



Evaluation of Training Programmes for Rural Empowerment

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To Cite this Article

A Amarender Reddy (2025). Evaluation of Training Programmes for Rural Empowerment. *Indian Social Development Review*, 1: 1, pp. 23-39.

Abstract: This study evaluates the effectiveness of training programmes aimed at training rural development and line departments with ultimate impact in terms of empowering rural populations. Conducted by the authors in 2017, the analysis draws on empirical data from participants across several states to assess the impact of capacity-building interventions on knowledge enhancement, skill development, governance, and behavioural change. The evaluation encompassed diverse thematic areas, including rural development, panchayat raj institutions, e-governance, the effectiveness of rural development schemes, climate-resilient agriculture, livelihoods, and entrepreneurial promotion. Findings reveal that training programmes significantly improved the participants' technical know-how and confidence levels. A majority reported increased adoption of managerial and sector-specific skills following training. The study also identifies key drivers of effective training outcomes, including participatory learning methods, the relevance of content to local needs, and the practical orientation of sessions. However, gaps remain in post-training support, handholding mechanisms, and promotional prospects, which constrain the translation of knowledge into sustained socio-economic gains. The paper recommends a more structured follow-up system, integration with rural development schemes, and greater involvement of local institutions to enhance the long-term impact of training. Gender-sensitive approaches and the inclusion of marginalized groups are emphasized to ensure equitable empowerment and representation. By systematically evaluating outcomes and suggesting improvements, this study contributes to strengthening rural human capital and shaping policy for more impactful capacity-building initiatives. The insights are particularly relevant for policymakers and institutions engaged in rural development and agricultural transformation.

Keywords: Rural Development Training Institutions (RDTIs), Participatory Governance and Capacity Building, Digital and Climate-Resilient Rural Development, Empowerment and Inclusion Frameworks

Introduction

Still, about 64.1% of the population lives in rural areas in India. Poverty is concentrated in rural areas, and most government schemes are focused on rural areas to alleviate poverty, impart skills, promote entrepreneurship, and deliver services. India's rural development trajectory has undergone a transformative shift over the last two decades, with a greater emphasis on inclusive growth, digital governance, and sustainability (Reddy, 2017; Reddy *et al.*, 2022, 2024). Central to these efforts is the empowerment of rural communities through capacity building and skill development (Reddy, 2014; Ashley & Maxwell, 2001; Ravallion & Datt, 1995; Reddy *et al.*, 2016; Desai & Joshi, 2014; Taylor, 2011). Training programmes aimed at strengthening grassroots governance, service delivery, and livelihood promotion are a cornerstone of this empowerment. Institutions such as the National Institute of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj (NIRD&PR), State Institutes of Rural Development (SIRDs), Extension Training Centres (ETCs), and other allied bodies have played a crucial role in delivering this mandate at the national, state, and local levels, respectively.

This paper reviews the role and performance of these institutions in training and capacity building and evaluates their contributions to rural empowerment. The increasing complexity of rural governance -encompassing climate change, digital inclusion, gender equity, and community-driven development -necessitates a continuous evolution of training approaches. As India aims to meet its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the vision of Atmanirbhar Bharat, training institutions must reorient themselves to be more responsive, inclusive, and impact-driven (Reddy, 2015).

Objectives

The primary objectives of this paper are:

1. To assess the impact of rural development training programmes on participants' knowledge, skills, attitudes, and job performance at the grassroots level.
2. To analyze the influence of training on service delivery, programme implementation, job retention, and professional growth of participants.
3. To identify gaps in current capacity-building initiatives and provide actionable recommendations for enhancing their effectiveness.

Methodology

The evaluation adopted the Kirkpatrick Model of training assessment, encompassing four key stages: Reaction (gauging participant feedback and satisfaction post-training), Learning (measuring knowledge and skill acquisition), Behavior (observing job-related behavioral changes and skill application), and Results (assessing broader organizational and societal outcomes, such as enhanced service delivery and empowerment). Data collection involved structured surveys, interviews, focus group discussions, and participatory workshops. The study engaged over 700 stakeholders from five regions—North, South, East, West, and North-East India—including government officials, elected Panchayat Raj representatives, NGO workers, rural entrepreneurs who had participated in training programs over the past five years, and trainers affiliated with State Institutes of Rural Development (SIRDs), the National Institute of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj (NIRD&PR), and other regional institutions in 2017.

Role of Rural Development Training Institutions

Rural Development Training Institutions (RDTIs), comprising State Institutes of Rural Development (SIRDs), Extension Training Centres (ETCs) at local and district levels, and apex national bodies like the National Institute of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj (NIRD&PR), have historically played a crucial role in strengthening the rural development apparatus in India. Their core mandate has focused on enhancing the skills and knowledge of a wide range of stakeholders engaged in planning, implementing, and monitoring rural development programmes. Initially, these institutions concentrated on building the capacities of government officials from rural development departments and district administrations, helping them better understand and deliver on poverty alleviation, rural employment, and infrastructure schemes. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment in 1992 significantly expanded the scope of training, mandating the inclusion of elected Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) members—particularly women and marginalized communities—to empower them with knowledge about their functions, rights, and responsibilities. Recognizing the importance of participatory development, the institutions also extended their training to community leaders, self-help groups (SHGs), and NGOs. Regular orientation and refresher programmes were introduced for functionaries like Block Development Officers (BDOs), Gram Panchayat Secretaries, engineers, and data operators to improve the implementation of flagship schemes such as

MGNREGA, PMGSY, SBM, PMAY-G, and NRLM. Over time, training areas diversified to include emerging themes like gender budgeting, participatory planning, financial inclusion, e-governance, entrepreneurship, and convergence planning. A multi-disciplinary approach was adopted, incorporating training on social accountability mechanisms such as social audits and citizen charters, thereby ensuring that rural development personnel remain responsive, inclusive, and effective in addressing the evolving needs of rural India.

Table 1: Major Rural Development and Livelihood Programmes in India (2024–25)

<i>Programme</i>	<i>Main Objectives</i>	<i>Target Population</i>	<i>Budget allocation (₹ Crore, 2024–25)</i>
MGNREGA	Guarantee 100 days of wage employment annually	Rural unemployed households	₹86,000 crore
PMAY-G	Construct pucca houses for rural poor	SC/ST, minorities, homeless families	₹54,487 crore
NRLM (DAY-NRLM)	Promote SHGs, livelihoods, and financial inclusion	Rural poor, women, vulnerable groups	₹14,129 crore
PMGSY	Provide all-weather rural road connectivity	Remote habitations	₹19,000 crore
PM-KISAN	Provide ₹6,000/year income support	Landholding farmers	₹60,000 crore
Jal Jeevan Mission – Rural	Tap water supply to rural households	All rural families	₹70,000 crore (Centre + States)
NSAP	Provide pensions to BPL elderly, widows, and disabled	Elderly (60+), widows, disabled	₹9,000 crore
Rurban Mission (SPMRM)	Develop rural growth clusters with urban amenities	Rural clusters	₹1,000 crore
Digital India – Rural	Digital literacy and infrastructure	Rural youth, SHGs, Panchayats	₹10,000 crore (cross-sectoral)
PMFBY	Crop insurance for weather and market risks	All farmers, esp. smallholders	₹13,625 crore
MUDRA Yojana	Microcredit for entrepreneurs (Shishu, Kishore, Tarun loans)	Rural micro-entrepreneurs, SHGs	₹20,000 crore refinance target
PMUY	Provide LPG to reduce indoor pollution	Rural BPL women	₹2,257 crore
ASHA Programme	Promote rural healthcare and health awareness	Rural women health workers	₹6,800 crore (under NHM)
RKVY-RAFTAAR	Support holistic agriculture and allied sector development	Farmers, FPOs, agripreneurs	₹7,150 crore

Figures are approximate and based on Union Budget 2024–25 and related ministry data. Many programmes are centrally sponsored, meaning budgets are shared between Centre and States (e.g., 60:40 ratio). Jal Jeevan Mission and Digital India are cross-sectoral, with rural components embedded in broader national programmes. MUDRA is not a direct budget line but operates under SIDBI (Small Industries Development Bank of India), with loans disbursed through banks and MFIs. Budget allocations for Digital India, Jal Jeevan Mission, and PMFBY include state contributions where applicable. PM-KISAN, PMFBY administered by agriculture ministry.

Responding to Emerging Needs

In the last decade, the scope and complexity of rural development have undergone substantial transformation. As a result, the training institutions have evolved to address a wider array of themes and cross-cutting issues (theoretical underpinnings are given in Table 2).

Rural Development Training Institutions (RDTIs) have evolved to address emerging priorities such as digital empowerment, climate-resilient development, social inclusion, and decentralized governance. Under the Digital India initiative, RDTIs now train stakeholders in the use of digital tools for scheme implementation, including platforms like AwasSoft, NREGASoft, DigiLocker, eGramSwaraj, and BharatNet, along with biometric attendance, GIS mapping, and mobile-based monitoring systems. With climate change affecting rural livelihoods, particularly in agriculture, training has expanded to include climate-smart practices such as water harvesting, sustainable cropping systems, soil health management, and low-carbon infrastructure. Emphasis on social inclusion has increased, with modules now focusing on empowerment of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and women through rights-based approaches, social inclusion audits, and targeted livelihood support. To promote economic diversification, institutions support SHGs and producer groups through training in microenterprise development, digital marketing, financial literacy, and supply chain integration. Further, with Gram Panchayats playing a larger role in fiscal management, training now includes participatory budgeting, local governance principles, resource mapping, and audit compliance to strengthen grassroots democracy.

Table 2: Key Theoretical Perspectives

<i>Theory</i>	<i>Core Idea</i>	<i>Key Thinkers</i>
Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed	Empowerment through critical consciousness and participatory education	Paulo Freire (1996)
Sen's Capability Approach	Focus on expanding people's capabilities and choices	Alkire, (2005)
Kabeer's Framework	Empowerment as expansion of resources, agency, and achievements	Naila Kabeer (2000)
Rowlands' Power Framework	Differentiates between "power over", "power to", "power with", "power within"	Jo Rowlands (1995)
Longwe's Women's Empowerment Framework	Five levels: Welfare, Access, Conscientisation, Participation, Control	Longwe (2002)
Social Capital Theory	Empowerment through networks, norms, and trust within communities	Siisiainen(2003)

Contribution of Training Institutions

India's institutional architecture for rural development training is among the most expansive globally, anchored in a decentralized three-tier structure comprising the National Institute of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj (NIRD&PR) at the national level, State Institutes of Rural Development (SIRDs) at the state level, and Extension Training Centres (ETCs) at the district level. This structure enables localized and context-specific training that addresses region-specific developmental challenges and administrative needs. Over the years, standardized training modules have been developed for key government schemes and thematic areas, ensuring uniformity in knowledge dissemination across diverse states. The training ecosystem has created a substantial cadre of grassroots functionaries, PRI representatives, and SHG leaders, many of whom now make meaningful contributions to rural development delivery. Technological advancements, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, have further enhanced accessibility through mobile learning, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), and virtual sessions. Moreover, collaborations with national and international agencies, such as the UNDP, World Bank, and GIZ, have enriched the curriculum and pedagogy with policy-relevant and evidence-based insights.

Despite these achievements, several institutional and systemic challenges persist. Many training centres still employ outdated, lecture-heavy pedagogies that limit experiential learning and real-world problem-solving. There is little follow-up to evaluate how effectively training translates into improved governance or service

outcomes. Furthermore, underfunding and inadequate infrastructure, particularly at the state and district levels, hinder the quality of training delivery. Training modules often lack sensitivity to local languages, gender issues, and regional contexts, affecting their relevance. Soft skills, such as leadership, negotiation, empathy, and community engagement, remain underemphasized.

Furthermore, weak linkages with academic and research institutions inhibit innovation in curriculum design. Crucially, many frontline workers—such as ASHAs, Anganwadi workers, and Gram Rojgar Sahayaks—remain outside the institutionalized training framework. Lastly, the absence of strong monitoring and evaluation mechanisms limits the ability to measure training effectiveness and guide adaptive improvements.

Results and Discussions

The evaluation of rural development training programmes across various states and institutions has yielded critical insights that highlight both achievements and areas requiring urgent reform. The findings are grouped under four thematic areas: Training Design and Content, Training Delivery and Participation, Impact on Behaviour and Results, and Post-training Performance and Retention. Together, these findings provide a nuanced understanding of the functioning, effectiveness, and limitations of capacity-building efforts in the rural development sector.

Training Design and Content

A consistent pattern across multiple rural development training institutions in India is the continued reliance on traditional, lecture-based pedagogy, which limits the effectiveness of capacity-building efforts. Despite increasing advocacy for experiential, learner-centred training, most programmes remain rooted in didactic methods, with long slide presentations and monologues by resource persons, offering little room for interaction, reflection, or peer learning. This approach particularly hinders participation from less confident or literate individuals, such as newly elected PRI members and grassroots workers. Moreover, training content is often not localized, resulting in modules designed for one region being replicated in vastly different socio-economic and linguistic contexts, such as tribal areas of Odisha or the Northeast, thereby reducing comprehension and applicability. Cross-cutting themes, such as gender mainstreaming, participatory development, and financial inclusion, are often treated as isolated topics, with minimal integration

or discussion on their practical implementation. Practical tools and frameworks—such as participatory planning templates, checklists, or mobile apps—are rarely provided, leaving participants ill-equipped to translate training into field action. Furthermore, many materials are outdated and no longer aligned with recent policy changes, particularly in dynamic areas such as e-governance or climate-resilient agriculture. This lack of innovation, contextualization, and practical application in training design significantly undermines its relevance, effectiveness, and long-term impact on rural development outcomes.

Training Delivery and Participation

The effectiveness of rural development training in India hinges not just on the content but significantly on how the training is delivered and the extent to which diverse participants are able to engage meaningfully. A persistent issue across institutions is the inadequate dissemination of training calendars, resulting in limited outreach that is mostly confined to those within established administrative networks, excluding many first-time or marginalized stakeholders, such as women or remote Panchayat representatives. Accessibility remains a core challenge—grassroots actors, such as SHG leaders, FPO office bearers, and rural entrepreneurs, are often unable to attend due to a lack of stipends, travel allowances, or logistical support. This is further complicated by linguistic barriers, particularly in linguistically diverse and tribal-dominated regions, where training is often delivered in non-local languages, hampering comprehension and engagement. Institutions that have experimented with bilingual formats and developed audiovisual content in regional languages have reported better feedback and engagement, proving the need for inclusive delivery formats.

Further, rigid training schedules and long, uninterrupted sessions often deter active participation, especially for women with caregiving responsibilities. Though digital training saw a boost post-COVID-19, many institutions still lack the basic infrastructure, technical support, and reliable internet required to sustain hybrid or mobile-based modules. Unless delivery systems are reoriented to be more inclusive, interactive, and context-sensitive, rural development training risks perpetuating exclusion and limiting its transformative potential.

Impact on Behaviour and Results

While most training programmes aim to enhance knowledge and build capacity, their real success lies in the behavioural transformation and improved job performance

of participants. Encouragingly, many trainees report increased confidence in articulating community needs, monitoring development schemes, maintaining records, and navigating administrative processes. This self-reported impact is notably higher in programmes that incorporate exposure visits, simulations, or field-based exercises—experiential learning strategies that resonate more deeply with grassroots participants than classroom lectures. Visits to model Gram Panchayats, successful SHGs, or digital service delivery hubs often inspire innovation and provide practical templates for replication. However, behavioural change is inconsistent. Participants embedded in rigid bureaucratic environments or under hierarchical control often struggle to apply new learnings due to institutional constraints or lack of decision-making authority. A significant institutional gap is the lack of structured post-training support; no mechanisms, such as mentoring, refresher courses, or communities of practice, are available to help trainees sustain their learning journey. Additionally, most training institutions rely solely on immediate feedback surveys to evaluate effectiveness, with no robust framework to assess medium- or long-term outcomes, behavioural changes, or community-level impacts. To bridge these gaps, a paradigm shift is needed toward outcome-based, long-duration capacity-building programmes that are followed by structured support, impact assessment, and iterative learning cycles.

Post-Training Performance and Recent Developments

Even when training is well-received and understood, its impact often dissipates if institutional systems are not conducive to applying the new skills. A common issue is the underutilization of trained individuals—SHG leaders trained in entrepreneurship may lack access to credit, markets, or mentoring. In contrast, trained government staff may face procedural hurdles that inhibit innovation. Administrative structures often overlook training outcomes in staff evaluations or career progression, thereby reducing the incentive to internalize and apply new knowledge. This is especially true for contractual or frontline workers—such as ASHAs, Anganwadi workers, or Gram Rojgar Sahayaks—whose roles are critical yet under-recognized in capacity-building frameworks. Attrition is also high among NGO and CBO staff, leading to a loss of institutional memory and hindering knowledge transfer, which further weakens the training's impact. The lack of alum networks or follow-up engagement with past trainees deprives institutions of a valuable feedback loop and the opportunity to build communities of practice. On a positive note, recent

developments, such as the growing digital transformation of governance and the proliferation of platforms like e-GramSwaraj, NREGAssoft, and BharatNet, have created a new paradigm for training. Institutions are now including modules on digital governance, mobile-based scheme monitoring, and digital marketing for rural entrepreneurs. Targeted digital literacy programmes in vernacular languages, MOOCs, and hybrid training models have increased accessibility, especially post-pandemic. These trends indicate a growing recognition of the need to align rural training with real-time administrative and technological changes. However, to make this transformation effective, capacity-building frameworks must institutionalize continuous learning pathways, link training to performance incentives, and ensure that digital inclusion is treated not just as a technical skill but as a core livelihood and governance competency.

Localization of SDGs, Gender Inclusion, and Climate Resilience in Rural Training

India's commitment to localize the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has fundamentally altered the direction of rural development planning, emphasizing decentralization, data utilization, and inclusive governance at the grassroots level. Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), Self-Help Groups (SHGs), and community-based organizations now play pivotal roles in identifying and achieving local development goals that align with global targets, such as poverty alleviation, gender equality, water access, and climate action. Consequently, rural development training institutions have expanded their scope to integrate Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)-based planning into their curricula. Trainees are now equipped to align Gram Panchayat Development Plans (GPDPs) with SDG indicators by identifying village-level development gaps, formulating priorities, and deploying evidence-based planning methods. The use of mobile-based data collection, GIS mapping, and Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) tools has been institutionalized to ensure that local planning is grounded in verifiable and contextually relevant data. Equally vital is the growing emphasis on convergence, which encourages trainees to pool resources from various schemes, such as MGNREGA, NRLM, and health and nutrition programs, for cohesive and impactful development. Digital dashboards that track SDG-aligned progress have been introduced in several states, and training sessions now focus on interpreting these data sets for targeted interventions and accurate reporting. In parallel, the rise of women leaders in PRIs

and a commitment to social justice have prompted training modules to focus on gender-sensitive budgeting, participatory leadership, and rights-based governance frameworks. Women, SC, ST, and OBC trainees are being empowered through leadership training, the use of vernacular languages, inclusive pedagogies, and affirmative participation mechanisms. These interventions represent a significant shift in training philosophy, moving from content delivery to inclusive capacity building, which enables marginalized voices to play a proactive role in development planning and execution. Despite ongoing challenges, such as entrenched social hierarchies and low digital literacy among specific cohorts, the focus on gender and social equity in training programs has led to a more accountable and inclusive rural governance ecosystem. In addition, the mainstreaming of climate resilience has emerged as a central training priority in response to rising environmental vulnerabilities. Training institutions are now systematically building the capacities of PRIs, SHGs, and farmers in climate risk assessment, climate-resilient agriculture, and sustainable water management. Modules have been introduced to integrate climate adaptation strategies into local planning using tools supported by national and state-level climate missions, including the National Adaptation Fund for Climate Change (NAFCC). Natural Resource Management (NRM) is taught not just from a conservation lens but also as an integrated strategy for enhancing livelihood security. This includes watershed management, agroforestry, and soil conservation practices. Disaster-prone areas now host training in Community-Based Disaster Risk Reduction (CBDRR), including emergency response preparedness and early warning systems. As a result, Gram Panchayats are gradually being transformed into units of environmental stewardship capable of responding to climate risks while ensuring inclusive and sustainable development. Together, the integration of SDG frameworks, social equity lenses, and environmental resilience measures into rural development training is helping establish a new paradigm of decentralized governance—one that is rights-based, accountable, and climate-resilient.

Entrepreneurship and Future Training Priorities in Rural India

As rural employment opportunities in traditional sectors reach saturation and the nation emphasizes a self-reliant growth model under “Atmanirbhar Bharat,” entrepreneurship has gained prominence as a strategy for rural transformation. Government-backed initiatives, such as Startup India, Standup India, Agri-Startups, and the Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana –National Rural Livelihoods Mission

(DAY-NRLM), have increasingly prioritized enterprise-led rural development. Accordingly, rural training institutions have expanded their offerings to include modules on entrepreneurial skills, such as business planning, branding, market linkage, quality assurance, digital marketing, and financial literacy. Special attention is being given to transitioning women-led SHGs from savings-and-credit groups to enterprise clusters capable of generating sustainable livelihoods. Training content is tailored to enhance backwards and forward linkages, provide access to digital tools, and facilitate quality production and packaging. Likewise, the collective strength of farmers is being harnessed through training programs for Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs), focusing on input procurement, value addition, equitable market access, and best governance practices. Recognizing that many rural entrepreneurs struggle with financial systems, training also includes digital financial tools such as UPI, BHIM, and mobile wallets to improve bank linkage, credit literacy, and formal financial inclusion.

Young rural populations are being targeted through startup incubation programs and skill development initiatives in collaboration with the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (MSDE), vocational training centres, and digital mentorship platforms. These interventions aim to transform rural youth from job seekers into job creators by fostering innovation and entrepreneurial leadership. However, to meet the complex and fast-evolving demands of modern rural development, future training must evolve beyond traditional models. Six future-ready themes stand out as urgent training priorities. First, climate resilience and environmental governance require modules on community-led adaptation, agroecological farming, biodiversity conservation, and green infrastructure accounting. Training must also enable access to climate finance and convergence mechanisms for long-term sustainability. Second, digital literacy and e-governance skills are non-negotiable in an era of online service delivery, data-driven planning, and citizen interface platforms. Training content must address not only the use of digital tools for governance but also enhance basic digital literacy among women and marginalized groups. Third, themes such as decentralized service delivery, local resource mobilization, and citizen engagement are crucial for deepening democratic governance and building responsive institutions. Fourth, financial inclusion and livelihood diversification should form the bedrock of future training, empowering rural populations with skills to access formal credit, insurance, and social security systems. Fifth, cross-sector convergence training-integrating health, nutrition,

water, and education planning-is key to achieving holistic development. Ultimately, capacity-building in social accountability tools, such as social audits, community scorecards, and grievance redressal systems, will promote transparency and foster citizen trust in local institutions. By embracing these themes, training institutions can future-proof rural governance and development strategies, ensuring that India's rural transformation is both inclusive and sustainable.

Digital and Inclusive Capacity-Building for Rural Transformation

To enable inclusive and technology-driven rural development, future training programmes must prioritize digital literacy, data ethics, and governance capabilities at the grassroots level. Basic digital competencies such as secure internet use, mobile banking, and navigating key government platforms like UMANG and DigiLocker are essential for enhancing rural access to public services. Alongside these, training must build familiarity with Management Information Systems such as e-SHRAM, MGNREGAssoft, and NRLM-MIS, equipping stakeholders with tools for effective monitoring and reporting. The integration of Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning in service delivery and agriculture forecasting calls for introductory modules to help rural functionaries make data-informed decisions. Skill-building in Geographic Information Systems (GIS), mobile-based mapping, and interpretation of satellite imagery through tools like GeoMGNREGA and Bhuvan further empowers panchayats in evidence-based planning. Cybersecurity and data ethics are increasingly important, especially as beneficiaries' data is handled digitally; hence, capacity-building in privacy protection and ethical digital governance is necessary. Moreover, bridging the digital divide through inclusive approaches that focus on SC/ST/OBC groups, women, and persons with disabilities using local language content and community digital champions is crucial to ensure that digital governance reaches all citizens equitably.

Parallely, sustainable rural development also requires a focus on livelihoods, social equity, health, and accountability. Entrepreneurship training must encourage innovation and self-employment by nurturing startup ecosystems and providing knowledge on business planning, seed funding, and market linkages. Strengthening Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs), cooperatives, and Self-Help Groups (SHGs) through capacity-building in governance, value chains, and digital commerce can create scalable rural enterprises. Social inclusion training should integrate legal literacy, gender-sensitive governance, and mechanisms to address caste- and gender-

based exclusion. Modules of inclusive planning, representation, and intercultural understanding are essential to foster equitable local governance. On the health front, training should support community-led action on sanitation, nutrition-sensitive planning, menstrual hygiene, and public health emergencies, emphasizing local ownership through VHSNCs and Poshan Abhiyan tools. Ultimately, enhancing social accountability through training on social audits, RTI, grievance redressal, and participatory budgeting can help rebuild citizen trust and ensure transparency in governance. These interlinked training themes, when implemented systematically, can transform rural institutions into resilient, equitable, and digitally empowered engines of development.

Revitalizing Capacity Building for Rural Development: Institutional Innovation and Inclusive Impact

Effective capacity building in rural India transcends traditional classroom-based training to embrace a more strategic, participatory, and context-sensitive approach. Improving training quality requires a fundamental rethinking of pedagogy and content design. Instead of relying on generic lectures, training must incorporate participatory learning methods like role plays, simulations, group discussions, and field demonstrations that are better suited for adult learners in rural settings. Content should be localized using region-specific challenges, vernacular materials, and case studies from the field to make learning more relevant. Institutions must shift towards modular and stackable curricula that enable progressive skill development and credential accumulation. Each training cycle must begin with robust training needs assessments (TNAs) that involve multiple stakeholders and use field data to ensure responsiveness to emerging realities. Furthermore, cross-cutting themes such as gender equity, digital literacy, climate resilience, and social inclusion must be embedded across all training modules to create a holistic and values-driven framework. Simultaneously, institutional capacities must be enhanced to deliver quality training—this includes building faculty expertise in facilitation and digital pedagogy, establishing periodic curriculum reviews led by academia and practitioners, and fostering internal research to continuously refine methodologies and tools. Training should be incentivized through performance-linked career pathways for rural development staff, while institutions must develop collaborative ecosystems for peer learning, horizontal exchange, and innovation across states and sectors.

Modernizing the physical and digital infrastructure of training institutions is equally vital for deepening outreach and enhancing the learning experience. Many institutions still lack basic amenities, *let alone* modern facilities. Investment in smart classrooms, Wi-Fi-enabled campuses, digital libraries, simulation labs, and climate-resilient buildings will allow State Institutes of Rural Development (SIRDs) and Extension Training Centres (ETCs) to function as centers of excellence. Blended and hybrid learning models—leveraging MOOCs, podcasts, WhatsApp-based microlearning, and AI-driven reinforcement—can help overcome geographic constraints and promote continuous learning. Mobile training units can be deployed to serve hard-to-reach communities such as tribal regions, disaster-prone areas, and remote hamlets. Residential campus facilities must be upgraded to provide trainees with a comfortable, gender-sensitive, and engaging environment that encourages retention and participation. At the same time, digital connectivity must be improved to bridge access gaps and empower both trainees and trainers to use online resources effectively. An integrated evaluation and monitoring framework is also necessary to ensure accountability and track long-term outcomes. A National Training Impact Dashboard can be established to collect real-time data on training themes, participation rates, and outcome indicators. AI and data analytics tools should be utilized to analyze feedback and performance data, while 360-degree feedback mechanisms involving peers, supervisors, and community members can help assess behavioral change and practical application of knowledge. Longitudinal tracking of trainees, coupled with annual follow-ups by district or state-level officers, can provide valuable insights into training effectiveness. Public dissemination of training impact reports will ensure transparency and generate momentum for performance-driven reforms.

Looking forward, the institutional ecosystem for rural development training must be overhauled to meet the demands of a rapidly changing development landscape. Training must shift from being scheme-centric to rights-based, outcome-driven, and aligned with broader goals such as Atmanirbhar Bharat, Digital India, and SDG localization. A comprehensive reform strategy should focus on institutional governance, outcome-based design, blended learning models, and investment in human capital. Partnerships with academic institutions, think tanks, and global knowledge networks must be scaled up to develop innovative, interdisciplinary curricula. Feedback loops using mobile-based surveys and impact assessments should drive continuous content revision. Peer learning platforms and communities

of practice must be created for Panchayati Raj representatives, SHG leaders, and field functionaries. Participation in training should be incentivized through career-linked rewards, while content should be adapted to local needs using participatory tools and vernacular language. Critical themes such as climate resilience, gender justice, digital governance, and inclusive entrepreneurship must be embedded across all training efforts. Ultimately, rural development training institutions must evolve into agile, inclusive, and accountable hubs of knowledge that enable field functionaries, elected representatives, and community leaders to lead transformative change. By doing so, India will not only improve the effectiveness of its rural development programmes but also empower marginalized rural populations to shape and control their own developmental futures.

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