNEGA has affected the tribal population.

The categorization of the tribal people has long roots, and can be observed already in Gopalan Nair’s book “Wynad – its people and traditions” of 1911. Already at this point in time the land owning tribes (which includes the Mullu Kuruman of today) is placed on the top of the development ladder, followed by the so called ‘hill tribes’ within which the Kurichian are ranked the highest. In the bottom of the ladder we find Paniyan and Adiyans – referred to as the “predial slaves” – as well as the forest dwellers, e.g. the Kattunaickan (Nair 1911: 50-51). In addition to the categorization, this book also provides evidence of the long roots of marginalization of the tribal people, placing the marginalization within a historical context. The Paniyan tribe can be lifted as one example, as they are described as “a savage tribe living in caves and thick forests” that were of no use until these “black beasts” were domesticated by landlords to go their errands (Nair 1911:100).

### **The cash crop crisis**

In 2001 – 2004 Kerala was struck by an economic downturn with its root in the cash crop sector. As Wayanad has been heavily reliant on this sector and only has a very small value-added production, it was severely affected by this downturn, which in the district escalated into an economic crisis (UNDP

2009:130, Jacob 2006:17, 20). The crisis was a product of many interlinked reasons, such as the declining world prices for cash crop, the adverse state of Wayanad's credit market, a lack of investment into the agricultural sector and ecological challenges such as declining soil fertility. Together these reasons brought on the crisis (Jacob 2006: 63, 64).

The crisis came to have far-reaching effects for all of Wayanad, where the employment levels, the trade sector and the physical and mental health of the inhabitants were all adversely affected (Jacob 2006: 17). To tackle the crisis, the state implemented a number of packages such as writing off loans for farmers and giving additional financial assistance to those who were perceived to be in need, but these packages to a large extent only reached the landowning communities, not the landless agricultural workers (Mohanakumar 2008: 27). As 91% of the tribal households of Wayanad need to work as agricultural laborer – either full time or as a supplement to self-cultivation – the crisis came to affect this section in a very adverse manner (Bijoy, Raman 2003:1976). The landless tribal workers, and to some extent the tribal marginal farmers, had little else to fall back on during the time of the crisis, which therefore came to affect them to a larger extent than the general population.

The cash crop crisis is an important event to keep in mind for any investigation into Wayanad, as it has played a big role in shaping the development of the district, and it also makes Wayanad a particularly interesting locality for an investigation of the effects of MNREGA. The crisis led to that there was a great need for any development initiative for people to get through this time, insuring that there was a need and a will to engage in MNREGA. The tribal population was particularly badly affected by the crisis, motivating Wayanad as the locality for a study of the workings of MNREGA in relation to the tribal communities of India.

The aim of the study is to explore how MNREGA affects the economic situation of its tribal participants. However, as many factors affect the economic situation of any individual, it will not be possible to fully discern to what extent MNREGA is responsible for the current situation and to what extent it is other factors. This background chapter has provided a historical backdrop to the situation of tribal MNREGA participants in Wayanad, and throughout the study it is important to consider how these events – and other events not covered in the background – also may have affected the findings of the study.

## **Previous research**

To date, the literature interconnecting the three research interests of MNREGA, STs and/or Wayanad is scarce. Misha, Behera and Nayak's (2010) article "A Development Delivery Institution for the Tribal Communities: Experience of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme in India" is one of

the few that research the role of STs in MNREGA. The research team addresses the issue of how MNREGA is fairing as a development institution for the tribal population, as that group is the most marginalized social group in India. By analyzing both official data and conducting a field study in Northern India, they conclude that while MNREGA appears to be reaching the tribal population it is not living up to its full potential due to a widespread lack of awareness of the scheme's entitlements among the tribal population (Misha et al 2010: 477). The access to or lack of information is indeed an important aspect for the success of a scheme like MNREGA, but the current study will not immerse itself into this aspect, due to space limitations and the need for focus. As was evident in the theoretical framework, three other aspects were chosen as the focus, and as such no further attempt will be made to confirm or refute Misha et al's findings.

The role of STs in MNREGA has also to some extent been researched as part of larger assessments of the impact of MNREGA, such as in Haque's (2011) recent contribution "Socio-economic Impact of Implementation of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act in India". Similarly to Misha et al, Haque (2011: 460) shows that the STs of India seem to be participating in the scheme to a quite large extent, as their share in total employment created under MNREGA is three times as high as their share in the total population. In part these numbers originate from the fact that the poverty incidence is higher among STs than the general population and that they therefore are in greater need of the scheme. Despite that, Haque hopes that the widespread participation of STs in the scheme can contribute to a much-needed social transformation in India, and believes that it can do so if the potential of MNREGA is properly utilized (Haque 2011: 466). Also Dutta et al (2012) has researched the role of STs and other marginalized groups as a part of a larger investigation of the ability for MNREGA to truly *guarantee* work. The findings of this study suggest that the rationing rate of MNREGA-work is high – eroding the guarantee – but that the work provided for STs increase faster than for other groups when the program expands. This implies that while MNREGA is in fact not guaranteeing work, the benefits for the STs will increase as the program expands.

The conclusions of these three articles represent what appears to be the current knowledge frontier concerning how India's tribal population is affected by the implementation of MNREGA. They establish that the tribal population appears to be participating in the scheme, but beyond that there seems to be a knowledge gap. This present study attempts to go further into the subject of tribal people in MNREGA, by analyzing what the MNREGA is doing for the tribal people that are participating in it, and why. In this way, the study aims to expand the current knowledge frontier.

Turning to what is currently known about the role of the tribal population in Wayanad, an extensive attempt to expand that knowledge was made by the Center of Excellence (2006) with the publication

of the “Wayanad Initiative” in 2006. With the aim to design a successful development initiative for the tribal population of Wayanad, a far-reaching investigation into their present situation was made. This investigation, published only one month before the implementation of MNREGA, will serve as a starting point for the present study as it is a useful benchmark for analyzing the effects of MNREGA over the last six years. Based on a baseline study of more than 400 households, the Wayanad Initiative finds that unemployment as well as underemployment is a wide-spread, that the average family income is only Rs. 1262/month while the spending is Rs. 1405/month, that almost 50 % of the family income is spent on food and that the tribal population is greatly dependent on employment opportunities as the largest share of their income come from wage labor (Center of Excellence 2006: 50, 76, 80, 81). The report concludes that a development initiative focused on strengthening family income is needed in order for the situation of the tribal population of Wayanad to improve. This initiative should be integrated with a plan for the whole society but focus on STs, it should be multi-dimensional and implemented through the Panchayat-system, it should take the issue of food security into account and it should have a rights-based approach (Center of Excellence 2006: 22, 114, 174). While this development initiative was never implemented (Key Informant 1: Interview 2012-01-13) the similarities to MNREGA is striking, as MNREGA is precisely a rights-based development initiative focused on improving incomes, implemented through the Panchayat system. With the Wayanad Initiative as a base, the importance of this study increases as it will be a chance to discover how the situation for the STs has developed in Wayanad since 2006; has MNREGA lived up to its potential to be the development initiative that the tribal people of Wayanad greatly needed?

Taken together, the theoretical framework, the background of the research area and the previous research that interconnect them provide the foundation of the empirical part of the study. The empirical data of the study have been collected, analyzed and discussed using the frame of PWPs as well as the history of MNREGA, STs and Wayanad as references points and focus. Given this, the study will now advance into its empirical section, introduced by an account of the methodology of the study.

## 4. Methodology

In this chapter the methodology of the study will be displayed, to show what measures were taken to answer the research questions and achieve the aim of the study. The methodology was designed to best utilize the current knowledge as described in the previous sections, in order to expand it.

### Research design

In order to best operationalize the research questions of this study, a case study design was chosen. The case at hand is the Wayanad district in Kerala, particularly the ST population of the district. Wayanad was chosen as the case as it is an economically backward district with a high proportion of STs in the otherwise well-developed, mostly non-tribal state Kerala, and also as it was one of the first districts to implement MNREGA. As such Wayanad represents a research interest on its own in this study, beyond its function as locality, justifying a case study design (Bryman 2008: 53). As Wayanad represents one of few cases with a pocket of backwardness in an otherwise quite well-developed region, it was further chosen for its ability to shed light on this particular circumstance, making it a *critical case* (using Yin's categorization in Bryman 2008:56). A case study can be both qualitative and quantitative in its approach, a feature that this research will make use of (Bryman 2008:53). The data collection has predominantly been qualitative, as the primary data was collected qualitatively in an effort to collect in-depth data that can provide answers for the research questions. However, as quantitative data has the ability to provide a broader picture, and as there exists a large quantitative survey of the development situation of Adivasi communities in Wayanad conducted in 2006 (Centre of Excellence 2006), quantitative data has been consulted as a secondary source.

### Data collection

In order to collect the necessary data to facilitate this case study, two main methodological tools were used: interviews to collect primary material, supplemented by the collection of written, secondary material. Interviewing is a valuable way of collecting rich, detailed data at the same time as it is flexible and responsive to the direction of the research (Bryman 2008: 436, 437). Given the particular time and budget constraints of the study, the interview method was further chosen as it enabled the study to access many different viewpoints in a relatively short period of time. However, as interviewing requires quite an extensive amount of time per respondent, the sample size is small. A survey method would have expanded the scope of the study, but considering the remote position of the respondents, it would not have been practically feasible to neither distribute and collect the surveys, nor expect them to be properly filled out. Beyond practical reasons, the interview technique was chosen as a way to give voice to the respondents of the study, and enable them to express their own experience of MNREGA in a fuller manner than is possible from a survey. Based on this priority for depth, other ways of expanding the scope of the study, such as using existing statistical data,

were also excluded. While the conclusions of the study need to be considered in the light of its limited coverage, the study will based on its methodology be able to point to trends within the research area and towards issues that need further research.

### **Primary sources: Interviews**

In order to collect the most useful data for answering the two research questions, interviews were conducted with two different groups of respondents: 1: “key informants” with a broader knowledge of the development situation in the district and state e.g. researchers, politicians and MNREGA officials, and 2: tribal people in Wayanad that work through the MNREGA. By including interviewees from both these groups, a broader picture of the effect of MNREGA was allowed to emerge by the contribution from both an ‘outside’ and an ‘inside’ perspective of the workings of the Act. The interviews were conducted in January and February 2012. Being the break between winter and summer this is a time of year when work is more readily available than during the monsoon seasons, which might have affected some of the answers of the MNREGA-participants regarding work levels.

The aim of the interviews with interview group 1 was to gain a broader perspective of the relationship between MNREGA’s implementation and the tribal population in Wayanad. Eleven interviews, covering twelve respondents, were conducted with this group, consisting of staff at the official MNREGA office in Wayanad, researchers tied to research institutes in Kerala, local politicians in charge in the implementation, land-owners with MNREGA-workers on their land, one former NGO-worker and tribal Wayanad-inhabitants who are not working in MNRGEA. As the aim of the interviews were to gain various perspectives of how the MNREGA is affecting the tribal population and why, a loose sampling frame was the most beneficial for the study. As such, no perspective was purposely excluded from the data collection, but instead measures were taken so that as many viewpoints a possible would be included. The interviews were all semi-structured in their format, ten being in a one-to-one setting, and one interview consisting of two respondents. The interview guide was adopted for every interview, to be focused so that every respondent would be able to contribute with the perspective of the MNREGA/ST relationship that they had insight to.

The aim of the interviews with interview group 2 – the tribal MNREGA participants – was twofold: to provide data for the first research question (how this group is affected by their participation in MNREGA) and also to connect the data from interview group 1 with the perspective of those who participate in the scheme – to be able to answer to second research question as well (why they are affected the way they are). In order to retrieve as much valuable data as possible with limited resources and to keep potential gaps in the data collection to a minimum, a thorough sampling frame was developed. As addressed in the background chapter, there are six tribal communities present in

Wayanad, which can roughly be divided into three categories distinguished by different occupations, development paths, history, educational level and traditional land-holding size. As all these aspects have the potential to affect how an individual benefit from a development initiative, this categorization was a useful sampling frame. One more aspect was added to this sampling criterion, namely a gender aspect. As most of the MRNEGA participants are women, a majority if the respondents are women. However, as to not exclude the male perspective of the effects of MNREGA, 5/14 respondents were male.

Over the course of the data collection, ten interviews were conducted with tribal MNREGA-participants in Wayanad, covering 14 participants. Eight interviews were in a one-to-one setting, while two interviews were group interviews with three participants per time. The group interviews were not focus group interviews where the participants are asked to engage with each other, but simply an interview with more than one respondent, conducted that way due to time constraints. The aim of all these interviews – including the group setting interviews – was to retrieve as much data as possible on the situation of each individual tribal person in relation to their experience of MNREGA, and therefore the setting was of subordinate importance as long as the questions were answered. This is also reflected in the interview guide that was used for these interviews as it - while still semi-structured in its true sense - fall closer to the structured side of the spectra in comparison with the interviews with the key informants. The interview guide consisted of 32 questions concerning their economic and social situation as well as their experience of MNREGA (see Appendix 1). To avoid placing too high demands on the interviewees, the questions are short and straightforward, and only a few open up for longer elaborations. To a large extent all interviewees were asked the same questions in the same order, but in keeping with the semi-structured design the questions and/or question order was altered when needed.

The district of Wayanad consists of three blocks: Kalpetta (the capital), Mananthavady and Sulthan Bathery. Sultan Bathery has the highest proportion of ST families and was therefore chosen as the location of the interviews (UNDP 2009:123). Within Sulthan Bathery, one village was chosen as the specific location of the study. This village represents the features of Wayanad which located the study there initially and was therefore a suitable location. These features are that it is a hilly, remote, relatively backward forest area where tribal people and non-tribal people live side by side. Within this particular village four of the six largest tribal communities are represented (with the exception of the two smallest tribes), and all the three sample categories. Interviews were conducted with representatives from the Paniyan, Kurichians, Mulla Kuruman and Kattunaickan communities, and included 3-4 respondents per tribal community.

In total 21 interviews, covering 26 respondents, were conducted. 17 of the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim, while the other four were recorded by taking notes. The transcripts and interview notes is what has served as the main foundation for this study.

### **Secondary sources: Written material**

In addition to the primary material collected in Wayanad, the study also draws on written material collected from Kerala. The Center of Development Studies (CDS) in Trivandrum – Kerala’s capital – has an excellent library which the author was able to access. From there much relevant data on the history of Wayanad was collected, which has contributed to the findings of this study as Wayanad-specific information proved difficult to access through other channels.

### **Analytical framework**

Predominately qualitative case studies tend to be inductive in their approach, an aspect that this study subscribes to (Bryman 2008:55). The theory of PWPs which this study utilizes has served as an overall frame, within which the findings of the study have been drawn from the collected data. The data collection has some features of quantitative research but the analysis will to a large extent be qualitative in nature, using a thematic approach as presented by Holliday (2007). Using this framework, the data is allowed to be in focus and be the driving feature of the study.

In Holliday’s (2007: 89-91) thematic approach to data analysis, the data is in focus from which themes are created as a way to drive the analysis forward. Themes are created by organizing the data by the natural deviations that appear in the data collection. These themes then become the basis of the data discussion, and together make up the main argument of the study. In the current data collection four themes that are important to answer the research questions have been identified, which will be treated separately in the data discussion. In the analysis the themes have been used as a step towards transforming the raw data of the data collection into the argument of the study, which is that MNRGEA is not living up to its full potential as a PWP due to a too low wage level, poor timing of works throughout the year and inadequate access to created assets. According to Holliday, the benefit of choosing a thematic approach to data analysis as suppose to other methods, such as Grounded Theory or Analytical Induction<sup>4</sup> is that it provides a way to organize the data as well as it enables a coherent - as suppose to chronological - account of the data. Both these features facilitate the writing up of the data (Holliday 2007:96).

In accordance with Holliday’s (2007: 89, 90) method, each theme of this study has been treated in three steps, where first the argument of the theme is displayed, which secondly is supported by extracts from the corpus of data. Lastly, these two steps are connected by the third step of discursive

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<sup>4</sup> see for example Bryman 2008: 538-562

commentary, where the link between the argument and the data is made clear. This method has been applied to all themes, with the main argument of the study overriding the data display at all times. This thorough analysis is done in order to reach a thick description of the situation of the tribal population in relation to MNREGA in Wayanad, from which the research questions can be answered. A thick description of a scenario is according to Holliday (2007: 103) reached by including two features: a description of a network of interconnected data as well as the argument and discussion of that network. In this study the network of interconnected data has been achieved by the use of two different interview groups and it is by the discussion of this data that the link from data to the argument has been demonstrated – facilitating a thick description of the situation in Wayanad<sup>5</sup>.

### **System of presenting the data**

The data will in the following section be displayed theme by theme, all including the three components of the argument, data extracts and discursive commentary. As the interviewees of this study will be kept anonymous, the raw data will be referred to by a system of codes. For the first interview group consisting of key informants, the informants will be referred to as KI 1-12 and the respondents of the second group of MNREGA-participants will be referred to as MP 1-14. The personal characteristics (e.g. gender, age, occupation and tribal community when appropriate) for each respondent are displayed in the list of references.

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<sup>5</sup> For further clarification of the method of data analysis and the constituents of thick description, see Figure 5.1 in Holliday (2007: 90) and Figure 5.2 in Holliday (2007:103)

## 5. Analysis and discussion

In accordance with Holliday's analytical framework, the analysis and discussion section of this study has been divided into four chapters, where each chapter addresses a specific theme. The first theme relates to the first research question and is an attempt to give a descriptive account of how the economic situation of the tribal people has been affected by their participation in MNREGA, based on data collected from a field study in Wayanad in January-March 2012. The following three themes relate to the second research question – why the STs have been affected in such a way – where each theme corresponds to one of the three theoretical aspects of PWPs that underpins this study: the wage level, the timing of a PWP and the self-targeting mechanism in relation to created assets.

### Theme 1: How has MNREGA affected the economic situation of the Scheduled Tribes?

The first step in analyzing the data collection will be to discern how MNREGA has affected the Scheduled Tribes of Wayanad in practice, in order to answer the first research question. The findings of this study suggest that while MNREGA is providing an increased access to employment and workdays, it has not managed to transform the economic situation for the tribal population.

**Table 1: The economic situation of STs in Wayanad - 3 categories.**

*Based on data from 14 MNREGA participants in Wayanad district, February 2012*

	Marginal farmers	Agricultural laborers	Forest dependants	Total – all ST categories
<b>Landholding size</b> (acres)	<b>0,96</b>	<b>0,06</b>	<b>0,33</b>	<b>0,57</b>
<b>Income<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>3390</b>	<b>2662</b>	<b>1650</b>	<b>2809</b>
- MNREGA	1150 <sup>b</sup> (34%)	985 (37%)	917 (55%)	1057 <sup>b</sup> (38%)
- Other income <sup>c</sup>	2296 <sup>b</sup> (68%)	1677 (63%)	733 (45%)	1699 <sup>b</sup> (60%)
<b>Expenditure<sup>d</sup></b>	<b>3690</b>	<b>2485</b>	<b>2317</b>	<b>3051</b>
<b>Borrowing<sup>e</sup></b>	<b>3 (7)</b>	<b>3 (3)<sup>f</sup></b>	<b>3 (3)</b>	<b>10 (13)</b>
<b>Annual workdays</b>	<b>232</b>	<b>196</b>	<b>132</b>	<b>198</b>
-MNREGA	92	78	73	84
-Other work	140	118	59	114

<sup>a</sup> Average monthly income has been calculated from reported number of working days in MNREGA as well as outside of MNREGA, times reported daily income per type of work. Where applicable, the reported annual income from agriculture has been added as spread evenly around the year. Displayed in Indian Rupees. <sup>b</sup> The numbers do not add up, as data from MP 13 and MP 14 is missing with regards to their ratio of workdays, see Appendix 2. <sup>c</sup> Any other income: e.g. wage labor and/or agricultural produce <sup>d</sup> Monthly expenditure calculated by reported monthly spending on food, medicine, household items, alcohol, tobacco, entertainment and 'other' expenses. However, MP13 and MP14 estimated their total expenditure themselves, see Appendix 2. <sup>e</sup> Displayed as number of respondents who report they have to borrow money to cover their basic expenses. <sup>f</sup> While otherwise 4 respondents in this category, data is missing for MP7, see Appendix 2.

Table 1 displays the economic situation of the MNREGA-participants of this study with reference to their landholdings, income, expenditure and the need for loans. On average, the MNREGA participants earn Rs. 2809/month (362 SEK) while spending Rs 3051/month (392 SEK), resulting in a monthly overspending of Rs. 242. The widespread overspending is confirmed by that 10/13 respondents report that they need to borrow money on a monthly or annual basis in order to meet their basic expenses. MNREGA contributes with Rs. 1057 to the monthly income, accounting for about 38%.

Table 1 displays the findings of the study as mean values, which inhabits its limitations. In an effort to offset the risk of a few respondents falling at the extremes of the spectra and distorting the results, the median values are to be found in Appendix 3. The findings conform with each other to a large extent, but on two notes they appear to differ. First, the value for the agricultural laborers' expenditure is significantly lower when calculated by the median than it is as calculated by the mean value, because MP6's high expenditure inflates the mean value. The second note where the findings appear to differ is that when displayed by the median, there is no average monthly overspending as the income is Rs. 246 higher than the expenditure. However, keeping in mind the large number of respondents that report they need to borrow money to make ends meet, it is probable that the mean value is more reliable in this case. In a further effort to show the robustness of the findings, despite the small sample size, the data was analyzed when excluding the extreme cases in addition to calculating by the mean and the median. Even when excluding the outlier respondents, the results were quite similar, indicating a certain level of robustness in the findings<sup>6</sup>.

In an effort to put the findings of the fieldwork into a broader perspective, the findings will be compared with the baseline study conducted by the Center of Excellence. As previously discussed, this baseline study is based on a survey of over 400 household which was published in January 2006, just one month before MNREGA was implemented in Wayanad. The combination of that baseline study and the current field data provides an opportunity to discern the trends of economic development for the tribal population of Wayanad since the implementation of MNREGA. The Center of Excellence's findings are based on family income and expenditure, while the current study is based on individual data. The comparison is as such not straightforward; nevertheless interesting

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<sup>6</sup>When excluding the extreme cases of MP1 (very high income) and MP5 (very low income and expenditure), the results are similar to a large extent, apart from that the income of agricultural laborers is increased. As it was the same group whose number differed between the mean and median value, it may be that the results for the other two groups are more robust than for the agricultural laborers. The results are (income/expenditure): Total – 2699/3030, Marginal farmers: 2913/3402, Agricultural laborers 3310/3000, Forest dependants 1650/2317.

conclusions may still emerge. To add to the comprehension of the comparison, the values from 2006 have been deflated using a Consumption Price Index, in order to adjust for inflation, and all values are therefore given 2012's Rupees (for further clarification, see Appendix 4).

**Table 2: A comparison of the economic situation of STs in Wayanad 2006-2012**

	2006 - Center of Excellence <sup>a</sup>	2012 – Fieldwork data	Change in %
<b>Monthly income</b>	<b>1954</b>	<b>2809</b>	<b>44%</b>
-Marginal farmers	2248	3390	50%
- Agricultural laborers	1818	2662	46%
-Forest dependants	1671	1650	- 0.1%
<b>Monthly expenditure</b>	<b>2089</b>	<b>3051</b>	<b>46%</b>
-Marginal farmers	2586	3690	43%
- Agricultural laborers	2151	2485	16%
-Forest dependants	1957	2317	18%
<b>Annual number of workdays<sup>b</sup></b>	<b>105<sup>c</sup></b>	<b>198</b>	<b>89%</b>
- Marginal farmers	-	232	
- Agricultural laborers	-	196	
- Forest dependants	-	132	

<sup>a</sup>To enable a more accurate comparison, the 2006 values are given in 2012's Rupees <sup>b</sup>including both MNREGA-work and other work. <sup>c</sup>This number denotes the average number of working days for men only, as the Center of Excellence chose to make this distinction. The number was even lower for women, at 47 days/year.

Table 2 shows that the average income has increased for the tribal population since the implementation of MNREGA, as the individual income at present is Rs. 2809, 44% higher per month than the previous family income. However, as the individual expenditure has increased by 46%, the increased income appears to have been cancelled out and overspending remains widespread. In fact, the overspending has increased steeply, from Rs. 135/month to Rs. 242/month. While the increased overspending could have its root in a changed expenditure pattern, the aggregate interview data suggest that the increase instead is caused by prices of products increasing more than the income. As a whole, the field study data suggest that the economic situation of the tribal population is severely challenged, and that no apparent improvement has taken place since the implementation of MNREGA. The income/expenditure ratio is similar to the situation before its implementation, and the little change that has taken place has even done so in the wrong direction, worsening the situation rather than improving it. The most drastic change that has taken place is that the number of

workdays has nearly doubled<sup>7</sup>. However, considering how the extra employment opportunities have not led to an improved economic situation, this can hardly be denoted as a success for MNREGA.

When reviewing the findings of this present study, one needs to consider that the findings are based on a small sample of only 14 participants. As such, the findings cannot be assigned the same statistical significance as the Center of Excellence's findings, despite the efforts of showing the robustness of the results. However, even when accounting for a large margin of error, the trend is clear showing that MNREGA has done little towards raising the income more than the spending while the participants are working more days.

While the sample of this study is quite narrow, a thorough sampling frame was developed in order to establish how the different tribal communities have been affected differently by the scheme, and the sample was therefore based on three different categories of tribal communities. As outlined in Table 1, the scheme generates the highest monthly income for the richest category, the marginal farmers, at Rs. 1150/month while the poorest section, the forest dependants, receive the least money from MNREGA at Rs. 917/month. While the forest dependants receive the lowest amount of income from MNREGA, they are also the section that is most dependent on the scheme, as it accounts for 55 % of their total income. As this group also is the group with the highest level of overspending, it appears that MNREGA has done little to strengthen their position. Turning to the agricultural laborers, they are the only group where the income actually exceeds the spending. However, as is displayed in Appendix 2, two out of the four respondents in this group report that they are receiving government subsidies for their food, offsetting the spending data. As all respondents report that they need to borrow money for their expenses, it is probable that the overspending is present also in this category. In Table 2, the data on how the different tribal groups have been affected suggest that MNREGA has done a poor job in altering the prevailing income distribution of the scheduled tribes. The marginal farmers are still the richest section of the tribal population and they also benefit most from MNREGA both in terms of wage and workdays, while the other groups are lagging behind. The situation for the agricultural laborers appear to have converged some with the marginal farmers – as their income has increased by 46% while the expenditure only with 16 % - but the situation for the forest dependants has not. As brought up in the background chapter, the marginal farmers have previously been found to corner the development initiatives intended for the tribal population, a situation that appears to continue with MNREGA. As such the traditional, uneven situation is still present and it appears that the MNREGA has not been powerful enough to cause a thorough development process.

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<sup>7</sup> The average of 198days/year might be somewhat inflated though, as 7/14 respondents belong to the marginal farmers – the group with the highest level of annual workdays. However, even if somewhat inflated, the increase has been large.

Turning to the development of the wage level for Wayanad STs as an effect of MNREGA, the data shows that the outside-scheme wage has increased significantly since the scheme's implementation. In 2006 the average daily wage for tribal laborers in Wayanad was Rs. 90 for men and Rs. 58 for women<sup>8</sup> (Centre of Excellence 2006: 76). According to the Wayanad Human Development Report, the average daily wage had increased to Rs. 100/day for men in 2008 (UNDP 2009: 130), and according to the field data, the present daily wage for casual labor outside MNREGA in Wayanad is Rs. 188 for men and Rs. 157 for women (MP1-14). The MNREGA-wage of Rs. 150/day could be a reason that has helped pull up the general ST wages in Wayanad, which would qualify as one of the successes of the scheme. However, according to the key informants of this study, the market wage for manual labor has increased dramatically in all fields recently, especially the construction field where a daily wage of Rs. 300-500 is not uncommon (KI1, KI6, KI7). As such, one cannot know to what extent MNREGA is responsible for the increased wage, or if the increase would have occurred anyway.

All 14 respondents interviewed for this study report that they are very happy with the MNREGA, because it provides work and income. As all the respondents live in economically challenging situations, it is quite understandable that an extra day of work and wage would be viewed to be helpful. However, as has been shown from this data display, despite the extra workdays, no structural improvement has taken place since the implementation of MNREGA. The income is still lower than the expenditure for the tribal people, and indebtedness is widespread. The main change that has taken place is that the people work many more days per year, but as this has not been coupled with an improved economic situation, it shows that MNREGA has not been powerful enough as a development strategy to launch the tribal population of Wayanad onto a path of long-term economic development.

However, as MNREGA is a very large project, it also has potential to have effects beyond the immediate economic outcomes. One such effect is that the tribal participants are receiving bank education, as the MNREGA wage is paid through the bank system. While the MNREGA-participants in the current data sample themselves see the bank visits mostly as a time-consuming chore, the local politicians of Wayanad describe this as one of the benefits of MNREGA (MP9, KI5, KI7). Another benefit, according to KI8, is that MNREGA has helped reduce out-migration from backward districts to other places. However, this notion was not confirmed by the field data as none of the MNREGA-participants acknowledge that MNREGA has had any effect on their desire to move out of Wayanad in either direction.

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<sup>8</sup> The interview data confirm that this was the wage level also in the sample village before the implementation of MNREGA.

In conclusion the data collection of this study shows that the income levels in Wayanad has increased since the implementation of MNREGA, but that no dynamic economic development has been launched as the income-expenditure situation has not improved. One cannot draw the conclusion however that MNREGA is the sole reason for this economic development, as there are many factors that affects the economic development of a district. As addressed, it is possible that the daily wage for tribal people in Wayanad would have gone up over the last six years even without MNREGA, because the general local wage has increased. Another reason that probably has affected the economic development is how the district has recovered from the cash crop crisis and the associated recession in the early 2000's. While it is beyond the scope of this study to fully understand the economic development of the tribal population of Wayanad over the last six years, investigating the effects of MNREGA will at least contribute to that knowledge. The MNREGA did, for example, work as a highly needed safety net towards the end of the cash crop crisis and as such it plays a role on the economic development of tribal people (KI2).

The argument of this first theme has been that while MNREGA has succeeded in generating more days of employment, it has not managed to transform the economic situation for its tribal participants in Wayanad. The argument is supported by the data display, which shows that while the MNREGA-participants are working 198 days/year and are happy with the scheme, their economic situation is still very challenging. The coming data analysis will now focus on why MNREGA has not been more successful in generating an improved economic situation by investigating the wage level, the timing and the self-targeting mechanism, as these features are important for the outcome of development strategies like MNREGA.

## **Theme 2: The wage level**

Turning to next theme of the data collection, the importance of the wage level in MNREGA will now be addressed. As was evident in the theoretical framework, the wage level is a very important aspect of any Public Works Program, including MNREGA. The data collected for this study reveals that the wage level in MNREGA is set below its optimal rate, and as such this essay argues that MNREGA would have a more beneficial effect on the tribal people of Wayanad if the wage level was raised.

As addressed in the previous section of the data analysis, a clear majority of the MNREGA participants interviewed for this study report that they need to borrow money on a monthly or annual basis in order to make ends meet despite participating in MNREGA and engaging in casual labor outside of the scheme. This shows that the MNREGA income has not been significant enough to battle the widespread indebtedness that many of the STs in Wayanad suffer. Considering how a high level of indebtedness and an unbalanced credit market was part of the reason for the recession that

hurt Wayanad during the first years of the millennia, this is a pressing issue that needs to be dealt with. One way of doing so would be to ensure that the MNREGA wage is high enough so that those participating would not be forced into taking loans for their survival.

The low wage level is a problem of extra weight in the districts of Kerala compared to other parts of India, as the gap between the market wage and the stipulated minimum wage for the state is very wide. The minimum wage – and as such the MNREGA wage – is Rs. 150/day, while the market wage for manual labor in Kerala for men ranges from Rs. 300-450/day (KI1, KI7). Despite Rs. 150/day being one of the highest minimum wages in the country, the wage level is as such very low within the Kerala context. In many other parts of India the minimum wage level instead fall relatively close to the wage level that Subbarao (1997: 678) finds to be the most beneficial: a wage slightly lower than the prevailing market wage. As the MNREGA wage is far below the prevailing market wage, it is probably not the most beneficial wage level and cannot be expected to lead to a dynamic economic development. This is confirmed by KI1, as he states: “This scheme amount is very low compared to local wage...so a significant change it cannot make”.

Another consequence of the low wage level is that the scheme in Kerala and Wayanad to a large extent only provides support for women; men do not wish to participate in the scheme for such a small wage. Researchers, politicians, NGO-workers and MNREGA participants alike expressed this opinion, which is confirmed by the fact that approximately 80-90% of MNREGA participants in Kerala are women (MP3, KI6, KI7, KI8). While one benefit of this situation is that MNREGA in this way reaches very weak sections of the society, such as widows and other women that are not able to find other employment, it confirms Lipton’s (1996: 48) concern that a too low wage might lead to that the ‘poor but proud’ people – the men in this case - refuse to participate in the scheme.

A further aspect of the wage level that is interesting to look at is when the wage is paid, to see how much is paid at one time. The MNREGA wage is paid bi-weekly, meaning that participants need to wait a full two weeks for their payment but also that they receive a relatively large amount at one time. Many of the MNREGA-respondents found this to be a problem as they struggled with the household economy while they waited for their payment (MP5, MP9, MP11). However, MP12 found it to be a benefit as being paid a large sum at once enables her to save some of the money. MP12 represents the category ‘marginal farmers’, while the other respondents represent the agricultural laborers and forest dependants, perhaps suggesting that the current situation of a low wage being paid in bulk is most of a problem for the weakest sections of the tribal population. If that is the case, the MNREGA wage would need to be improved so that also the weaker sections are able to manage between payments, not only those who have land to support them.

The official view, as stated by the MNREGA office in Wayanad's capital, does not acknowledge that the MNREGA wage would be too low, but instead emphasize how MNREGA has been a huge success that both has stimulated the district's economy and increased the STs bargaining power (KI 5). The fact that MNREGA has increased the STs bargaining power is to some extent confirmed by UNDP's Human Development Report from Wayanad. The report shows that MNREGA has put a stop to the dual wage system that has been common in Wayanad since the 1960's, in which the tribal people are paid less for the same work (UNDP 2009:130). However, this accomplishment aside, even politicians from both the two dominant parties (The Congress Party and CPI(M)-the Communist Party) agree that the MNREGA wage level is too low for the Kerala reality (KI7, KI9). Considering how the wage in for example the construction field is Rs. 300-500/day, both parties are on the local level working towards increasing the state minimum wage – and by extent the MNREGA wage - from Rs. 150/day to Rs.200/day.

One of the benefits of a low wage level – as was lifted in the theoretical framework – is that it mitigates the risk that jobs need to be rationed due to high costs, making sure the PWP reaches as many as possible. However, as Dutta et al (2012) finds, the rationing rate within the MNREGA is still very high. As such, the low wage level does not seem to involve many benefits for MNREGA but instead contributes to water down the scheme, especially in Kerala and Wayanad where the gap between the minimum wage and the market wage is high.

All MNREGA participants interviewed for this study report that their income is not enough to meet their basic expenses, despite MNREGA participation, and that MNREGA would be improved if it provided higher wages. While this might appear to be a quite 'natural' view for people living in an economically difficult situation, the MNREGA participants get support in their view from many of the key informants as well – researchers, politicians and NGO-workers alike. There are theoretical underpinnings for designing a PWP with a low wage-level, but it is evident that the MNREGA wage in Kerala and Wayanad is too low. As the wage is but a third of the local market wage, it is not powerful enough to lead to a dynamic economic development for the tribal population of Wayanad.

### **Theme 3: The timing of the MNREGA-work**

In the following section the timing of MNREGA throughout the year will be addressed, as this is the next of the important PWP aspects in focus of this study. On the basis of the field study data, the study finds that there is room for significant improvement concerning when MNREGA is available throughout the year.

The official standpoint as to when MNREGA is supposed to be available is that MNREGA is designed to fill the gaps of employment that might occur throughout the year. As such, MNREGA is mainly

supposed to be utilized during rain- and drought seasons, when little other work is available (KI5). The need for employment of such stabilizing nature that is well-timed through the year is confirmed by the MNREGA-participants. However, from the fieldwork data, it does not appear that MNREGA is actually focused during the rain- and drought seasons but that the majority of the works are available during the busy agricultural season. All participants report that there are times in the year when employment is scarce, and that one way for MNREGA to improve would be if it provided more workdays during the scarce time. MP9 stresses that while income is enough during the time of year when the interview was conducted (February, which is in the early summer season), it is not enough to cover the expenses during the monsoon season. MP11 confirms that income is scarce during monsoon season, so scarce that the family is forced to pluck wild roots in order to save the children from starvation. MP11 goes on to explain that the MNREGA payment would be more helpful for the family income if it was spread throughout the year, especially during monsoon season. In such a case, she could work a few days a week in casual labor to meet the daily expenses, and use the MNREGA payment (which comes as one sum every fortnight) for savings. The need to provide MNREGA work during the monsoon season is confirmed by KI10 as well, who argues that MNREGA jobs are of most use if it is provided when no other works are available. However, the timing aspect of MNREGA appear to be working to some extent, as the fact that MNREGA provides jobs when there are no other jobs is lifted as a benefit of the scheme by some of the participant-interviewees (MP3, MP13, MP14). However, from the data collection it is also evident that this timing aspect offers considerable room for improvement. MP14 states that one of the most significant problems of MNREGA is that it is not synced with the agricultural pattern. When politicians plan the MNREGA works, they are not aware of the agricultural pattern leading to that the laborers end up misplaced – for example cleaning roads even though their labor would have been needed in the paddy fields. As mentioned in earlier, this lack of alignment with the agricultural patterns is one of the main implementation problems that Kamath (2010) addresses in relation to MNREGA. MP14's own solution would be to include farmers in the planning process as they have experience knowing when labor is needed, and perhaps that is a valid suggestion in order to achieve a better timing of MNREGA. The local politicians themselves recognize that the poor planning of MNREGA works is not beneficial, as farmers end up having difficulties finding labor when they need it if all the laborers are engaged in MNREGA works (KI7).

The picture that emerges from this data reveals that poor timing of MNREGA works can have a double negative affect: both in the sense that laborers loose work opportunities during the monsoon season and in the sense that farmers struggle finding labor during the busy agricultural season. Turning to the theoretical framework of this study, the current data collection is more in favor of

Subbarao's (1997:680, 2003:13) theory that PWP jobs should be offered during the agricultural slack season, than Ravallion's (1987:17,39) idea that it is more beneficial to provide work during the busy agricultural time. Ravallion argues that offering PWP-work during the busy time would increase competition for laborers and drive up wages, but no such trends has been evident in this data collection. Furthermore, Ravallion (1987:48) argues that stabilization effects are better achieved by other strategies than a PWP, but even if there are other ways of achieving stabilization effects, the aim of MNREGA is to be a safety net for the rural poor, and in order to be that, stabilization effects are necessary. As such, it appears that Subbarao's theory is best applicable for MNREGA to utilize its full potential, but as of now it does not seem like MNREGA is living up to that potential. The official guideline and design of MNREGA is that work should be provided during the slack seasons and if that was properly implemented, significant improvements on the potential of MNREGA to lead to economic development for the tribal population could be reached.

#### **Theme 4: Self-targeting and access to productive assets**

The last theme that this data analysis will deal with is the aspect of self-targeting within MNREGA, and how self-targeting has affected the outcome of MNREGA for the tribal population in Wayanad. As was clarified in the theoretical framework, a successful self-targeting mechanism within a PWP is based on two notions: that it ensures that only the intended targeted group (e.g. the poor) participates, and that the same group receives access to the productive assets<sup>9</sup> that are created within the PWP. Given the data collection at hand – only 14 MNREGA participants, all from a poor section of the society – it is not possible to investigate to what extent only the poor participate in the scheme as a whole. Instead the focus lies on the second notion of the self-targeting mechanism; that it is the poor that receive access to the assets. As presented in the theoretical framework, Lipton argues that a PWP cannot be expected to lead to development through the cash transfer it provides, but that development is reached by the productive assets that are created within the PWP. As such, this section will evaluate the self-targeting mechanism by exploring to what extent the MNREGA-respondents of the study have received access to the assets they create through MNREGA.

According to the MNREG Act of 2005 the work within the scheme is supposed to focus on water conservation, drought proofing and land development in order to provide useful assets. KI5 – a staff member of the official MNREGA office in Wayanad – reports that this is the type of job that is in fact carried out within MNREGA in Wayanad, and points to how the work is very economically useful in Wayanad. Also the local politicians in Wayanad lift the fact that the work carried out within MRNEGA is economically productive, whether it is in road work, land development or well-construction. Through that, all the funds for MNREGA are utilized for the development of the rural areas (K7, K9).

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<sup>9</sup> E.g. irrigation opportunities, new roads and land development.

However, when interviewing people outside of the political sphere, another picture emerges. KI1 reports that the work carried out within MNREGA is in fact not within the fields it is supposed to be, but that MNREGA “just provides some small silly job that is not doing any productive, economic activity” (KI1). KI10 also argues that the work within MNREGA is of a very simple nature, and that it should be focused away from these simple activities to e.g. microenterprises (KI10). KI1 imply that the reason for the low level of economic productivity in the MNREGA works is that the local panchayats do not have adequate plans for where to place the MNREGA labor, leading to that laborers end up working with minor chores (KI1). Turning to the data from the interviews with MNREGA-participants, the data is more in favor of the picture presented by KI1 and KI10, than the one painted by the politicians and official MNREGA-staff. Only 2/14 MNREGA participants report that they have engaged in any work that would fall under the focus categories of MNREGA, namely MP7 and MP10 who have worked with digging ditches. On the other hand, all interviewed participants report that MNREGA works is mostly within road cleaning and land cleaning – by far the most common MNREGA work within the current sample. Other works that the interviewees have engaged in is coffee plucking and some paddy field work. It is interesting to note that that none of the four most common MNREGA works – land cleaning, road cleaning, coffee plucking and paddy field work – can be defined as generating a “productive asset”.

A consequence of the fact that MNREGA-works does not appear to be particularly productive is that MNREGA-workers run the risk of being viewed as “lazy people” – a term that KI1, KI3 and KI10 use to describe this group. According to these informants, a large part of a MNREGA-work day is, to use KI10’s words, spent “sitting by the national highway, looking at the sky”. The MNREGA-workers themselves are aware of this attitude towards them which MP7 addresses when enquired on the negative sides of MNREGA. On the other hand, the same respondent and MP1 lift the fact that MNREGA work “is easy” as one of the benefits of MNREGA (MP1, MP7).

The result of the low level of productivity of the MNREGA-works is that the Act comes to be more similar to an unemployment allowance than an actual Public Works Program, as nothing is being produced in return for the wage that the government provides. According to KI7 – a local politician – the middle class is starting to notice this and they proclaim that MNREGA is turning out to be a waste of money for the government. Also KI1 see that this could be a risk as he acknowledges that unless the issue of the low productivity in MNREGA-works is addressed, the money put into MNREGA will indeed be wasted (KI1). A potential solution to this problem was brought up by the current head of a panchayat in Wayanad, as he states that “all the activities of the small-scale farmers should be included in the act . . . then only there is a future [for the act]” (KI9). Currently some agricultural works are eligible as MNREGA-works but only a few, in order to keep within the focus works stated in

the Act in 2005. In the interviews with two farmers who currently have MNREGA laborers working with the permitted works on their land, a generally positive picture of MNREGA labor carrying out agricultural works emerged (KI11, KI12). It is viewed as a win-win situation where the MNREGA-participants receive work and the farmers receive free labor (as the state provides for the MNREGA wage). An expansion of this type of work within the act could perhaps help in turning the MNREGA works into something more economically productive than the current land and road cleaning. However, a solution of this type would not improve the second aspect of the self-targeting mechanism, as the productive work done in this scenario would benefit the farmers rather than the MNREGA-participants.

As is evident from these paragraphs of data extract, it does not appear that the MNREGA participants are receiving access to any productive assets through their participation, as no such assets appears to be produced! As Lipton (1996) and to some extent Imai (2006) shed light on, the cash transfer of a PWP is not enough to lift the poor out of poverty, but this process needs to be coupled with access to productive assets. Within the type of work that is actually carried out by the MNREGA participants interviewed in this study, no such assets are being produced. Instead, the participants spend their time cleaning the rural roads and fields, which is hardly something that can be used the further one's economic development. As such, the self-targeting mechanism in relation to created assets does not have the desired outcomes for its participants. In order for MNREGA to live up to its full potential in the future, this issue needs to be given careful consideration from the implementing agencies of MNREGA. If this does not happen, the Act may end being watered down to only being a new form unemployment allowance – a development that would take it far from its original aims.

### **Data discussion**

Based in the data displayed and discussed in the above four themes, this essay argues that MNREGA is not living it up to its full potential as a PWP-development strategy and that MNREGA in certain aspects fall short in both design and implementation. Due to the too low wage level, poor timing mechanism throughout the year and inadequate creation of productive assets it is not succeeding as a development strategy for economically marginalized groups in Wayanad.

When placing the present data collection within the theoretical framework of the study, conclusions can be drawn on why MNREGA is affecting the scheduled tribes the way it is, in reference to certain aspects of MNREGA as a PWP. The data of this study offers support to Lipton's (1996) caution towards setting a PWP-wage too low. As discussed in the theoretical framework, Subbarao (1997, 2003) argues that the wage level should be set low, as to ensure the participation of only poor people and to keep the budget costs down. However, this study has shown that a wage level which is

too low dilutes the power of the PWP as it becomes too weak to change the prevailing structures. This is evident by the fact that the economic situation of the tribal people has not structurally improved since before the MNREGA – both in reference to the income/expenditure pattern and to the intra-tribal structure between different communities. However, considering the timing of the scheme, the data of this study is in favor of Subbarao's (1997, 2003) argument that scheme-work should be offered during the agricultural slack season. Well-timed work opportunities can provide a double benefit of the scheme, both as a way to provide work during the low season and to ensure that labor is available for agricultural works during the busy season. This study found no evidence that offering scheme work during the busy season increases competition, and by extent, the bargaining power of the tribal communities as Ravallion (1987) suggests. Moving on to the last aspect, the present study did not attempt to evaluate the extent of self-targeting, but the potential benefit of self-targeting if it provides access to productivities assets for the poor according to Lipton's (1996) and Imai's (2006) notion that self-targeting schemes can only lead to development if it provides access to productive assets. However, the study was not able to complete that attempt, as it found that no – or at least very few – productive assets were created within the sample. As such, the study was not able to evaluate the benefits of self-targeting and its access to productive assets, but that finding in itself suggests that the mechanism is not optimally implemented at present. As no assets are being created, no access to them can be given, and as such the potential of MNREGA as a development strategy for the tribal people is weakened.

In the discussion of the three features of a PWP that has been the focus of this study, it appears that MNREGA could be improved concerning all three features. However, there is a significant difference in how such an improvement could take place between the wage level and the two other features. The wage level is designed to work as it currently is, and improving it would entail changing the actual design of the Act, either nationally by changing it to a wage higher than the minimum wage, or within the State by raising the minimum wage. The two other features however are not due to design flaws, but instead it is the implementation of the timing and creation of assets that should be improved. As mentioned, the Act is designed to offer works during the rain- and drought seasons, but this is not being implemented. Similarly, productive assets are supposed to be created according to the Act, but this is not implemented either. As such, the study finds that the tribal people of Wayanad have been affected the way they are by MNREGA both because of flaws in the design and because of inadequate implementation.

When reviewing the findings of this study, it is important to keep in mind the enormous potential that is built into MNREGA. The scheme is the largest ever public employment program, it includes a vast amount of money and it is backed up with a progressive, rights-based legislation (Ambasta et al

2008: 41). If the full potential of this was utilized, MNREGA would provide a great opportunity for the tribal population and other marginalized groups in India to improve their current situation. However, as the data of this study shows, this potential is not utilized. While MNREGA has achieved some results, it has a long way towards transforming the lives of all its participants. The aim of this study is however not to dismiss MNREGA as a failed project, but rather to learn from the experience of it and point to areas where it could be improved. If the wage level is raised somewhat, if work is made available during the agricultural slack season and if the jobs carried out within the scheme start producing more useful assets, MNREGA can most definitely contribute to a better development process for the tribal population in Wayanad.

## 6. Conclusion

The current study set out to investigate how MNREGA is faring as a development strategy for the STs, in order to contribute to the knowledge of how future PWPs can be designed and implemented to benefit the most marginalized groups of a society. A study of this type is significant as many developing countries are implementing PWPs, and the case of STs in MNREGA is a chance to contribute to the theoretical debate concerning how a PWP can be used a development strategy for the poor and marginalized. In order to achieve this aim of the study, the two research questions of the study guided the investigation.

The first research question posed the question of how MNREGA has affected the personal economic situation of its tribal participants, which was addressed in Theme 1. This study found that the personal economic situation has not improved significantly since the implementation of MNREGA, even though more work appears to be available. The annual work days have almost doubled and the overall income has increased, but even so the economic situation of the STs in Wayanad remains difficult. The raised income has been cancelled out by an increased expenditure, and MNREGA appears to have done little to change the prevailing structures. Indebtedness is still widespread, and the development of poorest tribal section – the forest dependants – has not converged with the other tribal groups. While it is beyond the scope of this study to establish to what extent this economic development is caused by MNREGA or other economic forces in the district, it does point to that MNREGA in practice has not spurred a dynamic, personal, economic development for its tribal participants in Wayanad.

In an effort to answer the second research question – why MNREGA has not led to a better economic development for the tribal people despite generating more work days – three features of a PWP were explored. Firstly, the study found that one of the reasons is that the wage level of MNREGA is designed to be too low, especially in the Kerala context. Furthermore, it appears that the timing of the MNREGA works is poor. The implementation of the timing of the works is falling short, as there is a shortage of jobs during the monsoon season, even though MNREGA is designed to be available when other work is scarce. The last reason to why MNREGA has not led to a better economic situation for the tribal people that this study found, is the fact that the MNREGA participants are not receiving access to any productive assets that could help them break out of their current economic situation, as no such assets are being produced.

A successful PWP needs to both properly designed and implemented in order to function as a development strategy for marginalized groups of a society. It is the hope of this study that its findings about tribal MNREGA participants in Wayanad have been able to contribute to the current

knowledge of how certain features of a PWP affect its participants in practice. The study found that caution is needed towards setting the wage level too low, that the works should be available during the agricultural slack season and that it is important to ensure that the works actually produce valuable assets. While further research is needed in order to fully establish these notions, the study argues that MNREGA would be improved as a development strategy for the STs in Wayanad if the wage was designed to be higher and if the timing and access to assets mechanisms were implemented more accurately according to the design of MNREGA.

## **Acknowledgements**

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Lastly I would like to thank all the respondents of the study for taking their time to participate. Your help has been invaluable for this study, thank you.

## Appendices

### Appendix 1

#### Interview guide for MNREGA-participants

##### General introductory questions:

1. What is your name?
2. How old are you?
3. Which tribal community do you belong to?
4. Are you married?
5. How many people live in your household? Who are they?
6. What is your highest level of education?
7. What is your current occupation, apart from NREGA work? (ex. self-employed (agriculture), self-employed (non-agriculture), Casual laborer, long-term employment, unemployed)

##### Concerning income and expenditure

8. Does your household own land?
  - a. If so, how much land do you own?
  - b. What crops do you grow on your land?
  - c. Do you sell any of your produce? Where?
  - d. How much of your total family income come from agriculture?
9. Income:
  - a. On average, how many days do you work per month?
  - b. How much you are paid by the day, outside MNREGA?
  - c. How many days of work have you received through MNREGA last year?
  - d. How many days of work have you received from outside MNREGA last year?
  - e. Has your overall income increased since you started MNREGA?
  - f. Has it increased more than your spending?
10. Expenditure:
  - a. How much did you spend on food last month, in rupees?
  - b. How much did you spend on medicine last month, in rupees?
  - c. How much did you spend on household items last month, in rupees?
  - d. How much did you spend on alcohol last month, in rupees?
  - e. How much did you spend on tobacco last month, in rupees?
  - f. How much did you spend on entertainment last month, in rupees?

- g. How much did you spend on other expenses last month, in rupees?
11. Is your total income enough to provide for your family or do you spend more than you make?
- a. If so, where do you get the extra money from?
  - b. If you borrow, how much have you borrowed the last month?
12. Have you had any savings at any point during the last year?

### Concerning MNREGA

13. What type of work do you do within MNREGA?
14. Where was it?
15. What are the positive sides about MNREGA?
16. Do you feel that there has been any discrimination towards you?
- a. If so, on what grounds?
17. Do you think women and men are treated in the same way at the worksites?
18. What do you think about working and mingling with non-tribal's at the worksite?
19. Concerning payment:
- a. Have you always been paid for your work?
  - b. When are you paid for your work?
  - c. Women: do you have control of the money you make?
20. In what way does the work that you and others do through MNREGA contribute to (= help) the agricultural development of this area?
21. In what way does the work that you and others do through MNREGA contribute to (=help) the general, economical development of this area?
22. The MNREGA is implemented through Kudumbashree – do you think that that is a good way?
23. Do you have any complaints about any aspect of MNREGA:
- a. job cards (lack of information, application refused, involving a fee)
  - b. application process (refused, involving bribes, no receipt)
  - c. worksite (not secure, further away the allowed)
  - d. wage payments (understanding the wage system, faulty measurements, delayed wages)
  - e. Corruption (does it occur – in connection to wage payments, false entry in job cards and muster rolls, bribes demanded)
  - f. Other
24. If you have complaints, have you made a formal complaint? Has anyone you know made a formal complaint?
25. Do you know about the social auditing process of the MNREGA?

- a. Have you participated in a social audit?
  - b. What are your views on the social auditing process?
  - c. Did you feel you were able to participate?
  - d. Do you think that the results of the social audits lead to any change?
26. Is it easier or more difficult to get employment now compared to six years ago?
27. How has the wages in the district changed the last six years?
28. Have you ever felt you want to move out of Wayanad?
- a. If so, have your participation in MNREGA made you think differently?
29. In general, has your participation helped your living situation?
30. Has the NREGA had any negative consequences for you or any other tribal person?
31. Do you think that the scheme could be improved in any way?
32. Do you have anything else you want to say?

## Appendix 2

### The economic situation of MP 1 -14

MP 1-4, 12-14: Marginal farmers. MP 5-8: Agricultural laborers. MP 9-11: Forest dependants.

	MP1	MP2	MP3	MP4	MP5	MP6	MP7
Income <sup>a</sup>	<b>6250</b>	<b>3313</b>	<b>2917</b>	<b>3750</b>	<b>688</b>	<b>2500</b>	<b>2875</b>
Expenditure <sup>b</sup>	<b>5416</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>5000</b>	<b>5916</b>	<b>938*</b>	<b>5900</b>	<b>1500*</b>
Workdays <sup>c</sup>							
-MNREGA	<b>100</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>80</b>
-Other	<b>250</b>	<b>150</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>150</b>
Daily wage outside MNREGA	<b>200</b>	<b>185</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>150</b>	<b>(0)</b>	<b>150</b>	<b>150</b>
Borrowing <sup>d</sup>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>-</b>

	MP8	MP9	MP10	MP11	MP12	MP13	MP14
Income <sup>a</sup>	<b>4583</b>	<b>1950</b>	<b>1050</b>	<b>1950</b>	<b>1000</b>	<b>3000**</b>	<b>3500**</b>
Expenditure <sup>b</sup>	<b>1600</b>	<b>2650</b>	<b>1650</b>	<b>2650</b>	<b>1000</b>	<b>3000**</b>	<b>3500**</b>
Workdays <sup>c</sup>							
-MNREGA	<b>100</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>-</b>
-Other	<b>200</b>	<b>106</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>-</b>
Daily wage outside MNREGA	<b>200</b>	<b>150</b>	<b>(0)</b>	<b>150</b>	<b>(0)</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>-</b>
Borrowing <sup>d</sup>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>No</b>

<sup>a</sup> Monthly income in Indian Rupees <sup>b</sup> Monthly expenditure in Indian Rupees <sup>c</sup> Workdays per year

<sup>d</sup> Answering the question: Do you need to borrow money to cover your basic expenses?

\* Receives food subsidies from the government \*\* Respondent's own estimate – Missing data

MP 1 – Male Kuruman, 31 years old, married with 3 children, 12 years of education

MP 8 – Female Paniya, 28 years old, married with 1 child, 7 years of education

MP 2 – Female Kuruman, 40 years old, widow with 3 children, 10 years of education

MP 9 – Male Katturnaickan, 50 years old, married with 4 children, no education

MP 3 – Male Kuruman, 32 years old, married with 1 child, 10 years of education

MP 10 – Female Katturnaickan, 40 years old, married with 4 children, no education

MP 4 – Female Kuruman, 44 years old, married with 2 children, 4 years of education

MP 11 – Female Katturnaickan, 43 years old, single with no children, no education

MP 5 – Female Paniya, 30 years old, single with no children, no education

MP 12 – Female Kurchian, 50 years old, married with no biological children but 2 foster sons, no education

MP 6 – Female Paniya, 35 years old, married with 3 children, 7 years of education

MP 13 – Male Kurchian, 60 years old, married with 2 children, 5 years of education

MP 7 – Female Paniya, 30 years old, married with 3 children, no education

MP 14 – Male Kurchian, 61 years old, widower with no children, 5 years of education

## Appendix 3

Economic situation for STs in 3 categories. Displayed by median-value.

	Marginal farmers	Agricultural laborers	Forest dependants	Total – all ST categories
<b>Landholding size</b> (acres)	<b>1</b>	<b>0,08</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0,63</b>
<b>Income<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>3313</b>	<b>2688</b>	<b>1950</b>	<b>2896</b>
- MNREGA	1250	1000	1050	1025
- Other income <sup>b</sup>	2313	1687	875	1584
<b>Expenditure<sup>c</sup></b>	<b>3500</b>	<b>1600</b>	<b>2650</b>	<b>2650</b>
<b>Borrowing<sup>d</sup></b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>
<b>Annual workdays</b>	<b>230</b>	<b>215</b>	<b>156</b>	<b>200</b>
-MNREGA	100	80	84	82
-Other work	150	135	70	113

*Based on data from 14 MNREGA participants in Wayanad district, February 2012*

<sup>a</sup> Average monthly income has been calculated from reported number of working days in MNREGA as well as outside of MNREGA, times reported daily income per type of work. Where applicable, the reported annual income from agriculture has been added as spread evenly around the year. Displayed in Indian Rupees.

<sup>b</sup> Any other income: mainly from wage labor and/or agricultural produce

<sup>c</sup> Monthly expenditure calculated by reported monthly spending on food, medicine, household items, alcohol, tobacco, entertainment and 'other' expenses. However, MP13 and MP14 estimated their total expenditure themselves, see Appendix 2.

<sup>d</sup> Answering the question: Do you need to borrow money to cover your basic expenses?

## Appendix 4

### Deflation of 2006 Wayanad Initiative findings

To enable the comparison of the baseline study from 2006 and the current data collection, the income and expenditure values were deflated using the Consumer Price Index (CPI) in the following manner:

$$\frac{\text{CPI 2012}}{\text{CPI 2006}} \times \text{Monthly value 2006} = \text{2006 value given in 2012's price level}$$

The CPI is calculated for Kozikode, Kerala, the geographically closes center that the CPI is available for. The base year is 1998, when the CPI as such was 100. By February 2006 the CPI had risen to 128, and by 2012 to 196 (Government of Kerala 2012). As such, the equations follow:

*Total Income*

$$\frac{196}{128} \times 1276 = 1953,8$$

*Agricultural Laborers – income*

$$\frac{196}{128} \times 1187 = 1817,6$$

*Total Expenditure*

$$\frac{196}{128} \times 1364 = 2088,6$$

*Agricultural Laborers – expenditure*

$$\frac{196}{128} \times 1405 = 2151,4$$

*Marginal Farmers - income*

$$\frac{196}{128} \times 1468 = 2247,9$$

*Forest Dependants - income*

$$\frac{196}{128} \times 1091 = 1670,6$$

*Marginal Farmers – expenditure*

$$\frac{196}{128} \times 1689 = 2586,3$$

*Forest Dependants – expenditure*

$$\frac{196}{128} \times 1278 = 1956,9$$

*Source:* Center of Excellence 2006: 79, 80. Marginal farmers consist of the groups Kurchias and Mullu Kuruma, Argicultural Laborers of Paniyans, and the Forest Dependants of the Kattunaickans.

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## **Respondents:**

### **Key informants**

KI 1 – Associate program coordinator at research center focusing on social transformation in Kerala, and one of the co-authors for the Wayanad Initiative. *Interview date: 13-01-2012*

KI 2 – Researcher at research center focusing on development issues, Kerala. *Interview date: 28-01-2012*

KI 3 – Tribal person from Wayanad of higher education, whose parents participate in MNREGA. *Interview date: 19-01-2012*

KI 4 – Tribal person from Wayanad, of higher education. *Interview date: 19-01-2012*

KI 5 – Staff at official MNREGA office in Waynad. *Interview date: 17-01-2012*

KI 6 – Former NGO-worker at NGO that work with education local politicians in how to implement MNREGA. *Interview date: 20-01-2012*

KI 7 – Local politician in Wayanad, from CPI(M) (the communist party). Former head of a panchayat, during the time MNREGA was first implemented. *Interview date: 17-01-2012*

KI 8 – Researcher at research center focusing on tribal issues, Kerala. *Interview date 13-01-2012*

KI 9 – Local politician in Wayanad, of the Congress Party. Current head a panchayt. *Interview date: 17-01-2012*

KI 10 - Tribal person from Wayanad, of higher education. *Interview date: 07-02-2012*

KI 11 - Farmer with MNREGA workers on her land. *Interview date: 13-02-2012*

KI12 - Farmer with MNREGA workers on her land. *Interview date: 13-02-2012*

**MNREGA-participants**

MP 1 – Male Mullu Kuruman, 31 years old, 12 years of education. *Interview date: 13-02-2012*

MP 2 – Female Mullu Kuruman, 40 years old, 10 years of education. *Interview date: 13-02-2012*

MP 3 – Male Mullu Kuruman, 32 years old, 10 years of education. *Interview date: 14-02-2012*

MP 4 – Female Kuruman, 44 years old, 4 years of education. *Interview date: 13-02-2012*

MP 5 – Female Paniya, 30 years old, no education. *Interview date: 15-02-2012*

MP 6 – Female Paniya, 35 years old, 7 years of education. *Interview date: 13-02-2012*

MP 7 – Female Paniya, 30 years old, no education. *Interview date: 13-02-2012*

MP 8 – Female Paniya, 28 years old, 7 years of education. *Interview date: 13-02-2012*

MP 9 – Male Kattarniackan, 50 years old, no education. *Interview date: 14-02-2012*

MP 10 – Female Kattarniackan, 40 years old, no education. *Interview date: 14-02-2012*

MP 11 – Female Kattarniackan, 43 years old, no education. *Interview date: 14-02-2012*

MP 12 – Female Kurchian, 50 years old, no education. *Interview date: 15-02-2012*

MP 13 – Male Kurchian, 60 years old, 5 years of education. *Interview date: 15-02-2012*

MP 14 – Male Kurchian, 61 years old, 4 years of education. *Interview date: 15-02-2012*