

Research Article

Problems and Prospects of Indian Local Governance an Achieving Sustainable Development Goal: An Analysis

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Abstract

Indian democracy has noble features of decentralization, devolution, and de-concentration. The Constitutional 73rd Amendment Act (CAA) of the early 1990s is a landmark for democratic decentralization which accorded constitutional status to Panchayati Raj or Local Governance system within the country. Wherein Gram Panchayat (village level) is the basic unit of grassroots governance, Panchayat Samiti (block level) at the middle level and Zilla Parishad (district level) is the highest level of local administration. With 73rd CAA, 29 functional items were put under Panchayats, relating to Sustainable Development Goals, such as Poverty Alleviation, Zero Hunger, Good Health and Well-being, Quality education, Gender equality, Clean water and Sanitation, Clean energy etc. The UNDP identifies Local Governments as vital partners in implementation. This paper analyzes the major challenges of Indian rural local government in achieving the sustainable development goals and examines its viable perspectives. The research methodology followed is descriptive research with narrative and qualitative analysis. The findings indicate significant challenges in attaining the SDGs in rural India and limited resources with rural local governments like. The silver lining, however, lies with the government willingness to translate the digital gains into productive information, mass awareness creation, and push for greater effective role of women the local governance.

Keywords: Democracy, Decentralization, Devolution, De-concentration., Gender equality, Health and Poverty.

Introduction

It is almost 33 years since the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts, creating the new Local Governance Framework in India, were made operational in April 1993. The Acts, focused on enabling democratic decentralization, have provisions that devolved a range of powers and responsibilities to local elected bodies and made them accountable to the people for their implementation. The new system of local governance has proved to be remarkably beneficial in some aspects. Yet, there are some lacunae, especially in the implementation of several provisions, which has limited the effectiveness of these reforms.

Evolution of Local Governance in India: There is long evolutionary history of local governance in India. Evidence from the Rig-Veda (1700 BC) shows self-governing village organisations called Sabhas. In time, these bodies became panchayats (council of five). The decentralization of authority was present in the Mauryan to Gupta dynasties. The British also tried to establish decentralized systems, albeit with very little powers. The Royal Commission on Decentralization (1907) under the chairmanship of Sir H. W. Primrose recognized the importance of panchayats at the village level.

Under the Government of India Act, 1935 Provincial Governments were responsible for local governance. They enacted legislations but little powers were provided to Panchayats. The framers of the Constitution of India included Article 40 among the Directive Principles: "The state shall organise village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government". Four committees (between 1957 to 1986) conceptualised local self-government in India; Balwant Rai Mehta Committee (1957), the Ashok Mehta Committee (1977–1984), GVK Rao Committee (1985), and the LM Singhvi Committee (1986). Eventually, the local Governance was given Constitutional Status with the 73rd/74th Constitutional Amendment Acts in 1992. The Amendment Acts of 1992 added two new parts IX and IX-A to the Constitution. Two new Schedules 11 and 12 were also added which contain the lists of functional items of Panchayats and Municipalities.

Table 1. Policy changes in rural local government from British Era till post-1992 reforms

Act & Committees	Year	Description
The Bengal Village Chowkidari Act	1870	Established village watchmen who were paid from local funds, laying an early foundation for rural administration.
The Madras Local Boards Act	1884	Introduced local boards in rural areas with partially elected members, setting a precedent for local self-governance.
The Royal Commission on Decentralization	1907	Recommended the enhancement of local self-government, influencing the structure of rural governance.
The Government of India Act (1919)	1919	Introduced the concept of 'Dyarchy' and transferred the subject of local self-government to Indian Ministers in the provinces.
The Government of India Act (1935)	1935	Expanded provincial autonomy and set the stage for further development of local governments, including rural areas.
Community Development Program	1952	Aimed at holistic rural development through the establishment of block-level administrative units.
National Extension Service	1953	Focused on creating a self-sustaining rural community by providing technical and administrative assistance.
Balwantrai Mehta Committee	1957	Recommended the establishment of the three-tier Panchayati Raj system (village, block, and district levels), which was implemented starting in Rajasthan in 1959.
Ashok Mehta Committee	1978	Suggested strengthening Panchayati Raj institutions with more powers and resources.
73rd Constitutional Amendment Act	1992	Provided constitutional status to Panchayati Raj institutions, mandating regular elections, reservation for marginalized groups, and the establishment of State Finance Commissions.
Post-1992 Reforms	Post-1992	Various state-specific reforms and central initiatives like the Backward Regions Grant Fund (BRGF), National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), and the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) aimed at strengthening rural governance and development.

Source: Compiled by Author

Structure of Local Governance in India:

The 73rd/74th Amendment Acts established a three-tier system of Panchayati Raj in every state at the village, intermediate and district levels. For rural areas, there are three nested bodies. At the top is the District Council or Zilla Parishad, which is made up of a cluster of Block Councils or Panchayat Samitis, which in turn, are made up of village councils or Gram Panchayats. Each village

has a village assembly or gram sabha comprising all adults in the village. Gram Sabha has the power to directly elect members of the panchayat. States with a population of less than two million may choose to have a two-tiered structure, without the intermediate block-level institution (Mathew, G. 1986).

In urban areas, there are three types of local bodies: Municipal Corporations (Mahanagar Palikas for areas with a population of more than one million), Municipal Councils/Municipalities (Nagar Palikas for areas with less than a million people), and Town Councils (Nagar Panchayats for areas transitioning from rural to urban).

Governance Structure of Panchayati Raj Local Governance:

Scheduled and Tribal areas are legally exempt from implementing the Panchayati Raj system. The Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas (PESA) Act, 1996 provides for the extension of the 73rd Amendment (with certain modifications and exceptions) to tribal and forested areas across 10 states of India, (excluding tribal areas in the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Mizoram, which are governed by District or Regional Councils). These provisions have been put in place to protect customary law, social and religious practices, and traditional management practices of community resources.

A minimum of one-third of the seats in all local bodies are reserved for women. Seats are also reserved for people belonging to scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, and other backward classes in proportion to their population (Suresh Vadranam and Jayaprada Sahoo, 2022)

The Role of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs)/Local Governance Bodies

PRIs play a crucial role in rural development and perform the following roles: (a) Administrative activities such as the maintenance of village records, the construction, maintenance, and repair of roads, tanks, wells, and so on; (b) Improving socio-economic welfare through the promotion of rural industries, health, education, women and child welfare, among others; (c) Judicial functions such as trying petty civil and criminal cases such as minor thefts and money disputes are also performed either by separate adalati or nyaya panchayats, or by gram panchayats.

Sustainability and Rural Development:

Sustainability in rural livelihood would basically help the current and future populations to fulfill their needs but in today's era, the biggest challenge is that the people are unable to get even the basic necessities of life. The need for sustainable development is to alleviate poverty and provide a better living. Therefore, sustainable development goals are the only mechanism for evaluating inter-generational equity. India has not been successful in attaining prioritized socio-economic growth and equitable distribution of welfare for the rural poor. The rural population is basically dependent on agriculture and other connected farm and non-farm activities as their means of livelihood. These people struggle for their survival and constantly fight against poverty, illiteracy, inequality, precarious health, filthy environment, etc. It is also no denying the fact that the government of India had launched a series of rural development programmes to achieve the UN mandated Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with a view to eliminating poverty, illiteracy, etc. targeting the majority of the population.

Sustainable development in rural areas can be achieved only through decentralized planning at the national and state level, and they should also provide powers of decision making at the village level, where the grassroots needs can be realistically understood. If decentralized planning can be done through community participation, only then this will lead to better development of the rural areas and the communities as well. Community participation means involving each and every person from the community in the decision-making process, in order to develop a sense of collectivism in the development process. This will further help the village panchayats in implementing the development plans. They would plan and frame their own development plans and sustainable environment, and realize the collective gains with solidarity and harmonic association. It would further assist them in organizing and increasingly reformulating the socio-economic and developmental activities, which in turn gradually eliminate poverty, improve health conditions, remove illiteracy, etc., thus making much better use of the government resources as well the ideas of the 73rd CAA and fulfilling the development goals (Suresh Vadranam and Jayaprada Sahoo 2025)

Current Issues in Rural Local Development:

More than seventy percent of India's population lives in rural areas, yet these rural communities remain utterly neglected in the country's mainstream development process. This paradox is visible from the fact that, despite the overall GDP and per capita income of the country rising over decades, the urban-rural disparities still remain appalling. India is also the fastest growing nation in terms of population size and set to overtake China in a short time. India is thus poised to face the rising necessity of food and resulting challenges if it continues to neglect the villages and the rural communities. According to the 2011 Census, only 30.80% of rural households get tap water, only 6% are connected to the closed drainage system and 55% of rural households have electricity (Mahadevan-Dasgupta, U.2022). Therefore, India has a lot of ground to cover in achieving sustainable goals. India being the next emerging power and more than 22 percent of its population reeling under poverty and an abysmal expenditure of 1.2% of GDP on health (Goldsmith, E. 1992) the basic goals of eradicating poverty and improving health remain the major challenge for the government.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) seem to be highly ambitious and run from Goal 1: Complete eradication of poverty, through Goal 10: "Reduce inequality within and among countries" to Goal 17: "Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development". Taking into account India's performance on the precursor Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), India needs to boost its resources to implement a vast range of 17 Goals and around 180 targets (India and the MDGs Towards a sustainable future for all. 2015)

India also lagged behind in achieving some of the MDGs and it must be aware of the correct reasons while starting to work on the SDGs so as to improve upon the means of implementation and review and monitoring mechanisms as well as coordinated efforts. Again, there also exists disparity among various states and their capacity to implement the SDGs in the near future. Its success will also be dependent on the strengthening of local bodies in rural areas for effective implementation of SDGs.

As mentioned before, the SDGs should be implemented through close coordination between the governments at the local, state and central level as well as the civil society and the industries. India needs to ensure a coordinated working approach among all these Stakeholders. The SDGs need active participation of the local governments and in India; the Panchayati Raj System is very weak, which needs to be strengthened to achieve the overall development goals. Awareness about the SDGs needs to be brought among the community and its collective participation is a must in order to achieve those (Affairs, D.O.E. S., Nations, U., Coordination, U.N.O.F.E.S.A. 2008). In order to mobilize efforts on such a huge scale, enormous funds will be required. Thus, the government must ensure uninterrupted supply of funds to the RLG and it has to take up a critical role in ensuring inclusion at the local level. More so, the local administration has to work effectively and efficiently to achieve the defined developmental goals. The success of India in achieving the goals will henceforth play a vital role in determining the success of the project as a whole.

Challenges for India in attaining the SDGs:

India faces severe challenges in attaining the SDGs, particularly in the following areas:

1. Uplifting masses reeling under poverty and hunger
2. Economic growth trickling down to the bottom with mass job creation
3. Enhanced investment in social sectors and basic services
4. Targeted approach and robust implementation of development programs
5. Improvement in basic infrastructure for education, health and other primary services
6. Removal of bottlenecks in social discrimination and injustice
7. Removal of gender inequalities and progressive empowerment of women

High economic growth and redistribution alone may not be sufficient to address the poverty and social sector challenges. As per Goldsmith (Goldsmith, E. 1992), one-third of the world's extremely poor lived in India in 2010, that's whopping 400 million people. Economic growth has not been enough to uplift these poor from below the poverty line and it has not resulted into broad-based job creation for the masses. The cost of implementing SDGs in India by 2030 is projected to be around US\$14.4 billion (Pritchett, L., Kenny, C. 2013). However, some years have seen reductions in social

sector spending by central government, and hence, there might be resource scarcity unless states allocate a sizable amount of expenditure to the social sector.

Likewise, India has peculiar social sector issues like education, drinking water and public health. The government schools are devoid of quality education, especially in rural areas. Also, India's so called safe water from tube-wells is not as safe as piped water supply. This results in high incidence of waterborne illnesses and deaths despite government reports of a very high proportion, more than eighty percent, of access to safe drinking water. Moreover, India's health expenditure is mostly out-of-pocket, which is exorbitantly costly. Good quality health services come at a premium from the private sector and public health still lacks better health infrastructure. India has to enhance public health insurance coverage for larger groups of people.

Lastly, monitoring the progress of SDGs would require NITI Aayog to play a critical role in it. However, there are reservations about its ability to manage this colossal task, as it has to coordinate between both the centre and states. States get their share of tax devolution for social sector spending and hence they have to play a critical role as well, in achieving the SDGs. States have to share judicious share of funds with the local governments and keep track of the progress with NITI Aayog's advisory. The top-to-bottom feedback mechanism has to be really robust for any viable success of the vision- especially in identifying local priorities, framing suitable policies, and advancing innovation & enterprising spirit for effective implementation.

Issues of Indian Rural Local Governments in Attaining SDGs

Local governments in rural India face several challenges in the accomplishment of the Sustainable Development Goals. These challenges are in varied forms- institutional, financial, human resource constraints, limited access to technology & information, limited ability for framing the plans for development and lack of visions for sustainable developmental models, etc. Some of the prominent challenges encountered by the local governance in rural India towards achieving sustainable development goals are as follows:

Institutional Capacity

1. As per Ministry of Panchayati Raj, as of 2022, there were over 2.48 lakh Gram Panchayats in India, out of which over 1.5 lakh are in rural areas. Many of these local bodies lack the institutional capacity to frame developmental plans and implement sustainable development models.
2. The key tool for local planning and development is the Village Development Plan (VDP). Estimates by National Institute of Rural Development (NIRD) Hyderabad and Ministry of Panchayati Raj found that less than 20 percent Gram Panchayats in India have a functional Village Development Plan, thus, limiting their abilities to formulate sustainable development initiatives.
3. These institutional initiatives should flow through top-to-bottom and bottom-to-top feedback loops. The top developmental think tank like Niti Aayog should not only coordinate with the state level development bodies, but also with the district, block and village local bodies. This two-way institutional feedback mechanism is virtually non-existent in India, which severely restricts the ability to achieve the SDG targets (Sharma, A.(2020).

Issues in Women Centric Governance:

1. Women participation in local governance in India that provided a minimum of 33% women reservation in village panchayats and local governments (Sahoo, M.K. 2008).
2. Over the years this has been increased to 50 percent in many states of India. By the year 2022, over a million women elected representatives were there in the local governments in the country (Masot, A.N., Gascón, J.L.G. 2021)
3. Despite this enhanced leadership roles for women in local governments, women issues are still addressed little in rural India- for instance, gender equality, better women education & healthcare, and women economic empowerment.
4. Gender equality is still to be achieved in India. India's overall human Development Index (HDI) rank was 132nd in 2021 among 191 nations- with male HDI rank at 119th and female

HDI rank at 131st showing stark gap in gender equality in India (Sahoo, M.K., Bhayani, M. 2017)..

5. Among other reasons, this situation probably is the outcome of the issue of 'proxy governance' and 'male dominance' in local governance systems in rural India.
6. The women elected representatives in the local bodies are forced to act as dormant and actual governance is taken over by the dominant male leaders typically, their husbands, fathers or other male family members.
7. In rural parlance, they are addressed as 'Pradhan-Pati' (or Pradhan-husband). This leads to distorted decision-making process in the local governance, often unfavorable to the women in general.

These challenges in the women-centric governance system in rural India are to be addressed by the local governments with initiatives taken from the Central and State governments and Niti Aayog-then only gender related SDGs will be achievable. Many studies on women centric local governance in India have confirmed silent role of women representatives (despite being proxies) in delivering better public goods & services, and lesser corrupt practices (Masot, A.N., Gascón, J.L.G. 2021. Moreover, women leaders affirmatively impact in framing women-related policy decisions and they are crucial in raising hopes & aspirations among girls, as confirmed by randomized research in West Bengal and Rajasthan by J-PAL Poverty Action Lab (Singh, S., Singh, M. 2006). This generates increased hope that if women are given more leg-room in rural local governance, there would be better chances of attainment of Sustainable Development Goals.

Revenue Resources for Local Governance:

The challenges in working of Local Government Bodies

Functional Challenges:

1. The power to devolve functions to local governments rests with the State Government. Most States have not devolved adequate functions to local government bodies.
2. This has severely affected the system's efficiency and effectiveness.
3. State Governments have created parallel structures for the implementation of projects around agriculture, health, and education, which undermines the status of local bodies.
4. Local bodies lack the support systems necessary to carry out their mandates.
5. The 74th amendment requires a District Planning Committee to be set up in each district; so that the development plans prepared by the panchayats and urban local bodies can be consolidated and integrated.
6. According to a study by the India Development Review (IDR, a think tank), District Planning Committees are non-functional in 9 states, and failed to prepare integrated plans in 15 states.

Financial Challenges:

(a) Local government expenditure as a percentage of GDP is only 2%. This is extremely low compared to other major economies like China (11%) and Brazil (7%);

(b) Most local bodies, both rural and urban are unable to generate adequate funds from their internal sources, and are therefore extremely dependent on external sources for funding. Studies show that around 80-95% of revenue is obtained from external sources, particularly State and Union Government loans and grants;

(c) The volume of money set apart for them is inadequate to meet their basic requirements. Local Governments are starved of resources. The Union Finance Commissions have made desirable recommendations, but the actual devolution of funds has been very poor. Not more than 5% of the divisible pool of Union taxes is given to local governments;

(d) The devolution of funds is associated with conditionalities that bind them to specific uses. (i.e., top driven schemes of Union/State Governments, rather than based on local needs). The Government-appointed officers have complete control over spending of funds instead of the elected representatives of local governments;

(e) State Finance Commissions are not established as per Constitutional requirements (constitute every 5 years). By 2014-15, States should have created 5th State Finance Commission (SFC) in their

respective States, but only 13 had created them. By 2019, when 6th State Finance Commission should have been constituted, some States were yet to create 3rd or 4th Commissions. J&K had created only 1 SFC by April 2019;

(f) Some experts argue that Local governments are reluctant to collect property taxes and user charges because of fear of backlash from public. They are happy to implement top-down programmes because they know that if they collect taxes, their electoral prospects will be hampered.

Constitution of State Finance Commissions (SFC)

Functionary Challenges: (a) Every local government needs to have organisational capacity, by way of staff such as office and clerical staff and social mobilisers. Staffing of local governments is scanty. Many panchayats share a single secretary, who is often overburdened; (b) Technology has been used to centralize the delivery of local services which has been detrimental to local decision-making.

Other Challenges: (a) Criminal elements and contractors are attracted to local government elections especially in urban areas. They are able to win elections through corrupt means, as local elections do not get same scrutiny as State Assembly or General Elections;

(b) Elections to the local bodies are often delayed. For long period of times there are no functional local governments;

(c) Despite a relatively higher level of literacy and educational standard, city-dwellers do not take adequate interest in the functioning of the urban government bodies e.g., the turnout in Municipal Elections in Delhi and Mumbai in 2017 was only 53% and 55% respectively;

(d) While women have been empowered with representation through reservation of seats, the 'Sarpanch Pati' syndrome limits the effectiveness. ('Sarpanch Pati' syndrome: Women Sarpanch is only nominal head, the male relative (generally husband) wield actual power).

Steps can be taken going ahead?

First, the provisions of 73rd/74th Constitutional Amendments should be implemented in true spirit. State Finance Commissions should be regularly constituted with clearly defined Terms of Reference (ToR). ToR should include recommendation to devolve more funds and make the functioning of local bodies more effective. Adequate powers to rise own revenues should be devolved to local governments.

Second, the elections should be held at regular intervals without any delay. State Governments and State Election Commissions must be held accountable for delays.

Third, Gram Sabhas and wards committees (in urban areas) have to be revitalized. Consultations with the grama sabha could be organised through smaller discussions where everybody can participate to make them inclusive. New media of communication like social media groups could be used for facilitating discussions between members of grama sabha/ward committees.

Fourth, local government organisational structures have to be strengthened. Panchayats are burdened with a huge amount of work that other departments thrust on them, without being compensated for the extra administrative costs. Local governments must be enabled to hold State departments accountable and to provide quality, corruption free service to them.

Fifth, there is a need to improve capabilities of human resources through training, process consultation, action research methods and workshops.

Sixth, citizen participation and engagement in local governance can be enhanced with the help of NGOs and civil society organizations. Citizens also need to be informed about the functioning and consequences of decisions taken by the local government bodies. The general public also need to be informed about the role of the service providers, the cost of services, the sources of their financing etc.

Conclusion:

Empowering the local bodies for Local Governance has been one of the most progressive reforms since Independence. It has envisioned placing the governing power in the hands of the general populace. Just like every other reform, this one has a few loopholes in it. Nevertheless, if

these gaps are removed, the present local governance system can truly empower the citizens and support the inclusive growth.

Despite several challenges, local governments in India have tremendous potential to become the developmental change agents. The findings indicate significant challenges in attaining SDGs in rural India and limited resources availability with RLGs like, lesser capabilities, financial resources, manpower and technological know-how. The silver lining, however, lies with government willingness to translate the digital gains into productive information, mass awareness creation and push for greater effective role of women in local governance. Effective development governance will require concerted efforts from top to bottom and the reverse way. From visionary programme formulation to effective implementation and monitoring along with greater participation of rural masses especially women folks will go a long way in hassle-free attainment of SDG goals for India

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