

Native Ecology and Rural Development in India: Missed Connections and Future Directions

Vijeta Pundir, Pratibha Rai & Anup Kumar Mishra

Abstract

Rural India is vulnerable to most of the 21st century developmental challenges like the vast and continuing environmental as well as ecological damage, large-scale migration and mobility, international competition, rising income-inequalities, increased instances of natural disasters and technological disruption. In order to navigate these complexities, a long-term guiding framework that emphasises on rural sustainability is essential. India has implemented various Rural Development Programmes (RDP), each with specific objectives, resulting in a fragmented policy framework and disjointed implementation. These initiatives seem to have been conceived from an urban perspective, ignoring the unique needs of diverse rural and peri-urban regions. Even though 44.72% of the world's population resides in rural areas, mainstream development policies often underestimate their potential. Rural areas can play an important role in sustainable development by harnessing indigenous resources, promoting local industries and tourism, and contributing to renewable energy production. This paper explores the effectiveness of integrated rural development initiatives in India, evaluating their impact on livelihoods, basic infrastructure, and community empowerment. Drawing from programme documentation and stakeholder perspectives, the paper seeks to identify key bottlenecks and policy-gaps. The findings underscore the need for context-specific interventions, stronger community-participation, and convergence across schemes for holistic development.

Keywords: *Rural development, Sustainable development, Integrated rural development, Social innovation, Smart villages*

Introduction

The rural regions are often vulnerable because of persistent poverty traps, social inequalities, population migration, reliance on nature-based livelihoods, administrative shortcomings, weak planning, and geographical isolation (DISD, 2013). To address these internal vulnerabilities, it becomes crucial to establish a development framework that ensures sustainability of rural areas amidst rapidly changing risk landscapes. Many platforms have long advocated for synergistic frameworks that prioritize both natural resource conservation and well-being of communities to achieve sustainable development. The ecological sustainability in the development narrative remains in discourses but is not reflected in practice. If governance is people-centric alone, catering to immediate needs with complete disregard for the larger ecology, sustainable development goals cannot be expected to be achieved. The saddest part is that even humanitarian goals are far from being achievable. This needs to be reversed; the focus should be to find a way through innovative localised approach. The study undertakes a review of the Rural Development Programmes (RDP) launched by the Indian government, with a focus on understanding the underlying factors contributing to the uneven pace of growth in rural India.

Rural development is generally understood as the overall development of rural areas to ensure a better quality of life for people residing there (Naldi et al., 2015). It must be understood as a multi-level process anchored in historical traditions. The Agenda 21's "sustainable development" paradigm is based on three conceptual foundations: Economic sustainability, Social sustainability, and Environmental sustainability (Kahn, 1995). Economic sustainability revolves around the traditional concept of growth and development. Its characteristics have been market resource allocation, sustained growth and consumption levels, the premise that natural resources are limitless, and the belief that economic growth will 'trickle down' to the poor. 'Sustainable development' expands development's concern with monetary capital to consider natural, social, and human capital and expects conscious use of resources to last for consumption by future generations. Social sustainability encompasses equity, empowerment,

accessibility, participation, sharing, cultural identity, and institutional stability. It seeks to preserve the environment through economic growth and poverty alleviation.

Researchers particularly those in support of the 'Environmental Kuznets Curve', are of the view that poor countries must accept environmental degradation as a short-term consequence of economic development. Others have argued that an enabling environment that optimizes resource allocation can obviate the need for such a trade-off (Kahn, 1995). In the most basic sense, 'social sustainability' implies a system of social organization that alleviates poverty. In a more fundamental sense, however, 'social sustainability' establishes the nexus between social conditions such as poverty and environmental decay (Ruttan, 1991). Environmental sustainability involves ecosystem integrity, carrying capacity, and biodiversity. Natural capital must be maintained as a source of economic inputs and a sink for waste. Resources must be harvested no faster than they can be regenerated. Wastes must be emitted no faster than they can be assimilated by the environment (Kahn, 1995). Only by 'integrating' and 'interlinking' economic, social, and environmental 'sustainability' can negative synergies be arrested, positive synergies fostered, and real development encouraged.

The nation cannot progress sustainably unless the aim is set for balanced rural development, a modernised rurality in terms of environmental protection, economic stability, and equitable opportunity for all. The unfortunate part of rural Indian growth programmes is that they are less focused on ensuring the use of native resources and maintaining long-term cultural and ecological sustenance in the decision-making process. Conceptually, rural-ecology sustenance is concerned with achieving a balance between rural people and local natural resources. The economic aspect of rural development for policy makers till the 1980s meant 'basic-needs-approach' i.e. provisioning of opportunities for rural people and their capacity to participate in the growth process. It included strategies for reducing income-inequality. The social dimension was incorporated much later and embraced growth of poor, marginalised communities, and disadvantaged groups. Political dimension has been incorporated into recent trends in a developmental discourse, including provisions for low-income people, women, ethnic minorities to participate in the

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decision-making process. India had followed the path of decentralisation long before, yet proper incorporation of the political dimension into the development discourse, grassroot implementations did not occur until constitutional amendment of 1992, when the three-tier Panchayati Raj system, a form of local self-government, was given constitutional validity (Balwant-Rai-Mehta-Committee-Report)¹. The three-tier system comprises Gram-Panchayats at the village level or at the bottom, the Panchayat Samiti at the block level or in the middle, and the Zilla Parishad at the district level. Although Subramanyam (1976) put forward the Integrated Rural-Development (IRDP) concept, it was not implemented in letter-and-spirit. The priorities should be to prepare a village centric unique blueprint as a policy document catering to village specific problems that opens perspectives for rural people, preserves rural-complex as a cultural complex, develops prerequisites for new jobs to make 'Atma Nirbhar Bharat' along the Saansad Adarsh Gram Yojana (SAGY) guidelines.²

This study seeks to examine how Integrated Rural Development Programmes (IRDP) impact the socio-economic status of rural communities in India. The primary research question is: 'To what extent do IRDPs enhance sustainable livelihood and provide access to basic services among rural populations? In an attempt to answer the research question and narrow the research gap, the study proposes a policy framework for rural sustainable development.

Review of Literature

Despite a significant share of the Indian population living in villages, rural areas continue to face considerable developmental challenges that impede the broader progress of the national economy (Divi et al.,2024). There exists substantial disparity in the development of villages, with most falling far short of desired standards. There is hence an urgent need for village-specific planning to address the welfare needs of local communities. Local Economic Development (LED) should play a pivotal role in promoting the establishment of new rural industries to achieve a sustainable rural landscape (Liedholm & Kilby, 1989). This should be accompanied by greater inclusion of rural people in economic and political processes and improved telecommunication services (Oladipo, 2008) for wider reach and knowledge. It is essential to ensure that such changes do not compromise the local agricultural and village resource base (Oni, 2008)

and that land and other rural resources are distributed more equitably to uplift the poorest sections of the rural population (Ujo, 2005). It is crucial to include marginalized groups such as women, national and ethnic minorities, and the elderly in the development process (Gusztáv, 2005). Neglecting their suffering has led to mass emigration from rural areas to urban centres (Usoroh, 2018).

Innovation in rural areas has received limited attention, despite national initiatives (Yin et al., 2019). There is a growing emphasis on the empowerment of women. The role of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in enabling economic independence for rural women is important. Rashidpour, et al. (2011) have emphasized the importance of Community-based Management (CBM) in sustainable rural development. Their study indicates that latent variables such as “Stakeholder’s Role” and “Affecting Factors” have a positive impact, while “Obstacles” have a negative role in designing CBM. Pandey and Soodan (2012) have elaborated on the role of leadership in rural intervention. Their study, which compared leadership styles in two NGOs, HIFEED and HESCO, in Uttarakhand, India, emphasized the need for effective leadership in implementing strategies and driving change.

Despite the awareness of the importance of public participation in making environmental decisions democratic, legitimate, and acceptable, meaningful public involvement has often been compromised. For instance, in the context of the Allain Duhangan³ hydropower project in northern India and the social impact of developmental interventions in villages like Chikapar village in Odisha (which houses the Hindustan Aeronautics Limited), there have been social and environmental impacts due to development interventions.

However, case studies from drought-prone regions like Hiware Bazar⁴ and Ralegan Siddhi in Maharashtra reveal that a localized economic development approach has lifted these regions out of extreme poverty and restored natural resources to sustainable levels. The success story of Punsari⁵ as a model smart village in Gujarat is attributed to customised planning based on identifying the unique gifts of nature and specific village problems, serving as an exemplary model for emulation. Similarly, Piplantri⁶ village in Rajasthan plants 111 trees every time a family welcomes a girl child, promoting gender equality and enhancing the village’s biodiversity.

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The efforts of Tarun Bharat Sangh (TBS)⁷ in organising villages and local communities across the country, has resulted in the formation of Rashtriya Jal Biradari (National Water Community-RJB). RJB is a network of like-minded individuals, farmer groups, social organizations, research institutions, and water experts, all deeply concerned about water-related issues, with more than 200 organizations and 10,000 individuals as members.

In light of this background and in alignment with sustainability and resilience goals, this research aims to outline a framework for the future-ready development of rural regions, particularly at the Gram Panchayat level, which serves as a fundamental governing institution in Indian villages. This research responds to India's rapidly evolving economy and the sustainability challenges faced by rural communities. India's growing and dynamic economy, on track to become the world's third largest by 2030 (World Bank, 2018), has evolved through government-led economic reforms emphasizing liberalization, privatization, and deregulation (Kim & Panchanatham, 2021). Over the years, the government's goals for rural development (RD) have shifted from mere survival to safety and, more recently, to sustainable development (NITI Ayog, 2018) across various sectors, including agriculture, infrastructure, microfinance, community development, and environmental conservation. Consequently, to realize the vision of Sustainable Rural Development, the government of India has proposed numerous policies, schemes, and programme initiatives under the aegis of Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD, 2021).

Rural Development Programmes, Impact, and Gaps

India has launched several rural development programmes as listed in Table 1. Table 1 is subdivided into three parts to trace the rural development policies chronologically. It can be seen that our government has initiated several programmes quite consistently over the considered period. The successful and effective implementation of these programmes is critical to achieving long-term development in rural areas. Since independence, the government has reformed and remodelled these programmes to increase their reach and popularity. On the other hand, the issues, obstacles, and concerns related to their implementation have remained largely unchanged.

Table 1(i)

Key Rural Development Programmes in India from 1950-1990

Rural Development Programme/Year-Objective/Description
Community Development Programme (CDP)-1952 -Overall development of rural areas with people's participation.
Accelerated Rural Water Supply Programme (ARWSP)-1972-73-For providing drinking water in villages
Crash Scheme for Rural Employment-1972-73-For rural employment
Draught Prone Areas Programme (DPAP)-1973-74-Minimize the adverse effects of drought productivity of land and livestock leading to drought proofing of the affected areas
Twenty-Point Programme-1975-Poverty eradication and raising the standard of living
National Rural Employment Programme (NREP)-1980-provide profitable employment opportunities to the rural poor
Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA)-1982-To provide suitable opportunities for self-employment to the rural women who are living below the poverty line
Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme (RLEGP)-1983-For providing employment to landless farmers and labourers
National Fund for Rural Development (NFRD)-1984-To grant 100% tax rebate to donors and also to provide financial assistance for rural development projects.
Service Area Account (SAA) -1988-A new credit policy for rural areas.
Jawahar Rozgar Yojana-1989-For providing employment to rural unemployed.
Agriculture and Rural Debt Relief Scheme (ARDRS)-1990-To exempt bank loans up to Rs. 10,000 for rural artisans and weavers.

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Table 1(ii)

Rural Development Programmes in India from 1991-2015

District Rural Development Agency (DRDA)-1993-To provide financial assistance for rural development.
Mahila Samridhi Yojana-1993-To encourage the rural women to deposit in Post Office Saving Account.
Swarna Jayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana-1999-For eliminating rural poverty and unemployment and promoting self-employment.
Indira Awaas Yojana-1999-To help construction of new dwelling units as well as conversion of unserviceable kutch houses into pucca/semi-pucca by members of SC/STs, freed bonded labourers and also non-SC/ST rural poor below the poverty line by extending them grant-in-aid.
Pradhan Mantri Gramodaya Yojana-2000-To fulfil basic requirements in rural areas.
Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY)-2000 and 2015: To line all villages with pakka road
Annapurna Scheme-2000-To ensure food security for all create a hunger free India in the next five years and to reform and improve the Public Distribution System so as to serve the poorest of the poor in rural and urban areas.
Sampoorna Gramin Rozgar Yojana-2001-To provide additional wage employment in the rural areas as also food security, along with the creation of durable community, social and economic infrastructure in rural areas.
Bharat Nirman Programme-2005-Development of Rural Infrastructure including six components: irrigation, Water supply, Housing, Road, Telephone and Electricity.
National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGA)-2006-To provide at least 100 days wage employment in rural areas.
National Social Assistance Programme-2009-Old age pensions are granted under three schemes to destitute persons- (i) Indira Gandhi National Old Age Pension Scheme (IGNOAPS) (ii) Indira Gandhi National Widow Pension Scheme (IGNWPS) (iii) Indira Gandhi National Disability Pension Scheme (IGNDPS)

National Livelihood Mission-2009-10-To reduce poverty among rural BPL by promoting diversified and gainful self-employment and wage employment opportunities which would lead to an appreciable increase in income on a sustainable basis?
Pradhan Mantri Adarsh Gram Yojana (PMAGY)-2010-Integrated development of scheduled castes dominated villages in the country.
National Rural Livelihood Mission-2011-Scheme is focused on promoting self-employment and organization of rural poor. The basic idea behind this programme is to organise the poor into SHG (Self Help Groups) groups and make them capable of self-employment.
National Food Security Scheme (National Food Security Act)-2013-Aims to provide subsidized food grains to approximately two thirds of India's 1.2 billion people.
Deen Dayal Upadhyay Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDUGKY)-2014-to drive this national agenda for inclusive growth, by developing skills and productive capacity of the rural youth from poor families.
Digital India Programme (2015) has helped improve rural governance by making it more transparent, efficient, and cost-effective. Digital initiatives include provisioning of broadband connectivity, digital literacy, and e-governance services, digital payments etc.

Table 1(iii)

Rural Development Programmes in India from 2016 onwards

Pradhan Mantri Awaas Yojana- Gramin (PMAY-G)-2016-to provide pucca houses with some of the basic amenities.
Shyama Prasad Mukherji Rurban Mission (SPMRM)-2016-to deliver integrated project-based infrastructure in the rural areas, which will also include development of economic activities and skill development.
Mission Antyodaya-2017-18-convergence and accountability framework that aims to ensure optimum utilisation and management of resources to ministries/ departments under various programmes for the development of rural areas

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Saansad Adarsh Gram Yojana (SAGY) Phase 1: 2014-19; Phase II: 2019-24-to develop three Adarsh Grams by March 2019, Later five such Adarsh Grams (one per year) will be selected and developed by 2024. The programme aims at holistic development of villages that improves the standard of living and quality of life for all.

Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP) - Sabki Yojana, Sabka Vikas⁸. The GPDP focuses on providing support for development of rural products like Bamboo, Honey and Khadi as a cluster-based approach. During 2019-20 this scheme promoted rural industry and entrepreneurship and supported 75,000 entrepreneurs.

Swamitva Yojana- The scheme focused on land ownership by availing advanced technology and was tested by the Panchayati Raj Ministry of the Union Government before its launch in 2020

The evaluations of rural development programmes, both qualitative and quantitative in nature—as highlighted by Mansuri and Rao (2013) reveal persistent challenges such as limited engagement from local institutions, inadequate stakeholder participation, and sluggish dissemination of development schemes. These shortcomings, coupled with strategic and managerial disconnects, have hindered efforts to establish self-reliant village communities.

Progress under Some Key Rural Development Programmes

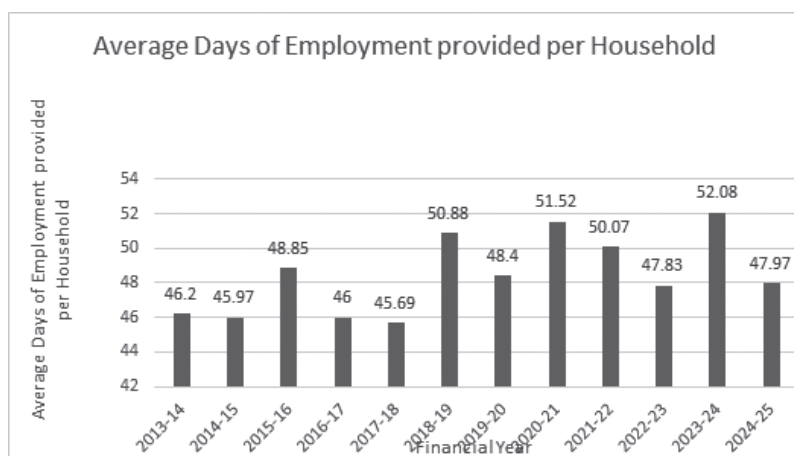
i. Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005 (MGNREGA)

The scheme's success in providing an employment guarantee of at least 100 days to rural households can be traced through Figures 1, 2, and 3. The average days for which rural households were employed fluctuated over the period 2013-14 to 2024-25. It, however, hovered around the 50 days mark falling well short of the target to guarantee employment for at least 100 days to rural households (Figure 1). The average wage increased over the period, rising from ₹ 132.7 per person in 2013-14 to ₹ 250.24 in 2024-25. This rise may not be considered sufficient as it has not compensated the employees for the increased inflation witnessed during the period (Figure. 2). The number of households that enjoyed the benefit

of 100 days of employment under the scheme was about 46 lakhs in 2013-14 but reduced to 40 lakhs in 2024-25. The number of beneficiary households was largest in 2021-22 with about 71 lakhs getting employment. (Figure. 3).

Figure 1

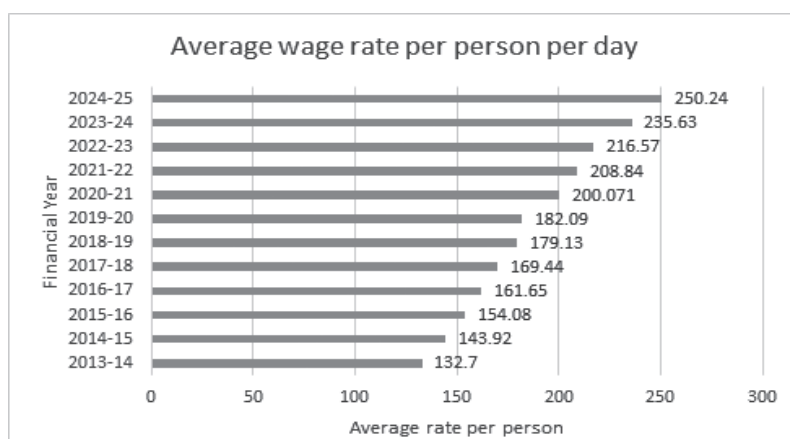
Average Number of Days of Employment Provided under MGNREGA



Source: <https://nrega.nic.in/MGNREGA>

Figure 2

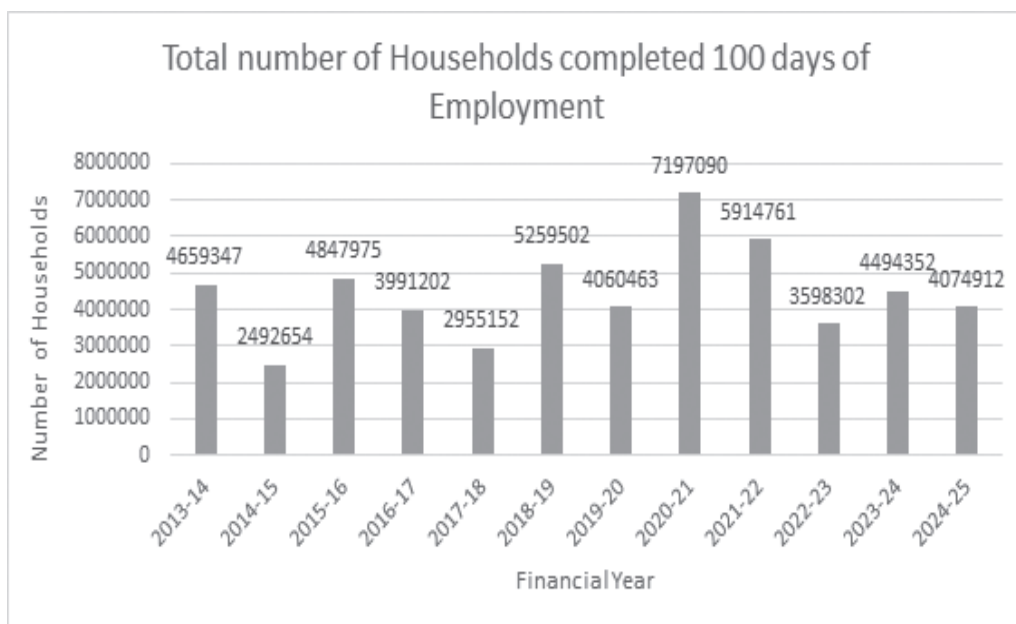
Average wage Rate per Person Since 2013-14



Source: <https://nrega.nic.in/MGNREGA>

Figure 3

Growth in the Number of Households that Completed 100 days of Employment Guaranteed under MGNREGA



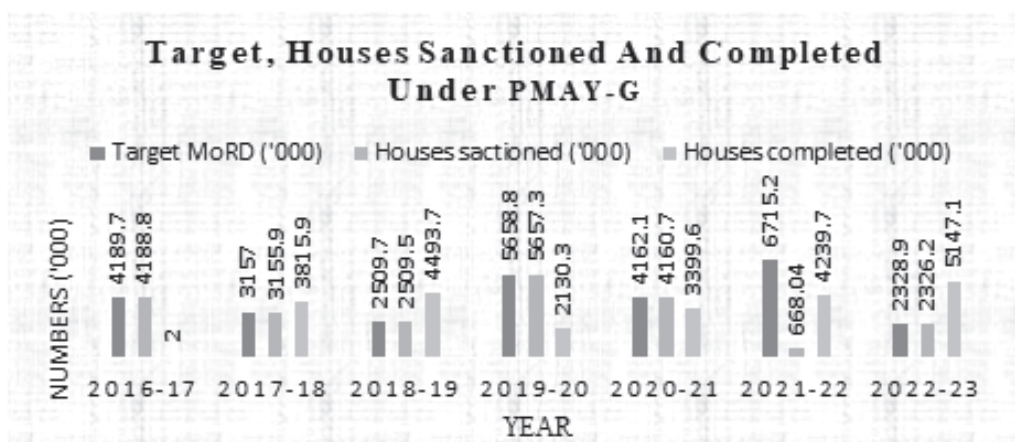
Source: <https://nrega.nic.in/MGNREGA>

ii. Pradhan Mantri Awaas Yojana- Gramin (PMAY-G)

The implementation of the Pradhan-Mantri Awaas Yojana for rural people through the years is depicted in Figure 4. It can be seen that the target number of houses provisioned to the rural poor by the Ministry of Rural Development is equal to the number of houses sanctioned for all years except 2020-21. This deviation can easily be attributed to the Covid-19 pandemic. The number of houses completed under the scheme shows a promising trend. However, what needs to be seen is the delivery time of this benefit to the rural poor which would be large as provisioning of houses is not an easy and quick job by any means.

Figure 4

Target and Sanctioned Houses under the Scheme



Source: <https://pmayg.nic.in>

iii. Saansad Adarsh Gram Yojana (SAGY)

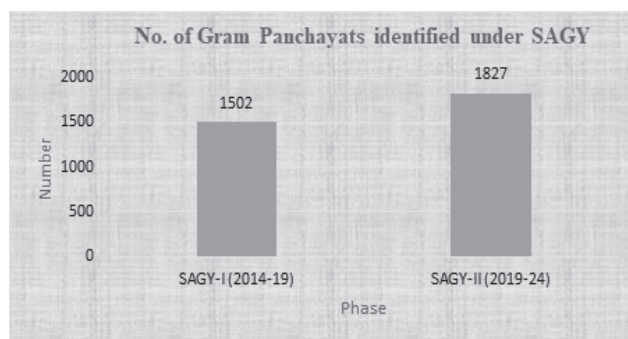
The SAGY is a relatively new scheme launched in 2014 that recognises the potential of the rural sector in overall sustainable development of the country. The progress of this scheme in terms of the number of Gram Panchayats identified under the scheme is highlighted in Figure 5. Total number of Gram Panchayats identified till date to implement the SAGY are 3333, with the total number of projects identified under this scheme being 246066, out of which 200750 have been completed.

Figure 5

Implementation of SAGY

Source:

<https://saanjhi.gov.in/>



iv. National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP)

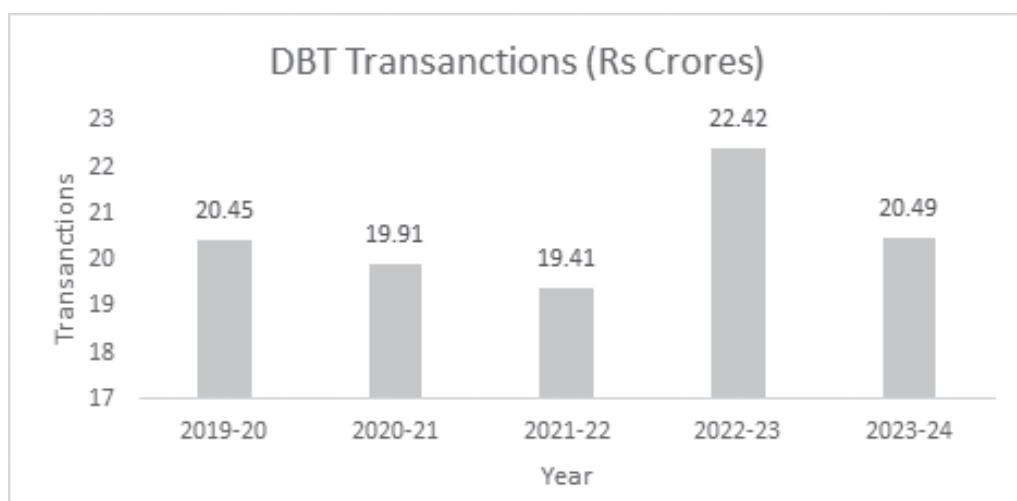
The programme launched in 2009 provides social assistance in the form of pension to the rural old and destitute under three schemes namely:

- a. Indira Gandhi National Old Age Pension Scheme (IGNOAPS)
- b. Indira Gandhi National Widow Pension Scheme (IGNWPS)
- c. Indira Gandhi National Disability Pension Scheme (IGNDPS).

The direct-benefit transfer under the scheme over the years is depicted in Figure 6.

Figure 6

Direct Benefit Transactions under NSAP



Source: <https://nsap.nic.in>

v. Progress under other Schemes

Mission Amrit Sarovar: This was launched in 2022 to conserve water for the future. It aimed at developing or rejuvenating 75 ponds also called ‘Amrit Sarovars’ in each district. About 68,843 ponds have been developed so far.

Jal Jeevan Mission: This was initiated in 2019 with the aim of providing all

rural households with clean and sufficient drinking-water. As on January 2025, a total of 12.2 crore households were provided with tap water connections.

Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana - National Rural Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NRLM): This mission was started in 2011, to empower rural poor women by organizing them into Self Help Groups (SHGs) and supporting both farm and non-farm economic activities with the objective of enhancing their incomes and quality of life. The scheme has so far mobilised 10.02 crore rural households into 90.90 lakh SHGs, 5.96 lakh Village Organisations, and 32,419 Cluster Level Foundations.

Since India's independence, rural development policies have primarily centred around poverty eradication. The predominant approach has been to boost agricultural productivity, assuming it to be the primary livelihood option for rural communities. Although numerous initiatives have emerged over time, such as NRHM for healthcare, NLRM for livelihood, and NSAP for social upliftment, the lingering concern remains: if these programmes were truly adequate and successful, their primary goal of poverty eradication in rural areas would have been accomplished (Pathak and Deshkar, 2023). The Ministry of Rural Development has come out with a vision document (2019-24) which recognises that the transformation of rural communities is important to achieving SDGs 2030 and lays down the road map to poverty-free India.

Insights from Select Studies on the Evaluation of Rural Development Initiatives and the Identified Gaps

India's rural development trajectory has been shaped by a series of ambitious government initiatives aimed at improving the socio-economic well-being of its vast rural population. Empirical studies reveal that while these programmes have delivered notable successes, challenges remain in ensuring equitable outreach and long-term sustainability. A cornerstone in this space is the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), which has significantly increased household incomes by offering employment during the agricultural lean season. Its efficacy in reducing seasonal migration and generating communal assets is demonstrated by case studies from Tamil Nadu and Chhattisgarh (Panda and Majumder, 2013). However, results are impacted by differences in administrative performance across rural areas. According to a study by Kumar, et al. (2021), MGNREGA has helped about 29.3 crore rural workers, underscoring its effect on rural unemployment.

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Rural people now have better housing options and skills because of two parallel programmes like the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Gramin (PMAY-G) and Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDU-GKY). Over 1.4 crore pucca houses were built with PMAY-G assistance (Kumar et al., 2021), while DDU-GKY made it possible for young people in rural areas to receive training. However, GRAAM (2020) indicates that low pay and placement in inconvenient locations are the top reasons why women quit their jobs, underscoring the necessity of training aligned with the local job requirement.

Institutional financing is also a significant factor. Mathavan and Prema (2004) discovered a high association between improvements in rural infrastructure and incomes and NABARD's financial operations, underscoring the significance of strong banking institutions in maintaining progress.

Access to benefits is still skewed by socio-economic differences in spite of these initiatives. Welfare programmes disproportionately benefit households with higher castes (Reddy et al., 2022). Stronger last-mile delivery mechanisms are required, which show that structural disparities limit the reach of even well-designed projects. Agricultural initiatives such as Telangana's Seed Village Programme (SVP) provide a more focused success story. Using regression analysis and 'Difference-in-Differences' (DiD), Bhavani et al. (2022) found that SVP participants' agricultural-earnings increased due to characteristics including farmer education and irrigation access.

Initiatives adopted at Community-level like *Kisan Melas* under Shri Kshethra Dharmasthala Rural Development Project (SKDRDP) also indicate some potential. These melas have increased awareness about agricultural policies and improved financial literacy, leading to creation of social capital through grassroots mobilization (Venkatraja & Prasad, 2019).

Studies by Bhagat (2009) and Mukherji (2013) stress the need for participatory models tailored to local contexts. Their work shows that policies must include marginalized groups and women in both planning and execution. Rural-to-urban migration persists due to limited local opportunities. Scholars recommend rural employment rooted in Traditional Knowledge Systems (TKS), with community support to maintain ecological balance.

To promote sustainable rural development, environmental aspects must

be considered with economic planning. Promoting green jobs and Local Economic Development (LED) involving low-cost projects is one approach. The challenge is in aligning such initiatives with current policy frameworks while overcoming limits posed by inaccessibility, particularly in employment training, transportation, and service delivery. A renewed attention on participatory governance, decentralization, and ecological sustainability is important to address these continuing gaps.

A Contextual Framework for Tailored Rural Development: The Way Forward

Rural development must start by classifying villages according to their developmental stage. This allows for tailored strategies that address each group's specific needs. Under-developed villages need basic amenities like roads, electricity, schools, and healthcare. The moderately developed ones should focus on improved farming, irrigation, and rural industries. Well-developed villages can adopt sustainable technologies, promote green jobs, and support rural tourism or decentralized energy like solar power. A uniform model is outdated. Programmes must support agro-industrial growth, promote suitable technologies, and build capacity for innovation and entrepreneurship. Both farm and non-farm sectors should be integrated through targeted interventions reflecting the strengths and gaps of each village.

True development must rest on sustainability—environmental, social, and economic. Programmes should minimize negative externalities and ensure fair benefit distribution. As observed by Bicalho and Peixoto (2016), integrating farmers' experiential knowledge with scientific understanding plays a crucial role in strengthening the resilience of agro-ecological systems. Yet, translating global frameworks like the 2030 Agenda, Paris Accord, and Sendai Framework into village-level strategies remains a challenge in India.

Success hinges on participatory and transparent governance. Grassroot engagement, combined with institutional backing allows communities to shape their development. Regular awareness drives, community feedback, and strong monitoring systems are vital to track funds and measure outcomes. A major barrier is the low motivation among officials in remote postings, often viewed as punishment. These roles must be reframed as opportunities, offering benefits like hardship pay, fast-track promotions, or priority postings after set tenures.

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This comprehensive, context-aware approach, rooted in differentiated planning and empowered governance—can drive sustainable rural transformation. Rather than imposing external models, development should evolve organically, aligned with local realities and aspirations.

Key Strategies for Rural Development Framework

Stimulating a meaningful rural-development requires a diverse, integrated approach. One effective method is employing labour-intensive technologies in rural industries to reduce disguised unemployment in agriculture. Educational workshops and seminars should also raise awareness among rural entrepreneurs about government and non-government schemes promoting enterprise development. Access to low-interest credit with flexible collateral norms is crucial, and financial institutions must adopt a proactive stance. Government support is equally vital—covering infrastructure, storage, marketing, and export facilitation. Renewable energy, particularly solar and wind, should drive sustainable rural-electrification. Supporting ancillary units around existing enterprises can boost productivity, while SHG-led microcredit programmes can expand employment and diversify rural economies.

Spreading knowledge of market trends, technology, and price updates empowers rural entrepreneurs. Tools like SWOT analysis, reliable credit systems, and infrastructure access help unlock financial and innovative potential. Establishing Innovators Clubs, Entrepreneurship Development Cells, and Rural Marketing Cells—coupled with management and skills training—can foster youth entrepreneurship.

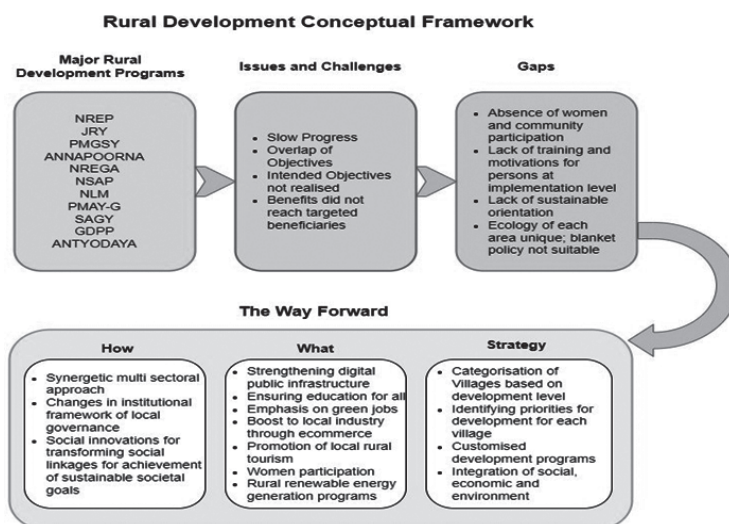
Investment in modernization, diversification, and agro-processing, especially in non-farm sectors, must increase. The OPS (Opportunity, Problem, Solution) framework helps identify regional issues, attract skilled returnees, and engage NRIs and affluent locals. Efficient local markets, product grading, and flexible manufacturing can boost rural commerce. Strengthening small enterprises with finance, marketing, research, and advisory services is essential for a resilient rural entrepreneurship ecosystem. Aligned with the 2030 Agenda, rural initiatives can advance SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 6 (Clean Water), SDG 7 (Clean Energy), SDG 11 (Sustainable Communities), and SDG 13 (Climate Action). Under the Paris Agreement, sustainable farming and clean energy in rural areas can cut emissions and improve climate resilience.

The Sendai Framework underscores the importance of disaster preparedness in safeguarding rural livelihoods. Each region needs tailored development plans based on its resources, stage of growth, and unique needs. A one-size-fits-all strategy is ineffective. The broader goal is a coordinated, multi-sectoral model integrating agriculture, rural industry, eco-tourism, biofuels, infrastructure, and green energy. For a resource-constrained country like India, avoiding duplication is key. This underscores the urgency of integrated governance, aligning stakeholders under a shared development vision.

The methodology and proposed framework for achieving convergence in rural development planning is illustrated in Figure 7. It has been developed based on implementation challenges as observed in various programme evaluations discussed above. The proposal is based on categorization of villages based on their development level and working out tailor made strategies to ensure sustainable development. The framework highlights the role of community-level institutions, inter-departmental coordination, and the integration of digital monitoring tools in enhancing the efficiency and inclusiveness of development outcomes.

Figure 7

Conceptual Framework of Rural Development



Conclusion

A holistic approach to local development should stem from the concept of bottom-up or endogenous growth (Gkartzios & Lowe, 2019), which emphasises local resources and internal capacities to build territorial capital. This demands a sectional approach, prioritising territorial coherence over isolated sectoral actions. A more effective model is the neo-endogenous method, blending internal potential with selective external (physical and digital) links, while minimizing ecological disruption. The six dimensions of the rural web—endogeneity, innovation, institutional arrangements, social capital, market governance, and sustainability—remain underused. This framework promotes interlinked actors, common standards, and cooperation. Successful rural innovation hinges on continuity, collaboration, and communication.

A reliable, updated rural database is crucial for informed policymaking. Bridging the planner-community divide requires local orientation, participatory methods, and the inclusion of Traditional Knowledge Systems (TKS). The envisioned model involves a bi-directional Citizen-Government (G2C2G) interface with feedback loops and geo-tagging—key elements in modern e-governance (Malhotra et al., 2006). Women, despite their key role in rural economies, remain under-represented in Local Economic Development (LED). This calls for gender-sensitive planning backed by gender analysis and budgeting.

The Smart Village model, introduced under Saansad Adarsh Gram Yojana (2014), supports inclusive rural transformation. Based on six pillars—Governance, Technology, Resources, Services, Livelihoods, and Tourism—it adapts to regional needs (Aziiza & Susanto, 2020). SMART villages are Sustainable, Manageable, Adaptive, Responsible, and Technologically advanced. Regulatory and governance reforms are essential for this model to thrive (Castro-Arce, 2020). Social innovation is central here, fostering collective action toward shared goals. When scaled, it can drive governance reform and regional resilience.

Agricultural technology is transforming rural economies. Tools like precision farming, drone-based soil analysis, AI crop forecasting, and blockchain traceability improve yields, cut costs, and open markets. When aligned with local knowledge, these technologies enhance productivity and reduce environmental impact, supporting sustainable development. Globally, the energy transition offers rural opportunities. Small-scale, community-owned renewable systems

can deliver both power and income (Clausen & Rudolph, 2020). This is timely as India promotes rural industries and eco-tourism, aligning with SDGs 8, 12, and 15. The urban-centric view that sees rural areas as mere resource suppliers must change. A new paradigm should value rural vitality and embrace the urban-rural continuum. Urban areas must invest in rural renewal, fostering self-sustaining economies and ensuring the rights and dignity of various segments of rural population. A coherent implementation-framework with local ownership, real-time monitoring, and inter-departmental convergence is crucial. Future policies should account for regional disparities and prioritise community engagement to ensure the sustainability of outcomes.

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