

Task Force 01

**FIGHTING INEQUALITIES, POVERTY, AND HUNGER**

# Synergies between Social Protection and Rural Development Programmes for Inclusive Food Systems

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## Abstract

Policy coherence and systems approach are frequently discussed as essential for crafting effective policies to address poverty, food security, and nutrition. This brief elaborates on synergies between social protection and rural development programmes, with a specific emphasis on how they contribute to agrifood system outcomes. The need for stronger coherence arises from the variety of constraints faced by smallholder farmers with limited incomes. Women, in particular, experience structural discrimination and disadvantages. They often have less access to productive resources, decent employment opportunities, education, health, and social services. These constraints cannot be addressed by rural development or social protection interventions alone. This calls for an integrated approach which combines policy interventions in an intentional manner to assist smallholders in managing risks, diversifying livelihoods, and achieving a sustainable income stream. Drawing on the experiences and learnings from two of India's flagship rural development programmes namely, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme and the National Rural Livelihood Mission, we highlight three approaches for effectively building synergies to address food security and nutrition challenges. Firstly, investments in institutional platforms of the poor are essential to establish convergence with community-based governance structures for facilitating access to rights, opportunities, and their contributions to shaping local policies and programmes. Secondly, the adoption of innovative approaches in inclusive value-chain development is vital to achieving food security and nutrition. Thirdly, technology can be leveraged for effective territorial planning, supporting communities in making more informed decisions regarding resource allocation and management.

**Keywords:** Food security, Nutrition, Rural Development, Social Protection, Women's Groups, Institutions, Value-chain Development, Territorial Planning

## Diagnosis of the Issue

After decades of progress, the steady decline in global Hunger stalled around 2015 and, more recently, has been negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, intensification of conflicts, economic slowdowns, rising inequalities, and climate extremes. Global Hunger, as measured by the prevalence of undernourishment, was 9.2% in 2022, and between 691 and 783 million people in the world faced chronic Hunger (FAO et al. 2023, 6). Moreover, more than 3.1 billion people worldwide could not afford a healthy diet in 2021 (FAO et al. 2023, 27).

Under its G20 Presidency, Brazil has prioritized the Global Alliance against Hunger and Poverty to make progress towards SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 2 (Zero Hunger). A systems approach to address the challenge of achieving food security, nutrition, and healthy diets has been consistently advocated, including by various G20 Presidencies, the UN Food Systems Summit in 2021, and the High-Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition (HLPE), an independent scientific advisory body to the UN Committee on World Food Security.

The rationale for a systems approach is driven by the understanding that sustained improvements in food security and nutrition are only possible through a focus on all six dimensions of food security (HLPE 2020, 2) – availability (production), access (equity), utilization (safe and nutritious), stability (resilient), agency (improving rights and capabilities), and sustainability (regenerative). The production and consumption of food needs to take place in a system that produces adequate nutritious food for all in an environmentally sustainable manner and, in doing so, generates fair and equitable livelihoods across all value chains. This requires synergistic innovations in policies, institutions, and technology (von Braun et al. 2023). This brief provides one such illustration and focuses on synergies between social protection and rural development

programmes. Poor rural households face various constraints which cannot be addressed in isolation. A coherent approach combines multiple policy interventions to comprehensively assist smallholders in managing risks and generating sustainable livelihoods through farm, off-farm, and non-farm interventions. Specifically, this brief draws on insights gained from the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) and the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) programmes. It illustrates how linkages between the two have been purposefully created through innovations in policies, institutions, and technology to address poverty and food insecurity.

MGNREGS is one of the world's largest social protection programmes. It provides a legal guarantee for up to 100 days of employment in a financial year to any rural household willing to do unskilled manual work at established state minimum wages. In financial year 2021-22, with a budget allocation of USD 13.2 billion, the Scheme reached 73 million households and generated 3630 million person-days of work. The average daily wage paid was USD 2.84 and on average 50 person-days of work were generated per rural household (Kasliwal, Bordoloi, and Kapur, 2023).<sup>1</sup>

The NRLM aims to alleviate poverty through community-based institutions and a comprehensive livelihoods approach. It focuses on four core strategies: mobilizing rural households into self-help groups (SHGs) and federations, improving access to financial and support services, enhancing livelihood skills, and delivering social and economic

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<sup>1</sup> Indian Rupee denominations converted to US Dollars using the average 2021

exchange rate: 1 USD = INR 74.135, obtained from:

<https://www.poundsterlinglive.com/history/USD-INR-2021>

assistance. As of January 2024, NRLM had mobilized about 99.8 million women into over 9 million SHGs (Ministry of Rural Development, 2024).

## Recommendations

### **1. Build institutional platforms for the poor to strengthen solidarity, voice, and bargaining power.**

Both MGNREGS and NRLM rely on a set of community institutions for their implementation. MGNREGS includes a bottom-up planning approach undertaken through the Gram Panchayat (GP), which is the lowest tier of a three-tier administrative system of local self-government in rural India, called the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI). The GPs organize village council meetings through which demand for MGNREGS work, job cards and all other developmental programmes are discussed and submitted to the government.

The NRLM mobilizes SHGs and its federated institutions, which include Village Organizations and Cluster Level Federations (CLFs). Each SHG has 10–20 members, who are adult women from poor rural households, including vulnerable groups such as Scheduled Caste/Tribe communities. They meet regularly and voluntarily contribute small sums of funds that are pooled along with grant money to provide low-interest internal loans to members. Support provided to SHGs includes a financial literacy programme to impart skills and a culture of timely repayments and links to formal financing from traditional banks (banks must provide SHGs with credit worth at least USD 1250 as their initial bank connection). A community cadre of frontline workers who are all women under the NRLM provide the last-mile delivery of financial and livelihood services (National Rural Livelihoods Mission, 2014) to the smallholder farmers, such as

training, field demonstrations, and technical assistance in a variety of commodity value chain topics (agricultural, animal husbandry, and non-timber forest products). They play an instrumental role in forming Producer Groups at the village level, which act as centers for production planning, primary produce aggregation, and quality control (Singh et al. 2020)

There has been a concerted effort to establish convergence between each set of grassroots-level institutions (Figure 1).

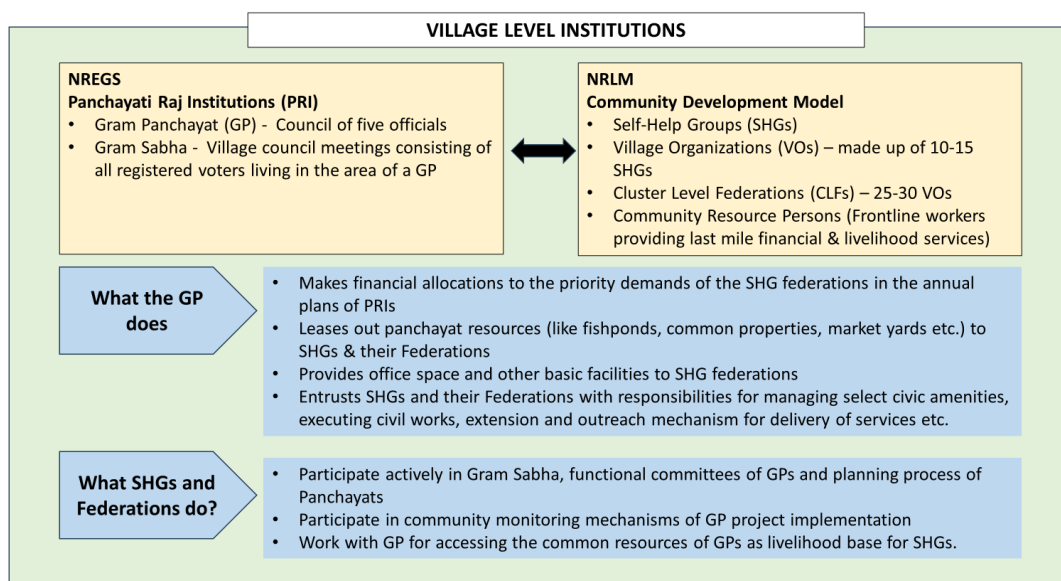


FIGURE 1. Convergence between village-level institutions. Authors' elaborations.

SHGs and their federations work closely with the GPs to access rights and entitlements to Government programmes for their members and to lend constructive support to the PRIs. The vision is to have "women asserting their rights for inclusion in the economy, for accessing resources, for addressing powerlessness and exclusion, for enabling participation and most significantly for realizing equity" (National Institute of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj, 2016). With respect to the MGNREGS specifically, SHG members must be included in the planning of the MGNREGS budget at the village

level, determining asset creation and monitoring of worksites, and in the identification and enrolment of households who may have been left out of the MGNREGS rolls. The rationale behind convergence is to address multiple constraints which can help trigger a set of inclusive rural transformation processes.

There is evidence that the NRLM has led to an increase in women's participation in MGNREGS and wages obtained (de Hoop et al. 2022), with knock-on impacts on household consumption expenditure, savings, and multi-dimensional poverty. However, there is little evidence of the impact of assets created under MGNREGS on income or livelihoods (Barooah et al. 2021)

## **2. Adopt innovative approaches for inclusive value-chain development.**

There are 266 permissible works under MGNREGS categorized across 1) Natural Resource Management, 2) Individual asset creation for vulnerable households, 3) Common infrastructure for SHGs, and 4) Rural Infrastructure. Only vulnerable households, such as women-headed households, persons with disabilities, and tribal and indigenous groups, among others, are allowed to develop individual assets (Ministry of Rural Development, 2023). Successful linking of MGNREGS and NRLM planning processes has led to SHG member households receiving productive assets to support their livelihood activities (MGNREGS State Mission Kerala, 2020). For example, construction of livestock shelters; water harvesting structures such as farm ponds and field channels; fishery ponds; storage sheds or warehouses for producer groups; and construction of market areas, can directly contribute towards increasing agricultural productivity and generating livelihoods. Individual and community-level agri-nutri gardens have promoted nutrition diversity and supported women in earning additional incomes (Coalition for Food and Nutrition Security, 2021).

However, local governments cannot always link public works to vulnerable target groups and create mechanisms such as user groups to ensure proper utilization and maintenance. Further, technical training and enterprise development solutions are required to make end-to-end value chains and strengthen livelihoods. The Indo-German development cooperation project ‘Enhancing Rural Resilience through Appropriate Development Actions’ (ERADA) focused on developing specific value chains by connecting MGNREGS and NRLM initiatives to enable vulnerable households to achieve a living income (Figure 2). On behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, GIZ implements the project in cooperation with the Indian Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD).

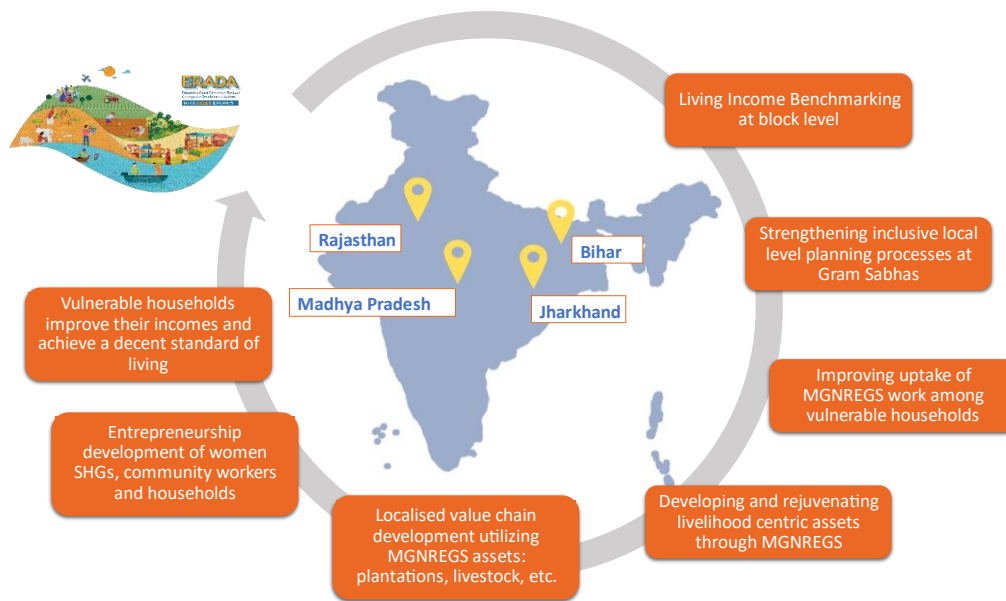


FIGURE 2. The approach of the ERADA project. Authors’ elaborations

A successful intervention under the ERADA project was the development of the Moringa value chain in the Indian states of Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. Moringa is a nutritious superfood, easy-to-grow crop that is suitable for most agro-climatic zones in



India. It requires less input and has high commercial value, given its diverse uses in medicines, cosmetics, and dietary products. The project mobilized women SHGs to undertake moringa cultivation by integrating moringa plantations and nurseries into MGNREGS planning, training CLFs on agroecological practices for cultivation and maintenance, providing entrepreneurship development training to SHGs, and introducing market access through localized buyer-seller events. The project documented increases in annual income from moringa-based livelihood initiatives and positive impacts on household nutrition (Paul et al., 2024; GIZ India, 2024). This has encouraged the government to consider introducing moringa-based products from the SHG members into the mid-day meal programme of public schools to fight malnutrition. Based on the project learnings, the MoRD has launched ‘The Moringa Toolkit’ to scale the initiative across India. Such convergence between MGNREGS and NRLM for value chain initiatives is increasingly being piloted for other sectors, such as livestock and aquaculture. Small-scale fisheries and aquaculture deserve greater attention. Investing in a variety of inclusive blue food value chains can support healthy diets and local economies (Leape et al. 2023).

### **3. Use technology within participatory processes for effective territorial planning.**

MGNREGS utilizes a Geographical Information System (GIS) based approach for planning natural resource management-based interventions. MGNREGS staff are supported in using open-source GIS data integrated with secondary socio-economic and demographic data to make informed decisions regarding the selection of MGNREGS works. For example, GIS data on water and land use patterns has helped to make decisions on site selection for digging a pond or fallow land development. Census data that shows

the number of vulnerable households in the GP has helped determine the individual asset creation patterns. This comprehensive understanding of the local terrain helps MGNREGS design landscape-based plans and develop assets in strategically beneficial areas. This, in turn, bolsters natural resource utilization, climate adaptation, improved agricultural productivity, and diversified livelihoods. In 2022, 256,000 Gram Panchayats (nearly 95% of all GPs in the country) have prepared GIS-based MGNREGS plans (Ministry of Rural Development, 2022). Careful selection of fallow and wasteland development works can increase crop acreage, yields per acre, and crop diversification, leading to enhanced food security (Pankaj and Bhattacharya, 2022).

The above-described territorial approach, key aspects of which include being people-centered, cross-sectoral, and multi-level (TP4D White Paper, 2018), can be further strengthened. Currently, at the village level, MGNREGS develops an Annual Action Plan while SHGs under NRLM create a Village Poverty Reduction Plan, both of which are consolidated into the Gram Panchayat Development Plan. There is potential for better integration of these three planning processes by combining scientific GIS data, market analysis, livelihood demands from SHGs, public works demand for MGNREGS, and other schemes and programmes. Such a territorial development approach can be an effective tool for strengthening food security and resilience by enhancing the natural, human, economic, physical, and social capital of rural households (Figure 3).

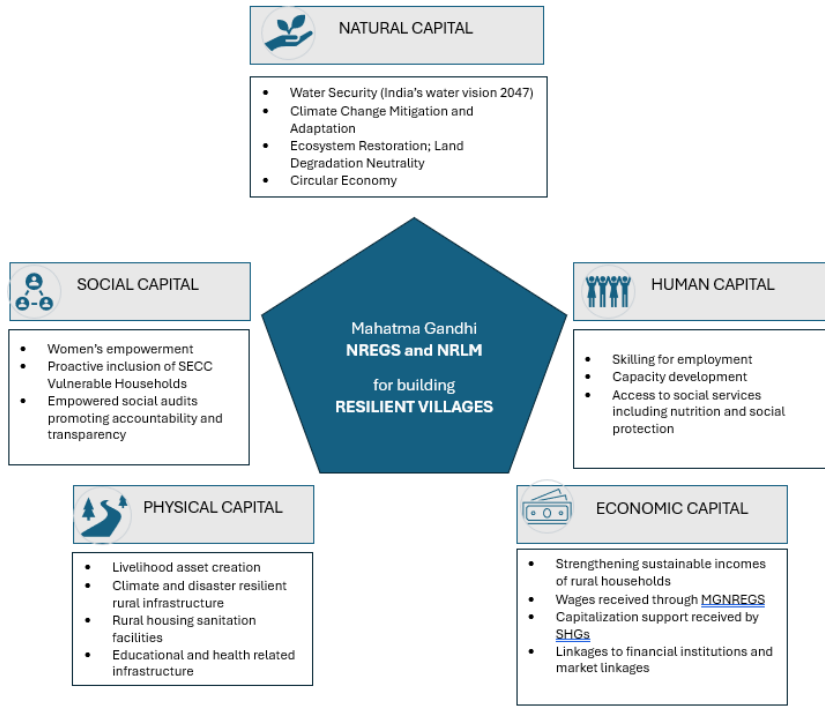


FIGURE 3. Enhancing food security through territorial development. Authors' adaptation using the Sustainable Livelihood Approach (Scoones, 1998)

## Scenario of Outcomes: Challenges and Opportunities

This brief recommends adopting innovative institutional approaches that enable participatory and inclusive decision-making. However, it is particularly challenging to shift the existing power dynamics of gender and caste-based inequalities. The poorest of the poor households face several adversities based on caste, gender, and location (Singh and Rani, 2020). Within existing patriarchal structures, the empowerment gained through SHGs may be constrained by deeply ingrained gender norms and power dynamics. The bargaining power of women SHGs with the GP, which controls the budget and development planning of all major rural development programmes, is unclear. GPs are still male-dominated in many Indian states, despite reservations introduced for women and vulnerable groups.

Moreover, it is crucial to acknowledge the increased responsibilities placed on women within the SHG model. As women take on the role of income earners while retaining their primary caregiver role within the household, it leads to a disproportionate time burden on them. There is a risk of women bearing the brunt of agricultural labor without commensurate access to resources or decision-making power. Moreover, emphasizing women's participation in SHGs may inadvertently marginalize men from development interventions, neglecting their potential contributions to household and community development. The ERADA project piloted a toolkit on gender transformative approaches in livelihoods and uses participatory methods to enhance awareness and understanding of gender issues among project stakeholders. Working with men has been effective in enabling them to understand why women's voice in participatory decision-making processes at the household and community levels is important for building resilience. While the SHG movement in India has always focused on working with women and

bringing them to the forefront, there is a need to move forward from gender-responsive to a gender-transformative approach.

Institutional platforms at the grassroots level, participatory decision-making, and territorial approaches characterized by multi-level, multi-stakeholder, and cross-sectoral collaboration require sufficient financing. This requires the mobilization of resources by governments, the private sector, multilateral financial institutions, and civil society. Simultaneously, to utilize resources efficiently, a learning agenda is vital. For example, it is important to understand how variations in the design, formation, and implementation of different group-based models affect the inclusivity of value chains and food security and nutrition outcomes. Evidence-based policy interfaces for shared learning and knowledge accumulation will play an important role in strengthening sustainable agrifood systems.

*The opinions expressed in this brief are those of the authors and may not necessarily represent the views of their respective organizations.*

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