

Transforming Rural Connectivity

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Improved rural connectivity (e.g. roads, phones, internet, and social media) greatly contributes to the creation of an enabling environment for local communities that stimulates entrepreneurship like starting or expanding the existing local businesses. It ensures that local communities get more reliable and quicker access to outside products, services, information, and social linkages.

Rural connectivity (both physical and digital) was a development priority for India even before the COVID-19 pandemic but now it is indispensable. However, rural connectivity is a necessary but not a sufficient prerequisite for inclusive and sustainable rural development. Better rural connectivity provides an enabling environment for improvement in livelihoods, employment, education and healthcare. Since independence, India has made tremendous progress in improving rural connectivity with huge investment on rural infrastructure and a series of flagship schemes and programmes like Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY), BharatNet initiative and so on. But still some parts of the country such as hilly areas, conflict prone areas and tribal concentrated pockets don't have an all-weather road connection and other crucial infrastructural facilities, which deprive them from benefits of the country's economic growth. During the various phases of lockdown due to COVID-19, we have witnessed severe erratic digital connectivity issues, which led to widening of digital divides, learning losses, difficult and delayed school-to-work transition, in addition to livelihood and health challenges.

Impact on Livelihoods

Improved rural connectivity (e.g. roads, phones, internet, and social media) greatly contributes to the creation of an enabling environment for local communities that stimulates entrepreneurship like starting or expanding the existing local businesses. It ensures that local communities get more reliable and quicker access to outside products, services, information, and social linkages. It also enabled communities to fully access existing government schemes, programmes and services. During the pandemic, we witnessed high incidence of reverse migration, i.e. rural people working in urban locales chose to return to their villages and small towns of origin due to lockdowns or mandated closures. It is an opportune time to focus more on improving connectivity including increasing investments in digital infrastructure, which will not only unlock opportunities for these people but also help decongest overcrowded cities and towns. Rural youth unemployment is a huge challenge which can be addressed by improving the rural connectivity. Access to good quality rural infrastructure (including internet) is a crucial factor for rural youth in deciding whether to stay or leave their villages.



Rural youth are crucial for the future of agriculture. Rapid transition from subsistence to commercial agriculture can only be achieved by youth, accompanied by increased connectivity. Better rural connectivity with good quality infrastructural facilities will also open opportunities of rural tourism and homestay enterprises.

Rural connectivity programme requires a robust service enterprise framework with public and private stakeholders at the very core. There is a need to create a vibrant 4P model i.e. Public-Private-Panchayat Partnerships for inclusive and sustainable rural development through rural connectivity.

The Leelavati Project seeks to improve the digital and financial literacy of at least 5,00,000 women members across six Indian states, i.e. Gujarat, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Meghalaya and Assam, which is supported by the Japan Social Development Fund (JSDF) and managed by the World Bank. The Self-

Employed Women's Association (SEWA) under this project train women weavers in Gujarat's Anand district and help them to showcase their products online, create WhatsApp groups of customers, and enable digital payments for purchases. The training has helped other crafts persons in setting up their retail through Facebook and Instagram. Women have also become financially independent and carry out basic online transactions through Paytm, the BHIM App, Google pay, etc. In addition to financial inclusion, many women are feeling more empowered and self-confident to speak out at Panchayats or Gram Sabhas. Through the Leelavati project attempts have been made to open up new livelihood opportunities for poor rural women, promote women-led entrepreneurship and enhance their participation in the workforce. So, an inclusive rural connectivity programme can bring transformative changes both in economic and social arena. Better connectivity and its accessibility play a crucial role for small and micro enterprises which operate at the bottom end of the value chain system. It should also be recognised that rural connectivity has two distinct dimensions, i.e. youth, gender.

Micro and small enterprises including SHGs have emerged as important change agents in the rural development landscape. Digital skills have helped rural women become self-reliant during the pandemic. There are many small but significant initiatives undertaken in recent past which should be documented and replicated in different sites with necessary customisation. For instance, a cadre of Community Resource Persons such Bank *Mitras* (Bank Correspondents), Tablet *Didis* are providing a bouquet of services at the doorstep of BPL families and keeping all the financial activities of SHGs on Management Information Systems (MIS) software respectively. Apart from bookkeeping, Tablet *Didis* show short films on their tablets to families to create awareness about various livelihood avenues, animal husbandry and also on social ills such as child labour, witch hunting, and domestic violence. Another additional but hidden benefit to the children and other family members of these Tablet *Didis* is that they are also becoming familiar with computer applications and becoming digitally literate. Many other good practices have been initiated under Aspirational District Programme for livelihood, skill and health related issues. (See Box 1)

Box 1- Significant Practices Carried out Under Aspirational District Programme

1.	Promoting local products through e-commerce portal - Goalpara district (Assam)
2.	Providing skill development and community outreach through the YUVA BPO - Dantewada district (Chhattisgarh)
3.	Model Anganwadis for holistic child development (including mobile science laboratory, digital literacy workshops) - West Singhbhum district (Jharkhand)
4.	Engagement of community members to improve financial inclusion - Ranchi district (Jharkhand)
5.	Utilisation of green technologies for better connectivity, Recycling the waste of single-use plastic to build roads - Goalpara district (Assam)

Aspirational Districts Programme: An Appraisal, UNDP, 2020

Engaging Local Institutions

Rural connectivity programme requires a robust service enterprise framework with public and private stakeholders at the very core. There is a need to create a vibrant 4P model i.e. Public-Private-Panchayat Partnerships for inclusive and sustainable rural development through rural connectivity. With narrow and lop sided visions of the existing extension services, local institutions, such as Panchayats with support from other stakeholders operating in the rural landscape, can play the dual role: (a) regular and continuous engagement with extension agencies in the context of local planning to promote convergence of development activities at the local level and (b) monitoring of services delivery by these extension agencies. For instance, by installing a computer in the Panchayat office or any community centre, it can help connecting small and micro entrepreneurs, including SHGs with various government schemes and programmes and also help them to get access to support measures available on IT enabled portals or websites.

There are many sustainable and community-led models for rural connectivity in India and in other developing and developed nations [see Luca Belli and Senka Hadzic (Eds.) (2021)]. Gram Marg (A road map to rural connectivity) is one such innovative model which aims to empower rural India digitally by bringing in Internet connectivity at affordable rates. Although under the BharatNet initiative, attempts have been made at digitally connecting 2,50,000 Gram Panchayats, there is huge gap in internet penetration which needs to be filled. So, in order to make connectivity sustainable in rural India, there is a need to develop a suitable partnership model with active participation of local institutions. The proposed 4P model have been implemented and validated on the ground, i.e. in the villages in the Palghar district of Maharashtra, where internet connectivity has been enabled by *Gram Marg*. In this model, the participation of community is important in maintenance of the network and safety of the devices. A village youth is nominated as the Village Level Entrepreneur (VLE) who undergoes training and skill development to maintain and operate the network in the village. The VLE is registered with the government's Common Service Centre (CSC)

programme to ensure that citizen service centres operate in all Gram Panchayat offices in India. The role of each partner has been clearly defined in the model, including a revenue generation model enabling the internet to thrive and grow sustainably. [Sarbani Belur, *et.al.* (2021)]. The Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP) could be an effective tool to mainstream rural connectivity issues including funding internet connectivity in villages. Such innovative models may be examined in greater details and possibility may be explored to replicate so as to expand the internet to penetrate rural areas.

Availability of adequate funding, training and capacity development are concerns for robust and inclusive rural connectivity programme. These include the necessity of a comprehensive programme of public investment in (i) rural basic infrastructure, including improved road connection and 100 percent electrification; (ii) development of rural human capital, ensuring adequate opportunities for education, healthcare and cultural development; and (iii) ensuring Internet connection, providing rural populations equal opportunities to make use of the new technologies that depend on digital platforms.

India has made great progress in building the backbone infrastructure to enable connectivity in rural and remote areas. But there are still pockets largely unconnected without appropriate last-mile connectivity solutions, partly due to lack of investment. In order to promote connectivity in rural areas, governments can ease regulatory requirements for alternative business models such as community networks, PPP models; create a more enabling environment for investment in underserved areas through incentives such as tax breaks, Corporate Social responsibility (CSR) and crowd funding, etc. Infrastructure investment in physical or digital connections, in the form of roads and digital networks, will expand the reach of technologies into more remote and rural areas. In addition, the government should accelerate its investments in expanding access to electricity, lowering Internet costs, providing education and digital literacy, and implementing regulatory changes to encourage new digital ventures and services [UN DESA, 2021].

Robust rural connectivity will play a crucial

role in the MoPR's new Rural Area Development Plan Formulation and Implementation Guideline (2018), which aims at planned spatial development for overall integrated development of villages. Rural connectivity needs to be understood from the perspective of the most vulnerable people in the rural areas. Speeding up the process of a robust and inclusive rural connectivity programme for producing major innovations in multiple areas, such as livelihood, education, health and the environment, is indispensable for attaining Vision India @ 2047.

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