



‘Skill India’ for Informal Workers : an integration through National Skills Qualifications Framework (NSQF)

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Abstract

The phenomenal size of the informal economy in India poses a challenge to the Skill India initiative. This paper is an attempt to describe how the informal sector workers can be integrated with the formal economy through recognition of their skills and how this can be facilitated by the National Skills Qualifications Framework (NSQF), a competency based framework that focuses on learning outcomes, irrespective of whether the outcomes were achieved through formal or informal methods of learning.

Keywords: skill, qualification framework, development

1. Introduction

A major challenge to the Skill India initiative is the phenomenal size of India’s informal labour force. According to the National Statistical Commission (2012), more than ninety percent of the labour force in India is in the informal economy. To define this sector, un-organized (informal) workers consist of those working in the un-organized (informal) sector or households, excluding regular workers with social security benefits provided by the employers and the workers in the organised (formal) sector without any employment and social security benefits provided by the employers (NCEUS, 2008). Employees are considered to have informal jobs if their employment relationship is, in law or in practice, not subject to national labour legislation, income taxation, social protection or entitlement to certain employment benefits like advance notice of dismissal, severance pay, paid annual or sick leave, etc.(NSS, 68th round).

There has been a strong policy focus to standardize the skill development initiatives in the country by making them industry driven and competency based to match the labour market

demands. The challenge is posed by the fact that even when majority of the labour force continue to be in the informal sector, the ongoing skill development schemes have not been able to reach the informal workers. Most of the informal economy workers are school dropouts who have never been to any vocational training institutions. The entry requirement and the geographical mapping of the formal training system are not aimed to offer skills to school leavers and particularly not to those in the rural non-farm sector. But neither are there other training providers to fill this gap. Most workers continue to learn trades on the job through informal apprenticeships at their place of work from other low-skilled craft people (World Bank, 2006)

The ultimate objective of all the skill development activities is to provide gainful employment to the beneficiaries. However, the formal economy is unable to provide sufficient job opportunities for the majority and ‘a realistic option is to focus on improving the productivity of the informal economy (ILO, 2007). The National Policy on Skill Development and Entrepreneurship of 2015 also ascertains this fact, as the rate of job growth in the informal sector is estimated

to be twice that in formal sector.

The Common Norms for Skill Development Schemes¹, as notified by the Government of India on 15th July 2015, defines Skill Development, for the purpose of any Government scheme, as any domain specific demand led skill training activity leading to employment or any outcome oriented activity that enables a participant to acquire a Skill, duly assessed and certified by an independent third party agency, and which enables him/her to get wage/self employment leading to increased earnings, and/or improved working conditions, such as getting formal certification for hitherto informal skills, and/or moving from informal to formal sector jobs or pursue higher education/training. Thus, skill development is clearly an enabler to unite the informal economy with the formal one. This is of particular relevance in India, where millions of workers have been working under a traditional non-formal system with no official certificate as recognition of their competencies. Research work by Chandra, 2007; King, 2007; Titumir, 2005 find that in countries India and Bangladesh, the training which is most commonly accessed is the traditional, on-the-job training, including the master-apprentice relationship.

While this system is working fine for a lot many, it limits the mobility and progression within the confines of where they work and whom they know. When seen from the ambit of a larger economy and different sectors, there is essentially a need to recognize the skills of the workers so that they can be integrated with the labour market at large. Skill Development not only boosts the productivity of the individuals who directly acquire the skills, but also create a 'knock-on effect' whereby these individuals usually make those they work with more productive too (Ashton and Green, 1996; Booth and Snower, 1996).

2. Methods

The paper draws on evidence of RPL practices from international experiences and tries to lay a roadmap for an effective RPL strategy for the Indian context that focuses on a strong regulatory framework, quality assurance and collaboration from industries to map and assess the competencies as per the needs of the labour market. It also entails linkage to placement as an end objective of RPL.

3. Findings

As outcomes based framework, NSQF allows for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) through assessment and certification of the skills of the informal

workforce that ultimately equips them to transition to the benefits of the formal sector. Such recognition is also an enabler to mainstream women's participation in the labour force. Finally, having a system of RPL based on a nationally recognised qualification framework promotes a pathway of career progression and life long learning, thereby enabling the skilling strategy to benefit the informal sector workers.

4. Improvements/Applications

The whole focus of skilling in India is on placement (wage or self) and the strategy on RPL should also be aligned to the same. The value of recognition of skills should translate into jobs and better livelihood opportunities. The present system of qualifications on skill education and training are being aligned to the industry vetted NOSs and QPs. It is therefore important that these certificates are accepted by industry while hiring manpower for different job roles.

5. National Skills Qualifications Framework – an enabler to recognize the informal workers

One of the means to integrate workers in the informal economy with the formal economy is recognition of their skills. There is a need to focus on the avenues to facilitate this integration such as the National Skills Qualifications Framework (NSQF). The NSQF in India was notified on 27th December 2013 as a competency based quality assurance framework that categorizes qualifications on the basis of competencies. These competencies are determined by specific learning outcomes based on i) Professional Knowledge (what the person must know at that level), ii) Professional Skills (what the person should be able to do at that level), iii) Core Skills (literacy, numeracy and soft and interpersonal skills) and iv) Responsibility (the degree of supervision that needs to be exercised over the person while doing the job, or the degree of supervision that person is capable of exercising over others). To qualify at a particular level, an individual should be able to demonstrate these competencies corresponding to that level, which can be acquired through formal system of training, formal or informal methods or any form of practical learning. The NSQF introduces a concept of 'notional hours', which basically is an indicator of a 'reasonable' amount of time that an individual may require to acquire a competency. Again, it does not depend on whether the competency was acquired through a formal school of learning or through informal on the job practice. Thus,

it marks the transition from a traditional input based system of qualification system to an output based one. It also breaks down the barrier between general and vocational system of education, which have been, hitherto, running as separate vertical.

5.1 Level descriptors

The NSQF has ten levels – level one corresponds to lowest complexity and level ten corresponds to highest complexity. The learning outcomes on Professional Knowledge, Professional Skills, Core Skills and Responsibilities for every level are explained by these level descriptors. It creates the linkage between the ability to undertake tasks that are ‘repetitive on regular basis’, ‘routine and predictable’ to ‘highly specialised’ tasks that require ‘knowledge and problem solving skills to provide original contribution’. It also shows the progress in competencies that is demonstrated from working under ‘close supervision’ to ‘being responsible for own work and learning’ and finally ‘taking responsibility for other’s work and learning’. This breaking down of competencies expected from every qualification is also an indicator of what a candidate is supposed to deliver in the job market. The workers in the informal economy have been demonstrating such skills with their experience but due to the informal nature of their sector, they have not been certified for their skills. NSQF facilitates the testing of these competencies for the informal sector workers by a process known as Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL).

5.2 Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) – what it means

Recognition of Prior Learning, as the name suggests, is giving due ‘recognition’ or acknowledgment and acceptance of the knowledge, skills and expertise of an individual gained through experiential learning which may be through formal, non-formal or informal channels. Formal, Non-formal and Informal learning may be defined as per the European Commission (2000,2001), which was first endorsed by the UNESCO Institute of Lifelong Learning (UIL) in its the first Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (2009) as:

- *Formal learning occurs as a result of experiences in an education or training institution, with structured learning objectives, learning time and support, leading to certification. Formal learning is intentional from the learner’s perspective.*

- *Non-formal learning is not provided by an education or training institution and typically does not lead to certification. It is, however, structured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support). Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner’s perspective.*
- *Informal learning results from daily life activities related to work, family or leisure. It is not structured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support) and typically does not lead to certification. Informal learning may be intentional but in most cases it is non-intentional (or “incidental”/random).*

This is of great relevance in India, where we have a huge population of workers working in the informal sector, who never had the opportunity to go to any formal institution to learn a skill, but have gained enough knowledge and ability of any profession or trade through work experience. The progress and mobility of these is limited as there is no formal means of ‘recognition’ of their skills. RPL opens up the opportunity for these workers to have their skills assessed and certified as per nationally accepted standards. Such recognition may allow these individuals to proceed to further education and training, to progress in their existing progression, and to enhance their personal and social recognition and promote mobility.

6. International evidence on RPL

International evidence shows that the recognition of the skills of acquired through non-formal/informal means through RPL been a primary focus in a number of countries. It is an accepted method to promote a flexible, efficient and inclusive route to skill development of those workers who have been left behind in the formal economy.

The Australian qualifications framework defines recognition of prior learning as “an assessment process that involves assessment of an individual’s relevant prior learning (including formal, informal and non-formal learning) to determine the credit outcomes of an individual application for credit”; where credit is the “value assigned for the recognition of equivalence in content and learning outcomes between different types of learning and/or qualifications.” Having a system of credit broadens the access to formal qualification and also reduces the time required to certify a candidate against a formal qualification. The experience of implementing RPL in Australia revealed that there is

no direct process of interpretation of equivalence between the prior learning of an individual with the learning outcomes of a formal qualification. Candidates, therefore, require strong mentorship support to be able to demonstrate their competencies within the parameters of a formal system of assessment and certification. This also includes knowledge of the system of formal education and training, language of training and assessment, as well as skills to undertake tests under RPL. Another useful learning from the Australian experience relates to the cost of funding RPL. It is not possible to recover the complete cost of conducting RPL operations from the beneficiaries/assessee and there is a need for the government and industries to devise innovative methods of funding RPL by factoring in the broader economic and social consequence of lower productivity and slower social improvements of not recognising skill levels of the workforce.

In France, RPL is backed by a law passed in 2002 known as Validation des Acquis-del'Expérience (VAE). This law establishes the right of an individual to recognition of his/her professional experience in the acquisition of an academic title or a diploma. The VAE process enables an individual to get all or part of a certification based on his/her professional experience. The Diploma thus obtained through RPL has the same validity as any diploma obtained through any formal means. Also, the VAE legislation does not limit the number of certifications that can be obtained by an individual, but the individual must have minimum three years of relevant experience to be eligible for RPL. An individual in France can get even a Masters level qualification without any formal academic qualification, through sheer recognition of his/her prior experiential learning. The French approach to RPL has often led to the debate that whether the path of acquiring a certificate through work experience could really be equivalent in terms of methodological skills and analytical capacity. On the other hand, the legal obligation for all higher education institutes in France to establish VAE process has institutionalised the competence-based approach within the entire system of higher education.

In the United States, under the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), the Department of Education set up a fund for Adult Basic Education (ABE) services to encourage the development of pathways for low-skilled adults to increase their educational attainment and obtain higher-skilled jobs. This fund is used to support the education of the undereducated and/or

unemployed/underemployed adults, youth and adults with disabilities, and English language learners (ELL) (Dann-Messier, 2011).

In Norway, the recognition or validation of non-formal and informal learning is part of the Public Employment Services (PES). It is a means to help marginalised persons and groups and senior citizens with long-term experience but no formal qualification to have their competences documented, thereby creating access to both employment and further education. They have the individual right to have their prior learning outcomes assessed on the basis of national curricula at relevant levels of education and training.

In Germany, the recognition of non-formal and informal learning is viewed as an enabler for a more equitable distribution of education opportunities and tackle bottlenecks in the labour market. It is regulated by each Land i.e. German Federal state (Werquin, 2010) and has a well developed system to prevent any loss of students who chose to acquire learning outcomes not through the formal system, as allowed under the dual system. The practice of informal continuing learning was first recorded in Germany in 1994, and since then, it increased from 52% in 1994 to 72% in 1997 and 74% in 2014 (BMBF - German Federal Ministry of Education and Research, 2014).

7. RPL in India

In India, the Modular Employable Skills (MES) under the Skill Development Initiative Scheme (SDIS) is one of the initial practices of certifying existing workers in the unorganized sector by offering 'direct assessment' of these workers, successful completion of which leads to the National Trade Certificates (NTC), under the National Council of Vocational Training (NCVT). However, this system only offers the opportunity to be assessed – it does not have any provision for gap training or bridge courses. The National Skill Development (NSDA), in 2014, launched pilots on RPL in three sectors to evaluate the benefits of certifying the prior experience workers. The sectors are - Agriculture, Healthcare and Gems and Jewellery in collaboration with the respective Sector Skill Councils; and Domestic Workers in collaboration with a consortium of non-governmental organisations. A separate pilot for the construction sector was conducted by the Directorate General of Training (DGT) using Building and Other Construction Workers (BOCW) welfare funds.² RPL has also been implemented by individual states and Sector Skill Councils³.

At the national level, RPL is being rolled out as part of the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY), the flagship programme of the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship. The RPL component under PMKVY means that certification is given to candidates who have prior work experience without having to go through the regular training under the scheme. There is a target to skill 5 lakh candidates through RPL. PMKVY is essentially a monetary benefit scheme that entails a direct transfer of reward money to beneficiaries on being successfully certified. The basic model of operation include :

- a. **Mobilisation and counseling** : Training Providers identify and counsel candidates eligible for RPL through mobilization camps and advertisements etc. The selected candidates will be given an orientation about the scheme. On the basis of their existing competency, the candidates are mapped against the suitable Job role for which they should be assessed. (Ideally, the process of orientation should take between 3 – 4 days leaving between 1-2 days for assessments and results.)
- b. **Assessment**: The candidates will be assessed by the Assessment Agency affiliated with the SSC on the basis of assessment criteria decided by the SSC. The candidate will need to pass in the minimum assessment criteria of a particular QP decided by the SSC.
- c. **Certification and transfer of reward money to successful candidates** : Students who qualify the assessment are given a certificate and the reward money will be transferred to their bank accounts.

8. Roadmap for India

The National Policy on Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, 2015, has given a major policy focus by stating that *RPL will be encouraged in the unorganized sector for certification of existing skills and integration with formal labour market. This will also open up options for up-skilling and further vertical mobility.* It further states that *multi-skilling in complementary areas will be promoted to enable sustainable livelihood in this sector.* Further on the importance of RPL, the Policy has stated that there is a need to skill 402.87 million people between 2015-2022: out of which 104.62 million are new entrants and 298.25 million will be skilled through RPL, reskilling, upskilling and skilling of the existing workforce especially below 45 years of age. Given, such an ambitious number to be achieved through

RPL, it is important that a robust mechanism is put in place to achieve the target.

8.1 Strong regulatory framework

There is a need to have a strong regulatory framework in place in order to standardise the processes related to RPL implementation. The guidelines on RPL policy (*draft*)⁴ in India have identified the primary objectives of RPL as (a) facilitate formal recognition of skills/competences acquired through non-formal and informal channels, opening up education and career advancement and growth opportunities for the individuals concerned. (b) provide a basis for structuring procedures and criteria for RPL implementation, monitoring and evaluation, including resourcing & quality assurance, (c) Assist in raising awareness, (d) define the processes and systems for Indian businesses wishing to establish RPL systems and structures in their workplaces, both to facilitate the national movement on skill development, as well as to create avenues of growth for their non-certified workforce, (e) establish a basis for the national coordination of RPL in India including all RPL data capturing & management issues, (f) support social inclusion efforts.

In order to achieve these objectives, a regulatory framework at every stage should be put in place to standardise and monitor the process. For successful implementation of RPL, an established framework of credit, qualifications and occupational standards is a key precondition (Sims, 2010). It has also been observed that RPL implementation outside the purview of strong regulatory frameworks ‘tend to suffer from a lack of transparency and validity that may deter learners, employers and education institutions’ (Björnåvåld, 2010). The implementation of the NSQF must be strengthened in order to operationalize RPL as per nationally recognized competency standards. There is evidence of RPL practices that exist outside of Qualification Framework, as pointed out by Werquin (2010). However, they tend to be limited to recognition between formal education institutions alone. Given the striking magnitude of the labour force that exists outside of the formal institutions, a successful RPL model will not work without an efficiently functioning qualification framework.

8.2 Participation of Industry is a pre-requisite

Participation of industry is a pre-requisite to make the transition of informal sector workers to the formal sector through RPL. In this regard, the role of the

industry led bodies called Sector Skill Councils needs to be highlighted. These SSCs, as part of their mandate, have mapped all the job roles existing in their respective sectors. They have developed National Occupational Standards (NOSs) as measurable indicators of outcomes for every job role. The NOSs for these job roles have been clubbed into what is called the Qualification Pack (QP) that depict the competencies and the job responsibilities that individuals at the job market are expected to deliver when employed under these job roles. Thus, for every job role, there exists a QP and training for these job roles are conducted as per these QPs. In the case of the informal sectors, the workers engaged in these job roles can be tested and assessed against these NOSs and QPs to identify their NSQF level, and certify them accordingly. It also allows identifying any gaps in the ability of a worker to perform his/her tasks as per the desired competencies, which can be covered up through a gap training or bridge course. An assessment of the informal workers and subsequent certification as per the NSQF levels is an empowerment tool for the informal sector worker by allowing them a means to have their skills nationally recognized.

8.3 Mainstreaming women's participation

The informal economy is sometimes said to have a 'woman's face'; in most countries women make up between 60 and 80 per cent of total informal employment (ILO, 2005). According to the International Labour Organization's Global Employment Trends 2013 report, India is placed at 120th of 131 countries in women's labour force participation.

Most women work in low productivity, lower-skill jobs (that may include food processing, garment sewing and domestic services) and/or receive less money for doing the same work - or work of equal value - as men. While all workers and producers in the informal economy – men and women – face constraints with regard to access to assets, markets and services, as well as those caused by inappropriate regulatory frameworks, 'women face additional gender-specific barriers, which include restrictions to entering into contracts, insecure land and property rights and the constraints of household and childcare responsibilities' (ILO, 2005).

Thus, the spectrum of skills and recognition of informal workforce should have a heightened focus on women. Skill development is the thrust area where women can, not just participate, but lead different sectors and be the drivers of economic growth.⁵ There

are many sectors that have traditionally been driven by women, but they never had the opportunity to have their skills recognized. The development of assessment methodologies for recognition of skills of informal workers should have a particular focus on women and should address the additional socio-economic challenges faced by them.

8.4 Quality is foremost

Assessments of skills for informal workers have to be different from that of the formal sector. There should be an assessment of the RPL implementation work that has been done so far in India, to understand the challenges of RPL in the Indian context. The informal sector workers comprise of a vulnerable group. Any system of formal recognition that promises them an opportunity to improve their economic and social status in society has to be addressed through quality measures. Any system RPL implementation practice that does not meet quality standards may dilute the value of certification itself in the area of skill training and development.

8.5 Linkage to jobs

The whole focus of skilling in India is on placement (wage or self) and the strategy on RPL should also be aligned to the same. The value of recognition of skills should translate into jobs and better livelihood opportunities. The present system of qualifications on skill education and training are being aligned to the industry vetted NOSs and QPs. It is therefore important that these certificates are accepted by industry while hiring manpower for different job roles. As per the implementation schedule of the NSQF notification, recruitment rules of the Government of India and Public Sector Undertakings of the Central Government shall define eligibility criteria for all positions in terms of NSQF levels. This offers a tremendous opportunity for workers in the informal economy to be eligible for a number of jobs in the formal sector. An RPL strategy for implementation should be designed with respect to the demands of employers (both government and private), in order to link it with placement.

8.6 Life long learning

The NSQF mandates all training and educational institutions to define eligibility criteria for admission to various courses in terms of NSQF levels. The competency levels under NSQF have been so designed that it allows learners to progress between levels as

they learn and acquire new skills during their lifetime. As the competencies can be acquired through vocational education/training as well as general education, or a combination of both, a student can move from vocational to general and vice-versa. In this way, the system breaks down the barrier between vocational and general education. This would increase the seamless lateral entry movement between general education as well as skill development courses in different sectors. The relevance of this is enhanced in a country like India, where it is feared that vocational training is destined towards blue collared fate for all times to come.

6. Conclusion

Skill development is a determinant in improving the productivity of the informal labour force, which can translate into higher economic growth. It also leads to better work opportunities, thereby enabling

the transition of workers from informal to formal economies. The informal sector accounts for more than fifty percent of India's national income. Skill development and recognition of the existing skills of the workers can have a significant impact in facilitating the transition of labour force from the informal to the formal economy. Also, recognition of the skills of informal workers can reflect a clearer picture of the skills available among this workforce that can provide effective linkages between the demand and supply of skilled workers in the job market. A national quality assurance framework like the NSQF, therefore, can have a significant influence in the functioning of the Indian labour market by allowing the recognition of the skills of the informal workforce based on their competencies through RPL. It not only empowers the labour force through certification, but can also ensure avenues for career progression and further learning.

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Foot notes

¹ The Common Norms for Skill Development Programmes was notified by the Government of India on 15th July 2015 and it is applicable to all centrally funded skill development schemes. The norms have been proposed to standardize different parameters of skill development programs that include cost and duration of programs, funding to training providers, third party certification and assessment, NSQF alignment etc.

² A tracer study of these pilots is currently being developed by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) to assess the impact of these pilots. The result of the tracer study would be an important resource to understand the impact of RPL implementation in India.

³ This was brought out during an RPL workshop convened by the NSDA in February 2015. Minutes are available at <http://www.nsda.gov.in/resources/Minutes%20of%20RPL%20Workshop%2016th%20Feb%202015.pdf>

⁴ Available at: <http://www.nsda.gov.in/resources/Draft%20RPL%20Policy%20submitted%20to%20MoSDE.pdf>

⁵ Under the RPL pilot for the Domestic Workers was launched by the NSDA in 2014, 920 domestic workers were assessed in the NCR with an 80% pass rate. This pilot is the first attempt in India to recognize the skills of a sector that has so far remained outside the purview of any institutional or formal recognition. A positive feature from this pilot was that the participants believed that a formal certification would increase their chances of obtaining a job and that showing it to potential employers was likely to help them gain a higher salary in their existing profession.

