

Implementation Challenges of MGNREGA and the Emergence of VB-G RAM G: A Policy Analysis

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Abstract

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) has served as a pillar for rural employment and livelihood security in India since its passage in 2005. Notwithstanding its successes, the program has had ongoing implementation issues, such as capacity limitations at the local level and wage payment delays. The Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rojgar and Ajeevika Mission Gramin (VB-G RAM G) is a new policy effort that aims to improve livelihood outcomes and reimagine rural employment in response to changing rural livelihood demands. This research paper explores the origins and justification of VB-G RAM G Act 2025, critically evaluates the difficulties in implementing MGNREGA, and talks about the policy implications for rural development.

Keywords: MGNREGA, VB-GRAM G, Rural Employment, Social Inclusion

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I. Introduction

India is in the phase of facing the demographic dividend, which means India, has a major proportion of working people in comparison to the total population, often creating demands for more employment opportunities. Besides unemployment, India also faces problems like a lack of resources, poverty, loss of biodiversity, increased pollution, etc. (Malik, 2019). India has been battling a pair of problems, such as poverty and unemployment, since the beginning of the 21st century. Therefore, the government of India has initiated numerous social welfare schemes to provide social security to those people who have been excluded from the formal sector (Hussain, Akhtar, & Ganie, 2025). One of such schemes is the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (2005), later renamed as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act that aims to guarantee the 'Right to work'. NREGA aimed to cover all the districts of India from 1st April 2008. The World Bank, in its *World Development Report 2014*, termed it a stellar example of rural development. MGNREGA was initiated to boost livelihood security in rural areas. It aimed to provide at least 100 days of guaranteed wage employment in a financial year to every household. Another aim of MGNREGA was to create robust assets such as roads, canals, ponds, wells, etc. (Government of Jharkhand, 2017).

Theoretical Framework

Following theories form the basis of the study:

Anti-Development Thesis (ADT)

The ADT theorists believed that development planning and strategizing began after the Second World War, when the Marshall Plan was formulated to reconstruct the nations ravaged by war and their economy in the West. The ADT emerged out of the criticism of the dependency theory in the latter part of the 1970s and the 1980s. It was later termed as good governance when the international agencies introduced the subject of sustainable development. The ADT theorists were not against development but rejected the earlier development strategies of the West to develop the southern hemisphere in the form of development, which was nothing but exploitation. Their rejection of development theories was because they thought that these theories were meant to enrich only a few, while the majority of the population remained bereft of all benefits and basic services. Based on the aspects highlighted by ADT theorists, it can be said that there must be a reinforced, strong people-centric approach to define and understand development. They recommended revoking the western development theories and reverting

back to traditional and indigenous ways to preserve the culture and social system of the developing countries against the western view of development, not development. Local means must be utilized to implement development programmes. As this theory suggests, continuous development is required, which would benefit the majority of the population. India, being a developing nation, is undergoing several developments continuously. The major population of India is involved in agricultural activities or engaged in rural activities, so the government launched a scheme in 2005, MGNREGA. Recently, it has been seen that this scheme has also developed into a new legislation, Viksit Bharat- Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) (VB-GRAM G) Bill. It proposes to increase guaranteed working days to 125 from 100. Under this scheme, the state's funding contribution will be increased (90:10 for north eastern states, Himalayan states and union territories). It also stated that work will be paused during agricultural seasons and wages will be paid weekly within a 15-day limit.

Social Inclusion Theory

Social inclusion defined in EU joint report as a process to give opportunities and resources to the people who are facing poverty and social exclusion so that they can participate in economic, social and cultural life. This theory aims to ensure participation of these people in decision making and to have access to their fundamental rights (Huxley, 2022). There are five perspectives to measure social inclusion which includes economic participation, education, social interaction, personal independence and self-determination and access to health services (Taylor, 2012). These groups are not only excluded through legal systems land and labour markets but also through attitudes, beliefs or perceptions. They can be excluded on the basis of gender, age, location, religion, race, ethnicity etc. (World Bank, n.d.).

The scheme ensures to provide work to the people belonging to the schedule caste or schedule type category without discrimination and it also ensures that at least 1/3rd workers must be women, this promotes social inclusion. This scheme has helped in reduction of migration and exploitation by providing local employment. MGNREGA leads to creation of various assets which are accessible to everyone especially poor people.

Participatory Development Theory

This theory states that the people who are meant to benefit from development projects should be actively involved in planning, carrying out and reviewing those projects. Instead of outside experts making all the decisions, this approach believes that local people know their own needs priorities best. Their knowledge and experiences are important for creating solutions that actually work in their specific situation and last for a long time. It supports shared and democratic decision-making in development work (Sustainability Directory, n.d.). Participatory mechanism allows citizens to take part in policy making, in order to promote structured, prosperous, culturally stable and open societies. It not only encourages volunteerism and welfare but also empowers citizens and enhances inclusion policy formulation, implementation and monitoring. This approach is based on coalitions of social and political forces which is supported by stakeholders from civil society and public sector (United Nations, n.d.).

Under MGNREGA villages decide what work should be done in their village according to their need this means local people choose what their villages actually need. In this scheme people can demand work when they need it, so the programme responds to people's needs. Participatory development focuses on inclusiveness and the scheme encourages participation of women, SC/ST/OBC etc.

Right Based Approach

The human rights-based approach is a way of planning development that puts human rights at centre of everything. It follows international human rights rules and focuses on making sure peoples' rights are protected and respected. This approach looks closely at inequality and unfair treatment- like discrimination or unequal sharing of power and resources- that stop people from improving their lives. Its goal is to fix these problems so that no group is ignored or left behind in the development process (United Nations, n.d.). The human rights approach ensures that the standards and principles of human rights are integrated in policy making as well as the day to day running of organizations (Scottish Human Rights Commission, n.d.). Some principles like participation, accountability, empowerment etc. are important for practicing human rights-based approach (Scottish Human Rights Commission, n.d.).

MGNREGA provides legal right to rural household to get 100 days of employment in a year. Right based approach says that government must be answerable to people and under the MGNREGA scheme there are various tools like social audit, job cards etc. make government accountable towards people. This approach protects vulnerable sections and MGNREGA mainly focus to benefit poor rural household. Right based approach says that people should participate in decisions affecting them and under MGNREGA gram sabhas help decide which work would be taken up by the village so people are involved in planning.

Feminist Economy

Feminist economics is a way of studying economics that looks at how culture and gender shape economic ideas and decision. It focuses more on people's real lives and well-being, not just market and money. It also uses personal experiences and real-world stories along with data. This approach questions the traditional economic theories that often reflect male viewpoints and tries to make economics more inclusive and fairer (Elsevier, n.d.). Feminist economy is an important part of the effort to bring different viewpoints into the field of economics. It focuses on issues that affect women but have often been ignored in a field mostly shaped by men. It also aims to create more space for women in economics- both because fairness and diversity matter, and because when women's concerns are included, the field becomes stronger and more balanced in future (Moran, 2020). Following are the key features of this approach-

- Gender analysis
- Value of unpaid labour
- Intersectionality
- Policy advocacy

MGNREGA puts the idea of this theory in practice by providing recognition to the work of women. MGNREGA gives financial independence to women as it helps them by providing employment. Feminist economy talks about gender wage gap and MGNREGA has brought down this gap by providing equal wages to both men and women. Feminist economy says that economic power increases social power and MGNREGA helps in that.

For the present study, the descriptive analysis of secondary data for the last five years i.e., 2020-2025 had been done. Secondary data was gathered from books, research papers, MGNREGA annual reports, CAG reports regarding MGNREGA, reports of Ministry of Rural Development regarding MGNREGA and newspaper articles.

II. Background And Policy Context

MGNREGA: A Brief Overview

In the late 1990s, the government started taking more steps towards building a welfare state. Government focused on various issues like the environment, gender equality, the welfare of disadvantaged groups, and health. On one side, globalization created new challenges for administration, and on the other side, there was a growing demand for equal and pro-poor policies (Chakrabarty & Chand, Public Policy Concept, Theory and Practice, 2016). Most people in India live in villages, and nearly half of them face poor social and economic conditions. Since independence, the government has made continuous efforts to improve the living standards of rural people. Rural development has been treated as a key part of overall economic growth and poverty reduction in every five-year plan (Kumar & Chakraborty, 2016).

Traditional ways of studying public administration were questioned, and newer approaches to public policy became important. As a result, in 2006, India took a strong step to fight rural poverty and unemployment. This led to the passing of National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) in 2005, which was later renamed the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in 2009 in honour of Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi believed that India's real need was not mass production, but production by the masses. His main concern was to ensure that the poorest people could live with dignity, which is why this law focuses on nation-building and helping the poor (Chakrabarty & Chand, Public Policy Concept, Theory and Practice, 2016).

Unlike earlier rural development programmes in India, NREGA is a right-based employment scheme. It gives rural poor and vulnerable households the legal right to demand at least 100 days of work each year. Since Indian agriculture depends heavily on the monsoon and rainfall is often irregular, this guaranteed employment during the non-farming season provides crucial income support to millions of poor and vulnerable rural people living below poverty line (Bhattarai, Viswanathan, Mishra, & Bantilan, 2018).

MGNREGA was introduced after a long struggle to make the right to work a reality. This law is special because it guarantees employment to people living in rural areas. It is the first law in India, and one of the first in the world, to make the right to work a legal right that people can demand. In a country like India, where many people depend on daily labour for survival, having a guaranteed job is very important. Work helps people earn a living and also support other basic rights such as the right to food, life and education. It is different from other government schemes because it was passed by parliament as a law, not just as a programme. Because of this, MGNREGA has played a major role in improving employment opportunities and bringing positive change in rural India (Paul, 2015).

Provisions of MGNREGA

MGNREGA includes clear rules and provisions to guarantee employment and protect the rights of rural workers. The main provisions of the scheme are given below:

1. *Right based framework*- The right to get work is time-bound. Applying for wage employment is the main criteria under this act according to which people claim their rights. This process ensures that villagers actively take part by asking for work as their right. People who want work under the act have the right to register themselves at their local gram panchayat. The right to get work is time-bound. Employment must be provided within 15 days of applying, and wages must also be paid within 15 days. Timely payment is a key part of MGNREGA. Workers' rights are further protected through social audits and proactive disclosure, which help ensure transparency and accountability under MGNREGA (Paul, 2015).
2. *Time-bound guarantee*- When a worker applies for a job under MGNREGA, the application must be officially accepted and recorded with a dated receipt by the gram panchayat or the programme officer. This starts the formal process of providing work. The law clearly guarantees timely action-work must be given within 15 days of applying, and wages must also be paid within 15 days of completing the work. If the government fails to provide employment on time, the worker is entitled to receive unemployment allowance from the state government as compensation for the delay (Jeyanthi, 2019).
3. *Minimum wages act*- Before 2008, the central government had not fixed wages for workers under MGNREGA. Because of this, workers were paid according to the local agricultural minimum wages in each state. In states like Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan- where the scheme was widely used – the government later increased agricultural minimum wages and expected the centre to pay MGNREGA workers at these higher rates. This created a conflict between the central government and the states. To solve this issue, in January 2009 the central government separated MGNREGA wages from the minimum wages act of 1948 and section 20 of MGNREGA. It also froze the wage rates for states where MGNREGA work was available, which meant that workers continued to receive a fixed daily wage of rupees 100, even if local minimum wages were higher (Klaveren, Gregory, & Schulten, 2015).
4. *Women empowerment*- Many studies show that the MGNREGA in India has the potential to improve women's economic participation and make their livelihoods more secure. The scheme is designed in a way that encourages women to take part in work. These assets can improve livelihoods for both men and women (Narayanan, et al., 2025)
5. *Permissible works and worksite facilities*- The MGNREGA scheme clearly lists the types of work that can be carried out under the scheme. These works mainly focus on managing natural resources, creating community and individual assets, building infrastructure for women's groups, and improving rural facilities. According to MGNREGA management information system, there are 45 categories covering 262 types of approved works. Out of these, many are related to managing natural resources especially water conservation and agriculture related activities. The main aim of creating these long-lasting assets is to strengthen the livelihood resources of poor rural households. Studies also show that the durable assets created under MGNREGA help in addressing local development problems and highlight the scheme's focus on sustainable rural development (Kosec, Kyle, Narayanan, Raghunathan, & Ray, 2024)
6. *Right to information*- Right to information act allows every citizen to ask for information from government offices, except in matters related to national security and a few sensitive issues. Because the act covers a wide range of areas, RTI has greatly strengthened democratic governance in India. When the National Employment Guarantee Act NREGA was passed by parliament in August 2005, RTI was made an important part of it. The idea was that without proper use of RTI, NREGA funds could be misused or lost due to corruption. RTI helps check such problems and ensures that money meant for NREGA is used properly. Overall, RTI provisions make the agencies implementing NREGA more transparent and accountable to the public (Menon, 2008).
7. *Transparency and accountability*- These are two very important features of MGNREGA. The scheme makes it compulsory to involve ordinary people at every stage- right from planning the work and deciding the budget to monitoring and checking how the work is carried out. One of the key ways to ensure it is through social audits. Under this system, every gram panchayat must keep proper records, and the gram sabha regularly examines all documents related to the scheme. All accounts and records must be open and available for the public to check, so that people can see how money is spent and whether the work is done properly (Paul, 2015).
8. *Wage material ratio*- Wage material ratio should not be less than 60:40. Wages of skilled and semi-skilled labourers to be included in material costs (Chakrabarty & Kandpal, Public Policy in India, 2025)
9. *Cost sharing*- MGNREGA is run jointly by the central and state governments, and both share the cost. The central government pays the full wages of unskilled workers, most of the wages 75% for skilled and semi-skilled workers, and also covers 75% of the material costs. The remaining costs are paid by the state governments. If a state government is unable to provide work within 15 days of a job application, it must pay an unemployment allowance to the worker. Under MGNREGA, 25% of material costs, 25% of wages for skilled and semi-skilled workers, and the administrative expenses are borne by the state government (Hazariika & Banerjee, 2018).

10. *Executing MGNREGA*- Panchayati raj institutions are the main implementing bodies. Village panchayats are the nodal implementing bodies. Monitoring of the works is done by gram sabha and implementation does not include any contractors (Chakrabarty & Chand, Public Policy Concept, Theory and Practice, 2016). Following table 1 show the roles of the institutions which are involved in the execution of the scheme-

Objectives of the Scheme

Following are the main objectives of the scheme-

- 1) Promoting social welfare of the most helpless and unprotected people of rural India by guaranteeing employment.
- 2) Creating more job opportunities for poor people in rural areas so that they earn regular wages, while also building long-lasting assets like roads, ponds and other useful infrastructures.
- 3) Restoring and improving natural resources in villages, such as land, water, and forests.
- 4) Building long-lasting and useful assets in rural areas that help people earn a living.
- 5) Giving more power and opportunities to socially weaker groups- especially women, scheduled castes, and scheduled tribes, by ensuring their rights through the law.
- 6) Encouraging local people to take part in planning and decision-making by linking different poverty-reduction and livelihood programs.
- 7) Making local self-government stronger by empowering Panchayati Raj Institutions and increasing people's participation at the village level (Department of Rural Development, 2025).

Significance of MGNREGA

MGNREGA plays an important role in improving the lives of rural people by providing employment and income security. Its significance can be understood through the following points:

1. *World's largest rights-based employment scheme*- MGNREGA is the largest employment programme in the world and is very different from earlier wage employment schemes. It has kept people at the centre. This programme works on people's demand for work. Anyone who wants work can ask for it, and the government is legally bound to provide employment. This makes it a right based scheme (Gupta, 2015).
2. *Legal protection and automatic reach to the poor*- The act also has strong legal safeguards. If work is not given on time or wages are delayed, workers are given compensation or allowance. The scheme automatically reaches the poor, who genuinely want to do unskilled manual labour. To encourage states to implement it properly, the central government pays the entire unskilled labour cost and most of the material cost, reducing the financial burden on states (Gupta, 2015).
3. *Demand driven funding and states accountability*- Unlike older programmes that deepened on fixed budget allocation, MGNREGA is demand-driven. Funds are released to states based on how much work people actually ask for. This motivates states to provide more employment. If states fail to provide work on time, they must pay unemployment allowance. Gram panchayats play major role and implement at least half of the total work (Gupta, 2015).
4. *Strong role of gram sabha and local decision making*- A very important feature of the act is the direct transfer of funds and powers to village institutions. Decisions about what work should be done, where it should be done and when it should start are taken openly in gram sabha meetings and approved by the gram panchayat. Even works suggested at higher levels must be approved by the gram sabha first. Higher authorities cannot change these decisions unless they violate the law or official rules (Gupta, 2015).
5. *Shift from relief work to sustainable development*- The success of MGNREGA mainly depends on villagers, gram sabhas and gram panchayats, not just government officials. The act has shifted from short term relief work to long term development, focusing on natural resource management, asset creation and sustainable livelihoods (Gupta, 2015).
6. *Social audit and public accountability*- Another major feature is social audit, which allows people to check how money is spent and how work is done. This creates strong public accountability. Reports on the scheme's performance are prepared every year by central and state employment guarantee councils and are presented to parliament and state legislatures, ensuring democratic oversight (Gupta, 2015).
7. *Need for innovation and operational guidelines*- Since MGNREGA is very different from earlier schemes, therefore it requires new and innovative methods for proper implementation. Operational guidelines have been issued to help ensure that the objectives of the act are effectively achieved on the ground (Gupta, 2015).

III. Implementation Challenges Of MGNREGA

There are several challenges that are mentioned in various studies which are faced by different states while implementing MGNREGA, which are as follow-

- ❖ *Inefficiency in conduction of social audits-* social audits conducted are not that much reliable because the teams do not check the project sites and visit beneficiaries to verify information. Meetings of social audits are not conducted properly according to rules and proper reporting system is not followed.
- ❖ *Inefficiency of the implementing authorities-* the ministry of rural development and CEGC do not monitor the implementation of scheme properly. There are no proper inspection and audit conducted. There is no proper maintenance of records. Ministry is not able to maintain transparency guidelines at every region.
- ❖ *Discrepancy in measurement of work and wage payment-* there is no uniform system across states for paying wages under MGNREGA. While a few states manage wage payments properly, underpayment is very common in many others. For example, in Rajasthan workers were often paid only 40 rupees- 60 rupees per day even though the official minimum wage was 73 rupees. Studies have shown that in states like west Bengal, Haryana and Gujarat, the actual cost of providing one day of employment was much higher than the wages paid to workers. Social audits also found serious problems in how work was measured and how wages were calculated and paid.
- ❖ *Inadequate wage-* wages under MGNREGA are supposed to be paid either on a daily basis or according to the amount of work completed. However, this requires proper measurement of each worker's output, which is rarely done in practice. Because of poor measurement, workers often receive less than what they deserve. In some cases, they are also made to do more work than what is reasonable for the wages paid.
- ❖ *Delayed payment-* delays in wage payment is a common problem in almost all states. Wages are usually paid based on the measurement of work rather than just attendance. In many places, temporary attendance and work records are first prepared and later officially entered into muster rolls. These records require approval from officials like junior engineers, block development officers, or the village head. Since this process involves many steps and approvals, it often takes a long time, which results in delayed payment of wages.
- ❖ *Corruption-* corruption has become one of the biggest problems in implementing MGNREGA. In many villages, contractors play an active role even though the scheme is meant to be contractor free. These contractors manipulate records, make fake entries in job cards, steal wage money and cheat in the supply of materials. Often, local political leaders, contractors and government officials work together, which allows corruption to continue. In many cases, officials take a fixed share of the funds released, which further increases misuse of public money (Chakrabarty & Chand, 2016).
- ❖ *Design flaw-* a major design flaw in MGNREGA is that transparency mechanisms focus mainly on the local level. Higher-level officials and bureaucrats who make important decisions often remain outside the scope of transparency checks. This imbalance weakens accountability at upper levels and allows misuse of power without proper monitoring.
- ❖ *Inadequate administrative staff-* social audits conducted in different states have revealed a serious shortage of administrative staff required for proper implementation of MGNREGA. In some villages, work is not available locally, forcing people to travel to nearby villages to find employment. Due to limited staff, monitoring and supervision of works remain weak, which affects the overall performance of the scheme.
- ❖ *Lack of transparency-* in many states, proper transparency measures are ignored, which leads to more corruption. For example, two types of attendance records are maintained- one unofficial record at the worksite and another official record kept elsewhere. Important information such as wages paid, work details, and expenditure should be displayed on mandatory websites, but this is rarely done. Due to gaps in the management information system, data can be changed either while writing records or during data entry. Instead of warning users about mistakes, the MIS system often hides these errors, making it easier to cover up irregularities (Chakrabarty & Chand, 2016).
- ❖ *Lack of grievance redressal mechanism-* although the employment guarantee act provides for grievance redressal systems, most state governments do not implement them properly. As a result, workers have no platform to complain about issues like unpaid wages, delayed payments, or denial of unemployment allowance. The absence of transparency and accountability makes it difficult to identify who is responsible for violations. Weak accountability encourages corruption and misuse of funds. As Rajiv Gandhi once stated, only a small part of development money actually reaches the poor (Chakrabarty & Chand, 2016).
- ❖ *Absence of worksite facilities-* women workers face many difficulties due to the lack of basic facilities at worksites. In several villages, essential facilities like crèches, drinking water, shade, and first aid are either unavailable or poorly maintained. The absence of crèches facilities forces mothers to leave their children unattended or go without feeding them for long hours. This negatively affects both the health of the children and the ability of women to work comfortably.
- ❖ *Harassment of women workers-* under MGNREGA workers are legally entitled to receive minimum wages as per the minimum wages act, 1948. However, in practice, workers- especially women- are forced to work long hours but are paid less than the minimum wage. Women workers often face harassment at worksites and complain about poor working conditions. Some contractors even threaten to replace them with able-bodied men. The Supreme Court has recognized the right to minimum wages as a fundamental right, and non-payment

of wages is considered forced labour under article 23 of the constitution. Delayed wages, unpaid allowances, and underpayment are clear forms of exploitation.

- ❖ *Lack of awareness*- one major reason for the failure of public welfare schemes in India is the lack of awareness among people. Many workers are not aware of their rights and entitlements under MGNREGA. Even well-designed policies fail when beneficiaries do not know how to claim their benefits. Confusing guidelines and poor information dissemination further add to this problem, preventing people from demanding their rightful entitlements.

IV. Policy Shift: Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission Gramin (VB-G RAM G) Act, 2025

MGNREGA has played very important role in providing employment to people. It has also improved their status of living. MGNREGA was built in 2005 since then it has developed faced various challenges so as to address the loopholes and challenges of the MGNREGA scheme, it has been replaced by new scheme that is VB-G RAM G (Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission Gramin), 2025. This scheme aligns with the vision of viksit bharat 2047. This scheme aims to streamline the rural employment guarantees, to safeguard accountability (Press Information Bureau, Government of India, 2025). This act ensures 125 days of employment instead of 100 days to every rural household. This includes those adult members who are able to do unskilled manual work. It gives 60 days no work period to the workers who are involved in agricultural activities, during sowing and harvesting season. The payment of the wages must be done on weekly basis.

Comparative Analysis: Challenges And Strategic Responses

Aspect	MGNREGA Challenge	VB-G RAM G Response
Employment Quality	Focus on unskilled wage work	Emphasis on skill upgradation
Institutional Capacity	Weak planning at local level	Strengthen local governance and planning
Wage Payments	Delay and inefficiency	Integration with digital payments and monitoring
Asset Utility	Poor sustainability	Focus on productive assets tied to livelihoods
Economic Diversification	Limited scope	Inclusion of non-farm and enterprise pathways

V. Conclusion

MGNREGA has played a historic role in rural India’s social protection architecture, yet it confronts structural implementation challenges that limit its transformative potential. The emergence of the Viksit Bharat Gramin Rojgar Ajeevika Mission (VB-G RAM G) represents a policy evolution that seeks to address these challenges by broadening the scope of rural employment, enhancing skill ecosystems, and strengthening institutional capacity. For the Mission Gram to succeed, policymakers must ensure synergistic alignment with MGNREGA, adequate resource allocation, and a participatory governance model that centres rural voices in planning and evaluation.

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