ROLE OF RURAL MANAGEMENT INSTITUTES IN COMMUNITY-DRIVEN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Sub-Theme: Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Higher Education

Dr. Viresh Bhanudas Parkhe

Assistant Professor, Department of Management StudiesSir Visvesvaraya Institute of Technology, Chincholi, Nashik
virmba09@gmail.com

Dr. B. M. Londhe

Director, Amrutvahini Institute of Business Management, Sangamner
directoraimba@yahoo.in

Abstract

Rural management institutes hold a position in India's higher education landscape that is, frankly, more interesting than the literature gives them credit for. They sit right in the middle of agrarian communities, tribal belts, and semi-urban pockets where poverty, joblessness, ecological damage, and social marginalisation are not abstract policy problems they are everyday realities for students, faculty, and neighbours alike. This paper looks closely at the role these institutes can play in what scholars call community-driven sustainable development (CDSD): an approach that treats local communities not as recipients of aid but as the actual architects of their own futures. The paper draws on existing literature, institutional case studies, and the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to make a case that rural management institutes, given the right institutional orientation, can work as what we describe as 'development laboratories' places where grassroots ideas get tested, where students learn to build social capital, where technopreneurs from farming families find mentorship, and where the wide gap between government policy and ground-level reality gets a little narrower. We also look at how India's National Education Policy 2020 (NEP-2020) connects to this agenda specifically, how its push for curricular flexibility, community outreach, and incubation-friendly classrooms could turn rural B-schools into genuine engines of local economic growth. The honest conclusion is this: rural management institutes have enormous, largely wasted potential. Unlocking it is not complicated in theory it needs committed institutional leadership, smarter policy, and real partnerships between institutes, industries, and communities. The paper ends with practical recommendations for administrators, policymakers, and accreditation bodies who are serious about making that happen.

Keywords: *Rural Management Institutes, Community-Driven Sustainable Development, Technopreneur ship, SDGs, NEP-2020, Social Innovation, Grassroots Entrepreneurship*

1. Introduction

About 65% of India's population still lives in rural areas. That is not a footnote it is the central fact of Indian development, one that shapes everything from labour markets to food supply chains to the meaning of economic growth (Census of India, 2011; World Bank, 2023). And yet, despite decades of rural development programmes, the picture on the ground remains stubborn: farm distress, youth unemployment, poor digital access, weak healthcare infrastructure. These are not new problems. What is new or at least underappreciated is the role that management institutes in rural settings could play in helping solve them.

Rural management institutes (RMIs) are not just smaller, less glamorous versions of urban business schools. They are something qualitatively different. They are physically inside the communities that development policy talks about from a distance. Their students often come from those same communities' children of farmers, first-generation college attendees, people who know what a failed monsoon actually means. If any institution should understand the texture of rural development challenges, it is an RMI. The question is whether these institutes are set up to do anything useful with that proximity.

Community-driven sustainable development CDSD starts from a simple premise: development works best when the people it is meant to serve are the ones driving it. Not beneficiaries. Drivers. That means building on local knowledge, backing local leaders, and designing interventions that communities actually want and can sustain on their own (World Bank, 2003). For RMIs to be meaningful players in CDSD, they need to stop thinking of themselves purely as degree-granting institutions and start thinking of themselves as development partners embedded in a specific place and time.

This paper explores exactly that shift how rural management institutes can align what they teach, what they research, and what they do in their communities with the principles of CDSD. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature. Section 3 lays out the conceptual framework used here. Sections 4 and

5 look at the specific channels of contribution and the policy environment that shapes them. Section 6 takes an honest look at the obstacles. And Section 7 offers recommendations that are, we hope, grounded enough to be useful.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Community-Driven Sustainable Development: Where the Idea Comes From

The idea of community-driven development gained real traction in the 1990s, largely as a reaction to how badly top-down development programmes had performed (Mansuri & Rao, 2004). Aid agencies, governments, and researchers had poured resources into interventions designed by outsiders, implemented by outsiders, and evaluated by outsiders and the outcomes were, to put it charitably, disappointing. Researchers like Platteau and Gaspart (2003) began arguing that something structural was wrong: communities needed to hold the reins, not just receive the outcomes.

Over time, this thinking merged with sustainability concerns to produce CDSD a framework that insists on community agency, ecological responsibility, and economic viability all at once (UNDP, 2018). Amartya Sen's (1999) capability approach underpins much of this: real development means expanding what people can do and be, not just what they earn. Elinor Ostrom's (1990) famous research on how communities manage shared resources water, forests, fisheries showed empirically that local governance, when properly supported, can be more effective and more just than state or market solutions. Together, these thinkers give CDSD a credible intellectual foundation.

2.2 Higher Education and the Communities Around It

Universities have always made implicit claims about their social role. But Ernest Boyer's work in the 1990s pushed the conversation in a more demanding direction. His concept of the 'scholarship of engagement' (Boyer, 1990) argued that universities should not just study society from a safe distance they should commit institutional resources to solving real community problems. That idea has since grown into a broader movement around 'community-engaged universities' that try to weave teaching, research, and service together into a single developmental mission (Fitzgerald et al., 2012).

In India, this responsibility has been articulated in one form or another since the Radhakrishnan Commission in the late 1940s. Higher education was meant to serve national reconstruction, not just individual advancement. NEP-2020 picks this thread back up explicitly it calls for community outreach, experiential learning, and social responsibility as non-negotiable components of higher education, not optional extras (Ministry of Education, 2020). For rural management institutes, this is not an abstract obligation. It is, in many ways, their original reason for existing.

2.3 Rural Management Education in India: What We Know and What We're Missing

The discipline of rural management in India has its roots in IRMA the Institute of Rural Management Anand, founded in 1979 in the wake of Operation Flood and the cooperative dairy movement. IRMA proved that management thinking could be applied to development problems, and a range of institutions followed its lead over the decades (Shah & Mehta, 2012). But most of the academic writing on rural management education has focused on the handful of elite institutions, largely in Tier-1 cities. The hundreds of smaller management institutes located in rural India have been, for the most part, ignored.

What we do know about these smaller RMIs is not encouraging, at least on paper. They face faculty shortages, minimal research infrastructure, weak industry connections, and limited brand recognition (Agarwal, 2009). Getting good faculty to move to Sangamner or Osmanabad or Nanded is not easy. Getting companies to recruit from there is harder still. But these structural weaknesses coexist with genuine strengths that the literature consistently undervalues direct proximity to the community's development policy is trying to reach, student bodies with deep personal understanding of rural livelihoods, and institutional missions that were never purely about corporate placements. The gap between potential and performance at these institutes is not fate it is a design problem, one that the right policies and strategies could address.

3. Conceptual Framework

To think clearly about how RMIs can contribute to CDSD, this paper adapts the Triple Helix model (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 1995) which describes the productive tension between universities, industry, and government as the engine of innovation and adds a fourth actor: Community. The original model captures something real, but in a rural development context, leaving out the community is not just an oversight. It is the mistake that most development programmes eventually pay for.

In this extended framework, the RMI sits at the centre not as a passive convener but as an active institutional node connecting all four actors. What that looks like in practice:

1. Communities bring real problems. RMIs translate those problems into research questions, curriculum modules, and student

projects that are grounded in lived experience rather than textbook cases.

2. RMIs facilitate connections between local industries and community enterprises helping build value chains that are inclusive rather than extractive.
3. They serve as small-scale policy laboratories, testing whether development models that look good on paper work when implemented in a specific village or taluka.
4. Through their incubation and entrepreneurship programmes, they nurture the next generation of rural technopreneurs people who understand both the technology and the social context of the problems they are trying to solve.
5. And they help build the social capital of the communities around them: training SHG leaders, mentoring FPO managers, running digital literacy workshops for people who have been left out of the digital economy.

This approach aligns closely with what Andrew Van de Ven (2007) calls 'engaged scholarship' research and teaching that does not just observe the world but tries to change it. It also fits SDG-17's emphasis on partnerships as a mechanism for achieving development goals. NEP-2020 uses different language, describing HEIs as 'multidisciplinary research and innovation hubs embedded in regional development contexts,' but the underlying idea is the same.

4. How Rural Management Institutes Can Actually Contribute to CDSD

4.1 Teaching That Gets Students Out of the Classroom

The most straightforward way RMIs can contribute to CDSD is through how they teach. When MBA students spend a semester working with a real village not on a two-day field trip, but in sustained engagement something changes. They learn things no case study can teach them. The community gets something too: fresh eyes, management skills, and people who have a stake in getting the answer right.

Several Indian management institutes have tried variants of 'village adoption' programmes, where student cohorts take on developmental challenges in a specific community over an extended period. Research on these programmes suggests they simultaneously make students better managers, strengthen communities' capacity to solve their own problems, and generate knowledge that feeds back into the classroom (Chatterjee & Nair, 2018). That is a remarkably good return on a semester's work. RMIs that do not offer something like this are missing one of their most obvious institutional advantages.

4.2 Incubation for Rural Entrepreneurs Not the Silicon Valley Version

Urban incubators default to a particular model: tech-heavy, capital-intensive, aimed at startups that can scale fast and exit faster. That model does not translate well to rural settings. A farmer in Ahmednagar district trying to build a small Agri-tech business does not need a coworking space in Pune and a pitch deck. She needs technical knowledge about precision irrigation, a connection to a market she can access, and maybe a small loan. Rural incubation must start from that reality.

RMIs are well-placed to build incubation programmes that fit this context. IRMA's incubation initiatives and platforms like Social Alpha which backs rural and agricultural innovations show what is possible. Government schemes like ASPIRE (A Scheme for Promotion of Innovation, Rural Industries and Entrepreneurship) and Startup India provide funding that rural institutes can tap into if they know how. The institutional infrastructure does not need to be elaborate. What it needs, above all, is to be genuinely useful to the kind of entrepreneurs who live in the surrounding region.

4.3 Research That Communities Can Use

Applied research is another area where RMIs have real potential that mostly goes untapped. Participatory needs assessments. Impact studies of government schemes at the village level. Livelihood surveys. Market analyses for small rural enterprises. Policy briefs on agricultural credit or watershed management. This is not glamorous academic work, but it is genuinely valuable, and it is the kind of work that RMI faculty, precisely because they are embedded in rural settings, are better positioned to do than researchers at urban universities.

The challenge is building research cultures at RMIs that can hold two things at once: rigour so the work is credible and publishable and relevance, so it reaches and helps community stakeholders. That is not impossible, but it requires deliberate investment in faculty development, research partnerships with established institutions, and an institutional willingness to treat community impact as a genuine measure of research quality, not just a checkbox.

4.4 Building Social Capital the Invisible Infrastructure

Not everything RMIs can contribute shows up in research outputs or startup counts. Some of the most valuable work is relational: helping SHGs develop stronger governance practices, training FPO managers in financial management, running digital literacy workshops, facilitating conversations between communities and

government departments that do not naturally talk to each other.

Paul Williams (2002) coined the term 'boundary spanning' for exactly this kind of work the capacity to bridge gaps between different sectors, communities, and knowledge systems. RMI faculty and students are natural boundary spanners. They understand both the academic language of development and the practical vernacular of the communities they live nearby. They can translate in both directions. That translation capacity is rare, and it has real value.

4.5 Connecting Institute Work to the SDG Framework

Mapping RMI contributions to the Sustainable Development Goals is not just a branding exercise. Done seriously, it creates accountability. It forces institutions to ask whether what they are doing actually moves the needle on poverty reduction, food security, quality education, decent work, reduced inequality, or any of the other goals that matter. Several SDGs are directly relevant here SDG-1, SDG-2, SDG-4, SDG-8, SDG-9, SDG-10, and SDG-17 among them.

Institutions that do this honestly that track their community development activities against SDG targets and publish what they find are doing something more than meeting an accreditation requirement. They are holding themselves to a standard that is bigger than their own institutional interests. That kind of accountability, rare in Indian higher education, is exactly what the sector needs more of.

5. Policy Support and What It Looks Like on the Ground

5.1 What NEP-2020 Actually Offers RMIs

NEP-2020 is often described in superlatives the biggest reform in decades, a once-in-a-generation overhaul. Some of the hype is warranted. The policy's push for multidisciplinary education, vocational integration, institutional autonomy, and community engagement creates genuine policy space for RMIs to do things differently. The emphasis on 'technology-enabled learning,' lighter regulatory structures, and research integration from undergraduate level onwards all point in directions that favour community-embedded institutions.

The risk, as with all ambitious policy documents, is that the gap between intent and implementation remains wide. RMIs that wait for the policy to deliver change to them will wait a long time. The ones that will benefit are those that treat NEP-2020 as an enabling framework something that gives them cover to try new things, make the case for resources, and push back against outdated regulatory expectations. The policy creates opportunity; institutions still have to seize it.

5.2 NAAC Accreditation: Useful Lever, Not Just a Compliance Exercise

NAAC's Criterion VII on Institutional Values and Best Practices gives explicit credit to community engagement and environmental sustainability. That is not nothing. Institutions that systematically document their CDSD contributions, rather than scrambling to compile evidence at accreditation time, will find that NAAC accreditation becomes a genuine governance tool rather than a bureaucratic ordeal.

AIMBA's own achievement of 'A' Grade NAAC accreditation is instructive here. It reflects years of consistent investment in quality, community engagement, and institutional governance. The grade is not a trophy it is evidence that a management institute in a semi-rural setting, operating under resource constraints that urban B-schools do not face, can meet and exceed national quality standards when its leadership commits to the work.

5.3 What's Already Working: Cases Worth Learning From

Two institutions in Maharashtra deserve mention here. The College of Agricultural Banking in Pune has built specialised programmes for rural banking professionals that have measurably improved financial inclusion in rural communities. VAMNICOM the Vaikunth Mehta National Institute of Cooperative Management has provided management education and research support to cooperative enterprises for decades, with tangible effects on the sector's capacity and governance. Neither institution is famous outside specialist circles, but both have done the kind of sustained, contextually grounded work that defines genuine community contribution.

For AIMBA, the context is Ahilyanagar district a place with its own specific development challenges and assets. The institute's community outreach, its focus on students from rural backgrounds, and its foundational connection to Amrutvahini Sheti & Shikshan Vikas Sanstha an organisation built from the ground up on the conviction that education is the key to rural transformation give it a heritage and a value system that most urban B-schools would have to manufacture artificially. That is a real asset. The question is what to build on it.

6. Being Honest About the Obstacles and the Openings

6.1 The Challenges Are Real

It would be dishonest to describe the potential of RMIs without accounting for the difficulties. These

are genuine structural problems, not easily solved by vision statements.

- Money is tight. Most RMIs operate on thin margins with limited research funding, ageing infrastructure, and little capacity for the kind of long-term investment that serious community development requires. They cannot simply replicate what IIM Ahmedabad does with a fraction of the budget.
- Getting good faculty to rural campuses is hard. Always has been. The combination of lower salaries limited professional communities, and the personal sacrifices involved in relocating to a small town creates a structural disadvantage that no amount of institutional goodwill fully overcomes.
- The dominant model of management education focused on placement statistics, corporate partnerships, and urban career trajectories is deeply embedded. An RMI that decides to prioritise community development over placement rankings is making a real trade-off, and the institutional culture often resists it.
- Assessment systems do not currently reward community development contributions. Faculty who spends time training SHG members or advising FPOs get no credit in promotion decisions. Students who want to pursue social enterprise have fewer institutional support structures than those pursuing corporate careers. These incentive misalignments are not accidental they reflect deep assumptions about what management education is for.
- Industry connections at rural B-schools are weak. Urban schools can draw on dense networks of alumni and corporate partners. RMIs in smaller towns generally cannot, which limits both student placement and research funding.

6.2 The Openings Are Also Real

None of the above means the situation is hopeless. Several genuine opportunities have opened up in recent years.

- Rural digital infrastructure has improved dramatically. BharatNet has connected thousands of villages. Mobile internet penetration has reached populations that were entirely offline five years ago. This creates real openings for EdTech, rural fintech, and digital service delivery in exactly the communities RMIs are best positioned to serve.
- Government money is available. ASPIRE, Startup India, PMKVY, NABARD's rural development programmes these are all funding streams that RMIs can access if they build the institutional capacity to apply for and manage them. Many do not currently do this well.
- The Companies Act's CSR provisions have created a class of corporate funders looking for credible rural development partners. An RMI with a good track record in community development is a natural partner for a company trying to meet its CSR obligations in a rural district.
- NEP-2020, for all the implementation challenges, does create a policy window. Institutions that position themselves as community development partners and document that role well have a stronger case for recognition and resources than they did ten years ago.
- The FPO movement is growing. Farmer producer organisations are proliferating across India, and they need management support financial management, market access, governance capacity. RMIs that build genuine partnerships with local FPOs are creating relationships that benefit both sides.

7. What Needs to Happen: Conclusions and Recommendations

The argument of this paper is not complicated: rural management institutes are sitting on potential they are not using. They are in the right places, serving the right students, operating in the right institutional tradition. What they often lack is the strategic clarity, the institutional structure, and the policy support to convert that potential into actual community development outcomes.

Changing that requires more than exhortation. It requires practical changes to how these institutions define their missions, organise their curricula, build their partnerships, and advocate for policy recognition. NEP-2020 and the SDG framework together create a more supportive policy environment than has existed before. But policy creates space institutions still have to decide to use it.

Here, specifically, is what needs to happen:

1. Institutionalise Community Development Mandates. This means more than adding community service to the annual report. RMI leadership needs to put community development contributions into faculty performance evaluations, into student assessment criteria, and into the institution's core strategic plan. If it is not measured, it will not be taken seriously.
2. Redesign Curricula Around Community Engagement. Mandatory fieldwork, participatory action research projects, and rural immersion programmes should be core

elements of the MBA curriculum at every RMI not electives that a small minority of students choose.

3. Build Rural Incubation Cells That Actually Fit Rural Contexts. Not replicas of urban startup hubs purpose-built incubation support for Agri-tech, rural fintech, and social enterprise, drawing on ASPIRE, Startup India, and CSR funding.
4. Develop Research Agendas Aligned with Local SDG Priorities. Each RMI is located in a specific district with specific development challenges. Research agendas should reflect that specificity producing knowledge that is useful to the communities around the institution, not just publishable in journals that nobody in those communities will ever read.
5. Build Real Partnerships with Gram Panchayats, FPOs, SHGs, NABARD, and District Administration. Not MoUs that sit in filing cabinets. Working relationships that create mutual benefit and mutual accountability.
6. Advocate With NAAC, AICTE, and UGC for Assessment Criteria That Recognise Community Development. The assessment systems will not change by themselves. RMI associations and individual institutions need to make the case, loudly and persistently, that community development contributions deserve recognition in accreditation and ranking frameworks.

Rural management institutes stand at a genuinely significant moment. The combination of NEP-2020's reform mandate, the SDG framework, growing rural entrepreneurship ecosystems, and expanding digital infrastructure has created conditions that did not exist a decade ago. Institutions that choose to position themselves as community development partners that stop apologising for not being IIM Ahmedabad and start being confident about what they uniquely can offer have the chance to make contributions that far outlast any placement ranking.

The communities around these institutes have been patient. They have watched management graduates leave for cities, taking with them skills developed partly at public expense, leaving behind the development challenges that motivated those institutes' founding in the first place. That is not sustainable economically, socially, or institutionally. The opportunity to do something different, something genuinely rooted in place and purpose, is there. Whether it gets taken seriously is, ultimately, a question of institutional will.

References

1. Agarwal, P. (2009). Indian higher education: Envisioning the future. SAGE Publications.
2. Boyer, E. L. (1990). Scholarship reconsidered: Priorities of the professoriate. Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.
3. Census of India. (2011). Primary census abstract. Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India.
4. Chatterjee, S., & Nair, M. (2018). Community engagement in management education: Lessons from village adoption programmes. Indian Journal of Management Education, 12(2), 45–67.
5. Etzkowitz, H., & Leydesdorff, L. (1995). The Triple Helix University-industry-government relations: A laboratory for knowledge-based economic development. EASST Review, 14(1), 14–19.
6. Fitzgerald, H. E., Bruns, K., Sonka, S. T., Furco, A., & Swanson, L. (2012). The centrality of engagement in higher education. Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement, 16(3), 7–28.
7. Mansuri, G., & Rao, V. (2004). Community-based and -driven development: A critical review. The World Bank Research Observer, 19(1), 1–39. https://doi.org/10.1093/wbro/lkh012
8. Ministry of Education, Government of India. (2020). National Education Policy 2020. https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf
9. Ostrom, E. (1990). Governing the commons: The evolution of institutions for collective action. Cambridge University Press.
10. Platteau, J. P., & Gaspart, F. (2003). The risk of resource misappropriation in community-driven development. World Development, 31(10), 1687–1703. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0305-750X(03)00141-3
11. Sen, A. (1999). Development as freedom. Oxford University Press.
12. Shah, A., & Mehta, B. S. (2012). Rural management education in India: Challenges and opportunities. Journal of Rural Development, 31(4), 421–436.
13. UNDP. (2018). Human development report 2018: Statistical update. United Nations Development Programme. https://hdr.undp.org
14. Van de Ven, A. H. (2007). Engaged scholarship: A guide for organizational and social research. Oxford University Press.
15. Williams, P. (2002). The competent boundary spanner. Public Administration, 80(1), 103–124. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9299.00296

16. World Bank. (2003). Community-driven development: Understanding the concept. World Bank CDD Resource Center. https://www.worldbank.org

17. World Bank. (2023). Rural population (% of total population) India. World Bank Open Data. https://data.worldbank.org