

# THE ROLE OF PANCHAYATS IN ACHIEVING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS IN RURAL KARNATAKA: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

**Ramananda M S**

Professor, Department of Economics, Karnataka State Open University,  
Mukthagangothri, Mysore

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## ABSTRACT

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by the United Nations in 2015, provide a comprehensive global framework for achieving inclusive, equitable, and environmentally sustainable development by 2030. In India, the realisation of SDGs is fundamentally dependent on the strength of grassroots institutions, particularly the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). Karnataka, as a pioneer in democratic decentralisation, offers a meaningful case for analysing the localisation of SDGs through Panchayats. This article critically examines the role of Gram, Taluk, and Zilla Panchayats in achieving major SDG targets relating to poverty reduction, health, education, sanitation, gender equality, employment generation, and environmental sustainability in rural Karnataka. Using a descriptive and analytical approach, the study also identifies key challenges such as financial dependency, administrative capacity gaps, social inequality, and the digital divide, while highlighting emerging opportunities through digital governance, scheme convergence, community participation, and climate-resilient rural development. The paper concludes that strengthening fiscal autonomy, institutional capacity, and participatory governance of Panchayats is essential for accelerating SDG achievement in rural Karnataka.

**Keywords:** Panchayati Raj Institutions, SDGs, Rural Development, Decentralisation, Karnataka, Local Governance

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Sustainable development has emerged as the central development paradigm of the 21st century, integrating economic growth, social justice, and environmental protection. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aim to eliminate poverty and hunger, improve health and education, ensure gender equality, promote decent work, protect natural resources, and strengthen institutions. India's commitment to SDGs is rooted in its constitutional framework of democratic decentralisation, which empowers Panchayati Raj Institutions as local self-governments responsible for planning and implementation of development programmes.

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 conferred constitutional status on Panchayats and transferred 29 subjects under the Eleventh Schedule for local governance. Karnataka became the first state to enact a comprehensive Panchayati Raj Act in 1993 and operationalised three-tier governance across rural areas. At present, the state has over 6,000 Gram Panchayats, 240 Taluk Panchayats, and 31 Zilla Panchayats, covering nearly 66 percent of the population residing in rural areas. Since most SDGs directly relate to rural challenges such as poverty, employment, sanitation, nutrition, health, drinking water, housing, agriculture, and environmental protection, Panchayats play a decisive role in converting global SDG targets into village-level development outcomes in Karnataka.

## 2. PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS AND SDGs: THEORETICAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL LINKAGES

The philosophy of SDGs closely aligns with the principles of decentralisation, participatory democracy, equity, and sustainability that underpin the Panchayati Raj system. The Eleventh Schedule functions assigned to Panchayats—such as agriculture, minor irrigation, education, health, sanitation, women and child development, social welfare, rural housing, poverty alleviation, and environmental protection—are directly connected to multiple SDGs. Thus, Panchayats serve as the institutional bridge between global development goals and local development processes.

From a theoretical perspective, the Panchayati Raj system operationalises the concept of “bottom-up development planning,” where people directly participate in prioritising development needs through Gram Sabhas. This decentralised planning process ensures that SDGs are not merely implemented as government schemes but are internalised as community-driven development goals. The principle of subsidiarity, which assigns governance responsibilities at the lowest effective level, further strengthens the relevance of Panchayats in achieving SDG targets in rural India.

The 17 SDGs are interlinked and multidimensional. Panchayats contribute directly or indirectly to several SDGs through constitutional responsibilities under the **11th Schedule**. Key linkages include:

SDG	Panchayat Functional Link
SDG 1 – No Poverty	MGNREGA, SHGs, livelihood schemes
SDG 2 – Zero Hunger	Nutrition programs, agriculture support
SDG 3 – Good Health	Primary health centers, sanitation
SDG 4 – Quality Education	School infrastructure, enrolment
SDG 5 – Gender Equality	Women SHGs, Gram Sabhas
SDG 6 – Clean Water & Sanitation	Swachh Bharat Mission
SDG 7 – Clean Energy	Solar pumps, biogas
SDG 8 – Decent Work	Rural employment
SDG 13 – Climate Action	Watershed programs
SDG 16 – Strong Institutions	Participatory governance

Thus, the SDG framework is deeply embedded in the constitutional vision of grassroots democracy.

## 3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Dreze and Sen (2013) highlighted the importance of decentralised governance and social sector investment in achieving inclusive development in India. The World Bank (2021) emphasised that empowered local governments significantly improve service delivery and development outcomes. UNDP (2020) observed that localisation of SDGs through local governments strengthens accountability and citizen participation in development processes.

Ravikumar (2019) empirically demonstrated that Panchayats in Karnataka have played a significant role in improving rural infrastructure and livelihood security, particularly through employment generation and women empowerment initiatives. NIRDPR (2022) emphasised that capacity building of PRIs is crucial for effective SDG implementation. The Ministry of

Panchayati Raj (2021) stressed that Panchayats are central to India's SDG strategy due to their constitutional mandate and proximity to rural communities.

While these studies have examined decentralisation, SDGs, and rural governance in general, limited research specifically analyses the integrated role of Panchayats in localising SDGs in rural Karnataka. This study attempts to address this gap.

#### **4. RESEARCH GAP**

Most existing studies focus either on decentralisation and Panchayati Raj or on India's SDG performance at the macro level. Very few studies systematically examine how Panchayati Raj Institutions function as local agents for SDG delivery at the village level in Karnataka. There is also limited empirical assessment of the challenges and opportunities faced by Panchayats in translating SDGs into actionable development programmes. This study seeks to bridge this gap by providing a Karnataka-specific analysis of Panchayat-led SDG implementation in rural areas.

#### **5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The present study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design. It is primarily based on secondary data collected from government reports, NITI Aayog SDG India Index, Karnataka Economic Survey, Ministry of Panchayati Raj publications, UNDP reports, and academic journals. Simple statistical tools such as percentage analysis and trend interpretation have been used to analyse progress in key SDG sectors. Karnataka has been purposively selected as the study area due to its pioneering role in Panchayati Raj implementation and SDG localisation initiatives.

#### **6. STATUS OF SDG IMPLEMENTATION IN RURAL KARNATAKA: DATA-BASED OVERVIEW**

Karnataka has been one of the leading states in aligning development planning with the SDG framework. According to SDG Index assessments, Karnataka consistently ranks among the top-performing Indian states, particularly in education, health access, drinking water coverage, sanitation, and renewable energy adoption. The state has integrated SDGs into District Development Plans, Taluk Action Plans, and Gram Panchayat Development Plans (GPDPs).

In rural Karnataka, notable progress has been achieved in sanitation, where over 95 percent of villages have been declared Open Defecation Free (ODF) under Swachh Bharat Mission–Gramin. Rural drinking water coverage has exceeded 90 percent household connectivity through schemes such as Jal Jeevan Mission. Primary school enrolment rates in rural Karnataka are above 97 percent, while institutional delivery under public health systems has crossed 90 percent, indicating significant advances in SDG 3 and 4. Women's political participation has also strengthened through 50 percent reservation in Panchayats, making Karnataka one of the leading states in women's grassroots political leadership. These outcomes clearly demonstrate the growing role of Panchayats in driving SDG progress in rural Karnataka.

#### **7. ROLE OF PANCHAYATS IN ACHIEVING KEY SDGs IN RURAL KARNATAKA**

Panchayats perform a multidimensional role in advancing SDGs in rural Karnataka. Under SDG 1 and 8 (Poverty Eradication and Decent Work), Panchayats implement employment generation programs such as MGNREGA, under which more than 100 crore person-days of rural employment are generated annually in Karnataka, providing income security to landless labourers and marginal farmers. Livelihood promotion through women Self-Help Groups,

skill development, dairy, fisheries, and rural micro-enterprises further strengthens local economic resilience.

Under SDG 2 and 3 (Nutrition and Health), Panchayats coordinate the functioning of Primary Health Centres, Anganwadi centres, immunisation drives, Poshan Abhiyan, and nutrition supplementation programmes. These interventions have significantly reduced maternal and infant mortality rates in rural Karnataka. For SDG 4 (Quality Education), Panchayats contribute to school infrastructure development, enrolment drives, mid-day meal implementation, digital classrooms, and adult literacy programmes.

Under SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), Panchayats lead Swachh Bharat Mission–Gramin, solid and liquid waste management, rainwater harvesting, and rural piped water supply systems. SDG 5 and 10 (Gender Equality and Social Inclusion) are promoted through women's reservation, SHG-based entrepreneurship, social security pensions, and protection of vulnerable groups. For SDG 13 and 15 (Climate Action and Environment), Panchayats implement watershed programmes, afforestation, organic farming, soil conservation, solar lighting, and renewable energy initiatives. Thus, Panchayats serve as the principal agents of integrated sustainable rural development in Karnataka.

### **7.1 Poverty Alleviation and Livelihoods (SDG 1 & 8)**

Through **MGNREGA**, rural skill programs, and SHG livelihood linkages, Panchayats enhance employment, income security, and financial inclusion. Women SHGs under **Stree Shakti Groups** have played a transformative role in household incomes.

### **7.2 Health and Nutrition (SDG 3 & 2)**

Panchayats coordinate with ASHA and Anganwadi workers to implement:

- Immunisation drives
- Nutrition supplementation
- Maternal and child healthcare
- Poshan Abhiyan monitoring

### **7.3 Education and Human Capital (SDG 4)**

Panchayats support:

- Mid-Day Meal Scheme
- School infrastructure development
- Digital schools
- Literacy drives

This has improved rural literacy and enrolment ratios.

### **7.4 Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (SDG 6)**

Under **Swachh Bharat Mission – Gramin**, Panchayats made villages **Open Defecation Free (ODF)** through:

- Household toilets
- Solid and liquid waste management
- Drinking water supply projects

### **7.5 Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (SDG 5 & 10)**

- 50% reservation for women in Karnataka Panchayats
- Active participation in Gram Sabhas
- Self-help groups and entrepreneurship
- Social security pensions

### **7.6 Environment and Climate Resilience (SDG 13 & 15)**

Panchayats implement:

- Watershed development
- Afforestation programs
- Rainwater harvesting
- Soil conservation
- Renewable energy installations

## **8. CHALLENGES IN ACHIEVING SDGs THROUGH PANCHAYATS IN RURAL KARNATAKA**

Despite their centrality in SDG implementation, Panchayats face serious challenges. The foremost issue is limited fiscal autonomy. More than 80 percent of Panchayat revenues come from government grants, while own-source revenue remains weak due to poor taxation powers and collection inefficiency. Delays in fund release further disrupt the execution of development schemes and asset maintenance.

Administrative and human resource constraints also weaken SDG effectiveness. Many Gram Panchayats lack engineers, accountants, planning experts, and data managers. Elected representatives often receive limited training in budgeting, digital governance, monitoring, and outcome evaluation. Poor village-level data systems and weak integration of SDG indicators into planning and review mechanisms hinder evidence-based governance.

Social inequality remains another major barrier. Caste exclusion, landlessness, gender discrimination, and poverty restrict equal access to SDG benefits. Despite women's political reservation, effective decision-making is often limited by patriarchal domination and proxy leadership. The digital divide also restricts the use of e-governance platforms in remote rural areas, where poor internet connectivity and low digital literacy slow down transparency and service delivery.

## **9. EMERGING OPPORTUNITIES FOR STRENGTHENING SDG DELIVERY**

Rural Karnataka also presents strong opportunities for deepening SDG achievement. The expansion of digital Panchayats through e-Panchayat, e-Swaraj, and Panchatantra software has improved transparency, online service delivery, and financial accountability. Direct Benefit Transfers (DBT), Aadhaar authentication, and online grievance redressal systems have strengthened citizen trust in local governance.

The convergence of schemes such as MGNREGA with watershed development, agriculture, sanitation, housing, and skill development has improved infrastructure creation and livelihood security. Continuous capacity-building programmes for elected representatives through state training institutes, universities, and NGOs have enhanced planning quality and administrative performance.

Community participation through Gram Sabhas, social audits, participatory budgeting, and citizen monitoring committees has emerged as a powerful instrument of inclusive governance. Climate-smart rural development initiatives such as solar lighting, micro-irrigation, organic agriculture, rainwater harvesting, and eco-village models offer new opportunities to integrate economic growth with environmental sustainability. Youth entrepreneurship, SHG-led enterprises, digital literacy campaigns, and rural innovation hubs further strengthen Panchayat-led SDG implementation.

## 10. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To strengthen Panchayats as engines of SDG implementation in rural Karnataka, deeper fiscal decentralisation is essential through enhanced taxation powers, timely fund release, and performance-linked grants. SDG indicators must be mandatorily integrated into GPDPs with measurable outputs and outcomes. Investment in rural digital infrastructure should be prioritised to bridge connectivity and skill gaps.

Continuous training in governance, financial management, digital administration, and SDG monitoring should be institutionalised. Women and youth leadership must be strengthened through entrepreneurship promotion and leadership development programmes. Establishing dedicated SDG Monitoring Units at the Taluk Panchayat level will improve data quality, evaluation, and policy feedback. Public-private partnerships and academia-Panchayat collaborations should be promoted to introduce innovation and technical expertise into rural development.

## 11. CONCLUSION

Panchayati Raj Institutions constitute the backbone of grassroots democracy and the most powerful institutional mechanism for localising the Sustainable Development Goals in rural Karnataka. Panchayats have made substantial contributions to poverty reduction, employment generation, education, healthcare, sanitation, women empowerment, and environmental conservation. However, fiscal dependency, administrative capacity gaps, social inequality, and digital barriers continue to restrict their full potential. By strengthening financial autonomy, institutional capacity, participatory governance, digital innovation, and climate-resilient rural development strategies, Panchayats can emerge as transformative agents of sustainable rural transformation. The successful realisation of SDGs in Karnataka ultimately rests on empowered, accountable, and people-centred Panchayati Raj Institutions.

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