



Empowering Rural Communities: Role of NGO's: A Case Study of Rural Development Trust (RDT), Anantapur.

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Abstract

Empowering rural communities is a crucial attempt that can lead to tremendous changes in the lives of rural population. These communities face numerous challenges, like limited access to resources, education, training, and economic opportunities. By focusing on empowerment, Governments and NGO's can help these communities harness their potential, build resilience, and create sustainable pathways for growth. Rural Development Trust (will be referred as RDT in the coming paras) is one such NGO, based in Anantapur district of Andhra Pradesh and bringing the targeted changes in the lives of rural communities by focussing on health, education, skill training, job opportunities, etc. This paper focuses on need for empowering rural communities with special focus on role of NGOs with a case study of activities and achievements of Rural Development Trust (RDT), Anantapur using primary and secondary sources.

Keywords: Rural Development, Rural Employment, Rural Empowerment, Rural Education, Rural Health, Role of NGOs, RDT, Women Empowerment, Poverty Alleviation

Introduction

India is predominantly a rural country. India's two-third population and 70% workforce residing in rural areas. The rural economy contributes significantly to India's GDP, with agriculture being a cornerstone of the rural economy. Thus, the rural population's sustained growth and development is critical to the overall growth and inclusive development. Rural development is important for improving the economic and social well-being of people in rural areas. It is also important for reducing poverty and inequality.

Since, independence, Government of India started focusing on empowering rural areas. Though the Government is the major agent of change, its not enough to cater to the needs of crores of population who are illiterate, poor, and lacking skills, resources, and opportunities. Here comes the role of Non-Governmental Organizations, which are playing a substantial role and achieving real changes at grassroots level by involving locals as agents of change. Many a times, NGOs do experiment and provide best practices to follow elsewhere. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are essential to rural development because they promote community involvement and function as change agents. NGOs frequently have the freedom to experiment and modify their approaches to suit the unique requirements of rural communities, in contrast to official organizations. Their extensive knowledge, resources, and experience allow them to execute focused initiatives that tackle regional issues like poverty, healthcare, education, and environmental sustainability. Furthermore, NGOs frequently collaborate directly with community members to guarantee that their projects are inclusive and culturally aware. By enabling local populations to take charge of their own development processes and cultivating a sense of agency and self-reliance, this grassroots approach empowers them.

Additionally, by establishing a link between communities and government resources, NGOs support rural development. They frequently act as go-betweens, making it easier for people to get money, training, and necessary services. NGOs may ensure that the views of marginalized groups are heard and have an impact on policy decisions by speaking out on behalf of rural communities at different levels. Their joint efforts with corporations, international organizations, and local governments increase the efficacy of development programs and produce greater long-lasting results. All things considered, it is impossible to overestimate the role that NGOs play in rural development; in addition to carrying out successful initiatives, they also foster a

shared vision for a brighter future, promoting social transformation and raising living standards in rural communities. One such successful NGO working in the field of empowering rural communities is Rural Development Trust, Anantapur. RDT achieved amazing results in the field of rural empowerment over a period of 5 decades. This paper focusses on the role of NGOs in empowering rural communities with a case study of RDT, Anantapur.

Methodology

This study is based on primary and secondary sources. Author visited RDT office working in Alur, Kurnool District and investigated about their rural initiatives in the area. Author utilised the data from government websites, research articles on rural development strategies. Case study on RDT initiatives and achievements is also based on related news coverage in the mainstream media, government websites and RDT website.

Literature Review

Empowering rural communities in India is essential for achieving sustainable development and bridging the gap between urban and rural areas. Rural communities, comprising approximately 69% of India's population, face challenges in access to basic needs such as education, healthcare, economic opportunities, and infrastructure. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have played a critical role in addressing these challenges by empowering rural populations and contributing to social and economic development. This literature review explores the significance of rural empowerment and the role NGOs have played in facilitating sustainable change in rural India.

Concept of Rural Empowerment

Rural empowerment refers to the process of enhancing the capabilities, resources, and decision-making power of rural communities, enabling them to address their own needs and aspirations. According to Sen (1999), empowerment involves expanding individuals' freedoms and choices, leading to improved quality of life. In rural areas, this empowerment can take the form of increased access to education, healthcare, employment opportunities, financial inclusion, and participation in governance and decision-making processes.

Rural Empowerment - Dimensions:

1. Economic Empowerment: Ensuring access to financial resources, skills training, and employment opportunities.
2. Social Empowerment: Promoting social equality, community participation, and leadership roles for marginalized groups, including women, Dalits, and tribal communities.
3. Political Empowerment: Strengthening rural people's participation in local governance and policy-making.
4. Cultural Empowerment: Preserving and promoting local traditions and identities while integrating modern knowledge for development.

Independent India's rural development journey, started with the Community Development Program in 1952, evolved through various phases and programs, shifting its focus to poverty alleviation and integrated rural development from 1970s. Let us look at the rural development journey of India since 1952.

Phase -I: 1950s - 70

- **Community Development Program (1952):** This marked a significant step, aiming for holistic rural development, including agriculture, industry, communication, education, health, and allied sectors.
- **Community Projects Administration (1952):** Established under the Planning Commission to administer community development programs.
- **National Extension Service (1953):** Focused on agricultural extension and rural development.
- **Intensive Agricultural District Program (IADP) (1961):** Targeted specific districts for intensive agricultural development.
- **Applied Nutrition Programme (ANP) (1963):** Focused on improving nutrition in rural areas.
- **Integrated Agricultural Area Programme (IAAP) (1964-65):** A more holistic approach to agricultural development.
- **Integrated Cattle Development Programme (ICDP) (1964):** Focused on improving cattle breeding and management.
- **National Demonstration Project (NDP) (1965):** Demonstrated new agricultural technologies.
- **Oilseed Development Programme (ODP) (1966):** Focused on increasing oilseed production.
- **High Yielding Varieties Programme (HYVP) (1966-67):** Introduced high-yielding varieties of crops.
- **Farmers Training and Education Programme (FTEP) (1966):** Trained farmers in new agricultural techniques.

- **Farmers Training Centre (FTC) (1966):** Established centres for farmer training.
- **Multiple Crop Programme (MCP) (1966):** Encouraged farmers to grow multiple crops.

Phase -2: 1970s-1990s

- **Drought Prone Area Programme (DPAP) (1970):** Targeted drought-prone areas for development.
- **Dry Farming Area Programme (DFAP) (1970):** Focused on improving dry farming techniques.
- **Department of Rural Development (1974):** Created as part of the Ministry of Food and Agriculture.
- **Ministry of Rural Reconstruction (1979):** The Department of Rural Development became a separate ministry.
- **Ministry of Rural Development (1982):** The Ministry of Rural Reconstruction was renamed.
- **Ministry of Rural Areas and Employment (1995):** The Ministry of Rural Development was renamed, with the inclusion of departments on Rural Employment and Poverty Alleviation.
- **Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) (1980):** Aimed to integrate various rural development programs.
- **National Rural Employment Programme (NREP) and Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme (RLEGP):** Introduced to address unemployment and poverty.

Phase - 3: FROM 1990s

Ministry of Rural Development (1999): The Ministry of Rural Areas and Employment was renamed back to Ministry of Rural Development.

- **Swachh Bharat Mission (Clean India Mission):** Aims for universal sanitation coverage and elimination of open defecation.
- **Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY):** Focuses on connecting rural areas with all-weather roads.
- **National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) (2005):** Guarantees 100 days of employment to rural families.

The Role Of NGO's In Rural Empowerment In India

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have been instrumental in supporting the empowerment of rural communities in India. NGOs work in diverse fields, such as education, health, livelihood, women's empowerment, environmental sustainability, and advocacy. Their interventions help rural communities become self-reliant and reduce dependence on external aid that leads to credit trap.

1. NGOs and Economic Development

NGOs have focused on improving rural economic conditions through various initiatives. According to Kumar and Mishra (2016), NGOs have helped rural communities build sustainable livelihoods by providing skills training, creating micro-enterprises, promoting entrepreneurship, and facilitating access to credit. The microfinance movement, for example, has been central to empowering rural women and improving their economic conditions. Institutions like the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) and Grameen Bank have provided small loans to women to start businesses, boosting local economies and fostering self-reliance.

2. NGOs and Education

Education is a fundamental component of rural empowerment. NGOs in India, such as Pratham and Barefoot College, have contributed significantly to improving literacy rates and providing educational opportunities for children and adults in remote areas. As highlighted by Tiwari (2018), NGOs have played an important role in promoting adult education, vocational training, and school infrastructure. They often bridge the gap between government policies and rural needs, ensuring that quality education reaches underserved populations.

3. NGOs and Healthcare

Rural areas in India are often underserved when it comes to healthcare facilities and services. NGOs have stepped in to provide healthcare services, particularly in maternal and child health, vaccination drives, and sanitation programs. Organizations like the Smile Foundation and Rural Development Foundation have been instrumental in delivering healthcare services to marginalized communities, improving access to clean drinking water, and enhancing health awareness.

4. NGOs and Women's Empowerment

Women in rural India face various forms of discrimination, including limited access to education, employment, and decision-making opportunities. NGOs such as the Foundation for Rural Entrepreneurship Development (FRED) and the Society for Elimination of Rural Poverty (SERP) focus on empowering women through self-help groups (SHGs), awareness campaigns, and leadership training. These initiatives not only enhance women's economic and social status but also contribute to community development by promoting gender equality.

5. NGOs and Environmental Sustainability

Environmental issues such as water scarcity, deforestation, and climate change significantly affect rural communities. NGOs like the Navdanya Trust and the Watershed Organization Trust (WOTR) have worked on sustainable agricultural practices, rainwater harvesting, and promoting agroecology. Their efforts help rural communities adapt to changing climatic conditions and ensure long-term environmental sustainability.

6. NGOs and Advocacy for Rights

NGOs have also been key players in advocating for rural communities' rights. Rural populations, particularly marginalized groups such as Dalits and indigenous communities, often face discrimination and exclusion from social and political processes. NGOs such as the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) and the Adivasi Adhikar Manch work to ensure the protection and promotion of the rights of these communities. Their advocacy helps rural populations gain recognition in policy decisions, ensuring that their voices are heard in national and international arenas.

Challenges Faced by NGOs in Rural Empowerment

While NGOs have made significant strides in empowering rural communities, they face several challenges that hinder their full potential. Some of these challenges include:

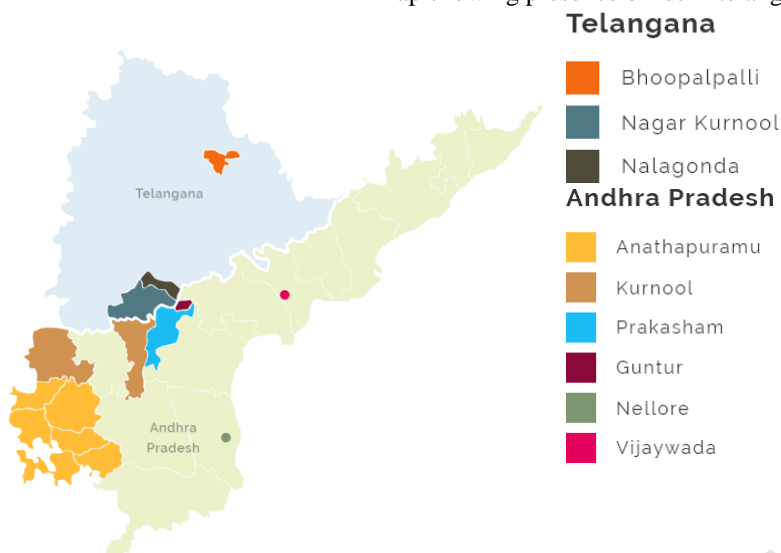
1. **Sustainability of Programs:** Many NGO-led programs are short-term or donor-funded, which raises concerns about their long-term sustainability. Without adequate funding or government support, these programs often face difficulties in continuing their efforts after the initial phase.
2. **Bureaucratic Challenges:** NGOs often struggle with bureaucratic hurdles, government regulations, and lack of coordination with local administration. These challenges can delay the implementation of projects or limit their effectiveness.
3. **Cultural Barriers:** In certain regions, traditional beliefs and practices can obstruct the implementation of progressive ideas, particularly in areas concerning gender equality, education, and healthcare.
4. **Dependence on External Funding:** Many NGOs rely on external funding from donors, which may limit their autonomy and flexibility in decision-making.

Rural Development Trust: A Game Changer In Anantapur District

RDT was founded by Vicente Ferrer, a Spanish person in 1969 in Anantapur. Journalist Anne Perry supported him in his social projects, whom she married later. RDT works in numerous fields such as Disability Inclusive Development, Ecology and Sustainable Livelihoods, Education, Habitat, Rural Hospitals and Clinics, Sports for Development and Women Development. Upon visiting RDT office in Alur, Kurnool district, and interacting with the Area Development Officer over there it is evident that the RDT projects are causing changes in the lives of rural beneficiaries in a big way. Every year 10th passed students eagerly await and compete for RDC-CET to try their luck for free education from 12th class onwards. Rural youth and women are formed into groups and trained in vocational skills. Hospital in Bathalapalli, Anantapur caters to the needs of thousands of patients at free of cost.

RDT clearly displays that "Empowering rural communities and supporting them in their struggle to eradicate poverty, suffering and injustice" is its mission. Though RDT gradually spread its activities to Kurnool, Prakasham, Guntur in Andhra Pradesh and few districts in Telangana, its totality of achievements can be seen in Anantapur, because it was Vincent Ferrer's starting point in 1969.

map showing presence of rdt in telangana and andhra pradesh



3,589 villages spread across 111 Revenue Mandals in 6 districts of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. RDT has recorded impressive results in the fields of eradication of poverty, rural health, Education, women empowerment in the villages they are working.

Education Sector

The Education for transformation sector at the Rural Development Trust (RDT) aims at guaranteeing sustained access to quality education at all levels. RDT projects include both primary and secondary education, as well as higher and professional education, with the aim of increasing literacy levels, reducing school drop-outs, ensuring educational quality and gender equality in the classroom. Currently, almost 100% of the children belonging to vulnerable groups of 3,662 villages where RDT works, are enrolled in primary education. Till now, 12772 students equipped with access to education, 10767 students enabled to pursue graduation and postgraduation, 40981 bicycles distributed, 87% from RDT Professional School of Foreign Languages found job.

RDT's Education for transformation programme currently focuses on six areas explained below.

1. Enrolment and retention

The first step to ensuring the right to education for children is to monitor enrolment rates and to reduce the causes of dropouts. Awareness meetings amongst parents about the benefits of sustained education are held. By providing counselling through social teams facilitated by inter-sectoral staff, girls are persuaded to complete intermediate as a strategy to offset early marriages. Sanitation facilities are provided to prevent drop-outs, especially for girls. Orphaned children's enrolment into residential schools and focus on their continued education.

2. Tuition schools and coaching

Supplementary schooling is provided before and after normal school hours. Holiday coaching camps run by the supplementary schools up to Class VI to ensure student's competitiveness. Services to help improve reading and writing abilities of primary school students facilitated by educated youth.

3. Capacity building

RDT trains their Community-Based Teachers and Community Development Committees (CDC) to enhance quality education.

4. Training of CDC members in leadership and management skills.

Regular training sessions for teachers in academics and classroom management and Workshops for CDC members organized every three months to discuss academic issues.

5. Special Scholarship Programme

RDT funds the higher education of meritorious students in reputed institutions. To select student amongst target communities, RDT conducts a Common Entrance Exam (RDT-CET). Intermediate and higher education expenses are covered such as Tuition/course fees, hostel and mess charges, educational materials, travel expenses and pocket money. Coaching classes for specific university entrance examinations and monitoring the progress of the student.

6. Assistance and incentives

RDT provides students with incentives and assistance to ensure that they have access to the schools and are equipped with the necessities. Children from low-income families shortlisted by the CDC, are credited yearly Rs. 700 to a savings fund from the age of 5 to the age 18 as far as they continue enrolled in school.

Scholarships and grants for higher education or professional/technical courses are provided. Bicycles, School uniforms and other school material are supplied to students. General Scholarship Programmes for target population is also organized.

Health Sector

RDT is providing free diagnosis and treatment for rural population by establishing hospitals at Bathalapalli, Kalyandurg and Kanekal. RDT is working on 3 principles, Accessibility, Assistance and Awareness to rural poor.

RDT Bathalapalli Hospital, since its inception in 2000, has been working towards making quality and affordable healthcare accessible to all while promoting healthy lifestyles and practices. With 12 departments, including a specialised department for infectious diseases, 352 beds and supporting services, the hospital has been constantly trying to improve the quality of care to people in rural areas. Author visited Bathalapalli Hospital and witnessed that medical services are provided by highly qualified doctors and nursing staff with so much love and care which defines their dedication towards upliftment of mankind. It is recognised by NABH, and serving as AP State Arogya Sri reference hospital and overseen by Institutional Ethics Committee.

RDT Kalyandurg Hospital, established in 1978, initially operated as a rural clinic to create access to basic healthcare among rural communities. In 2006, the clinic was expanded into a hospital with a special focus on women and childcare, continuing to serve as one of the major hospitals in a 60 km radius, with round-the-clock Obstetrics and Childcare services serving almost 200-300 villages. With 150 beds, the hospital offers services through four departments. The Obstetrics and Gynaecology Department is well-equipped and handles over 750 deliveries each month with an efficient and steadfast commitment to women's healthcare.

RDT Kanekal Hospital, started in the year 2004, provides primary health care services, counselling, and screening for timely diagnosis and treatment. The hospital also endeavours to create awareness among people about health and disease prevention while promoting healthy lifestyle and practices.

Women Empowerment Programs

In India, a deeply patriarchal society, women are subjected to constant discrimination and in many cases, harassment. They are legally entitled to equal rights in all spheres of society, yet most women are at great disadvantage. The Rural Development Trust (RDT) works with men and women to achieve gender equality by fighting against gender-based violence and discrimination and striving to improve the social and economic situation of women. By enabling women to reach their full potential and equipping them to be a part of the decision-making processes, we can attain sustainable development. RDT trained over 8,280 rural women in vocational skills. 6,258 women got house sites in their name from government with the support of RDT. The Women Empowerment sector focuses on the following areas of work to attain its goal

1. Self-help groups, by forming and strengthening these sanghams in the villages, RDT promotes the collective autonomy and the rights of women at the grassroot level. Over 1,11,157 women formed into 8,187 SHGs. To improve women's access to finance, self-help groups promote the creation of savings and loan mechanisms.

2. Economic development, through the sanghams, women successfully managing 13 mini-banks wherein they pool their monthly savings and then grant loans amongst themselves on a rotating basis. There is a Women Development Fund, a revolving fund that provides capital to undertake income-generating activities or small businesses. Sanghams helping women access institutionalised loans from the government.

3. Reducing gender-based violence, Gender sensitisation workshops with men to push for attitudinal shift and make them partners in the fight for equality. Discussing about gender violence in the village meetings and through cultural activities on women's rights, on how to avail legal aid and medical assistance, where to report a crime, or on the functioning of family courts. RDT provides rehabilitative support to victims of harassment and violence to help them recover from the trauma they have undergone and provide a safe space to them.

4. Social Action Teams, generally comprising of two men and two women, these teams are trained to identify and tackle gender-based violence in the society. Training is imparted to these members on observation and communications skills as well as first response. They spread awareness in the villages about importance of education in girls and adolescents, the difficulties involved in early marriages, alcoholism, migration, trafficking, etc. They have been instrumental in identifying and stopping cases of child marriage and domestic violence in the villages. RDTs sister organisations manage Childline 1908 the Government's helpline for children, in the Anantapur district.

5. Counselling centres and shelter homes, RDT runs counselling centres especially in the Kadiri region where incidence of trafficking is high. These sessions are led by RDT staff and a female doctor, who also checks on their health. To extend rehabilitative support RDT runs a shelter home in Bathalapalli for women

in distress. These women and their family members are provided with counselling to help them recover from their trauma. They are also imparted with vocational training.

6. Widow's support, Widows and destitute women who are in vulnerable situations are provided with nutritional support so that they can maintain their health and don't fall prey to illnesses.

Ecology And Sustainable Livelihoods

RDT projects include Water Conservation Activities, afforestation and Social Forestry Projects, Cattle Husbandry Projects, Mana Bhoomi, Alternative Energy Programme, Organic Farming Promotion, etc. Over 1347 check dams built, 5316 rain water conservation structures built, 14924 milch cattle distributed, 24360 farmers adopted micro irrigation practices.

Conclusion

NGOs have played a pivotal role in the empowerment of rural communities in India. Their work in the areas of economic development, education, healthcare, women's empowerment, and environmental sustainability has significantly contributed to improving the lives of rural populations. However, challenges related to sustainability, government coordination, and cultural barriers remain. To maximize their impact, NGOs need to focus on creating more sustainable programs, working in close collaboration with government agencies, and ensuring greater community ownership and participation in development initiatives. Empowering rural communities in India remains an ongoing process, and NGOs continue to be important agents of change.

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