



DECENTRALISED GOVERNANCE AND RURAL TRANSFORMATION: EVALUATING THE ROLE OF VILLAGE COUNCILS AND VILLAGE DEVELOPMENT BOARD IN NAGALAND

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Abstract:

Several indigenous groups, each with political systems and cultural customs, define the northeastern Indian state of Nagaland. As they lead local government and development, village councils play a critical role in upholding these customs. Village councils oversee social welfare, development projects, resource distribution, and dispute resolution. They serve as the cornerstone of grassroots governance. This article discusses village councils' critical role in rural development, emphasising their roles in government program management, customary law enforcement, and decision-making. The difficulties they encounter are also covered, such as the demands of modernisation, outside factors, and striking a balance between tradition and advancement. The rural communities of Nagaland have significantly benefited from the socioeconomic progress and cultural preservation of village councils, which are resilient and adaptable in the face of adversity.

Keywords: Local Governance, Village Council, Village Development Board, Rural Development, Community Development

1. INTRODUCTION

India's northeastern state of Nagaland is home to various indigenous groups with distinct cultural traditions, customs, and political structures. Scholars, policymakers, and development professionals have long focused on rural development. Nagaland offers a challenging environment for sustainable development projects because of its distinctive combination of many tribal cultures, rough terrain, and historical difficulties. Village councils' function becomes apparent in this setting as a vital component of local government and community development. (Deka, 2018; Chasie & Hazarika, 2009). A decentralised system of government has historically defined Nagaland, with village councils having a significant influence on resource management and decision-making within their separate communities. (Zhimomi, 2015). However, different areas and communities have seen various levels of success from these village councils in achieving rural development goals. (Longkumer, 2018). This study aims to investigate and evaluate village councils' contribution to Nagaland's rural development. It specifically aims to comprehend how these community-based organisations support infrastructure growth, socioeconomic advancement, and community empowerment in rural areas. This research seeks to identify the processes by which village councils assist and promote

rural development initiatives by exploring the dynamics of village-level governance institutions and their connections with more general development initiatives. In the past, these councils have been essential in overseeing neighbourhood affairs and settling conflicts. (Ao, 2014). In recent years, the emphasis on rural development has intensified, recognising the need for sustainable growth to improve the quality of life in these areas (Kikon, 2017). However, integrating traditional governance with modern development strategies presents opportunities and challenges (Nuh, 2019).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The research on Nagaland's rural development and local government highlights the interaction between traditional institutions and contemporary governance frameworks. Zhimomi (2015) and Ao (2014) offer fundamental perspectives on Naga traditional government, highlighting its function in resolving disputes and promoting communal well-being. Hanjabam (2019) and Chasie & Hazarika (2009) investigate how political and historical elements, such as state intervention and insurgency, have influenced modern governance systems. Numerous academics examine village councils' structural and operational features, pointing out their dual roles in development and administration (Choudhury, 2020; Longkumer, 2018). In their discussions of rural development difficulties, Deka (2018) and Kikon (2017) emphasise the necessity of long-term, locally led projects. Nuh (2019) and Nag (2024) examine the merger of traditional and modern government, pointing out both the similarities and differences. Recent studies by Yimchunger (2023) and Khatso (2023) provide examples of effective Village Councils, whereas Rao (2021) and Zeliang (2022) point out enduring issues such as capacity shortages and resource limitations. To improve the effectiveness of governance, Sharma (2022) and Singh (2021) call for closer collaborations between the government, non-governmental organisations, and local institutions. The literature emphasises the importance of Village Councils in Nagaland's rural development and advocates for laws that balance tradition and modernity while removing structural obstacles to efficient government.

3. METHODOLOGY

The primary research inquiry driving this investigation is: What role do village councils play in Nagaland's rural development? In the context of Nagaland's rural development, we hope to clarify the many roles, difficulties, and possibilities related to village councils through this case study. Through analysing the viewpoints, experiences, and methods of village council members, public servants, and community members, this research seeks to produce knowledge that can guide community-led projects and policy interventions to enhance rural development results in Nagaland and other states with comparable problems. This study aims to investigate the relationship between village councils and rural development in Nagaland, ultimately offering insightful analysis and suggestions for promoting grassroots empowerment and sustainable development.

4. OBJECTIVES

1. To understand the village council's conventional governing structure, history, background, and function.
2. To understand the village council and rural development initiatives.

5. HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND TRADITIONAL GOVERNANCE

Village councils have a long history in Nagaland and are essential to the region's population's social, political, and economic structure. These councils, which represent the standards and values of the Naga tribes, have formed an essential part of the traditional governance structure. In the past, these councils managed common resources like land, water, and forest areas, all essential to the Naga people's agrarian way of life and mediating conflicts among community members. The councils ensured that these resources were distributed relatively and frequently by reaching a compromise that strengthened the sense of community and avoided confrontations. Additionally, they maintained and upheld the customs rules passed down through the years, protecting the Naga people's distinctive cultural history and customs. These customary laws were frequently entwined with spiritual beliefs and rituals, and they addressed a wide range of topics, such as inheritance, marriage, and the use of natural resources. As guardians of these traditions, the councils ensured that the rituals and practices constituting Naga identity were upheld and respected. They significantly impacted moral behaviour, social order preservation, community cohesion, and government, among other things. Elders and delegates from different clans and families would discuss crucial issues in the councils, which acted as a platform for group decision-making and ensured that all opinions were heard. In a culture made up of various tribes and clans, it was essential to foster a strong sense of community cohesion and belonging through the use of an inclusive strategy. These councils have remained important even with the advent of contemporary legal and administrative frameworks. They have continued to act as a link between conventional wisdom and current government, even in the face of modern obstacles like the demand for formal education, economic growth, and infrastructural upgrades. The village councils have frequently collaborated with government agencies to provide a tailored and culturally aware style of governance that is well-liked by the Nagaland populace. Their continued significance is evidence of the Naga culture's tenacity and the traditional institutions' flexibility in the face of change.

6. FUNCTIONING OF VILLAGE COUNCIL

Under the Nagaland Village and Area Council Act 1978, the chairman is a key position in the village council. It is usually an adult well-respected for his or her vast experience, wisdom, and leadership abilities. The choice of the chairman is frequently determined by long-standing traditions, group agreement, or official village selection, demonstrating a strong belief in their capacity for leadership. The chairman manages all aspects of council operations, guarantees the observance of customary laws, and arbitrates conflicts between community members. They also act as the village's spokesperson when interacting with outside parties, such as governmental and non-governmental groups, and they are crucial in establishing policies, resolving disputes, and overseeing different development initiatives. Council members are chosen from various families, clans, or community organisations, guaranteeing a wide range of opinions and a fair decision-making process. Attending council meetings, participating in conversations, and helping with decision-making are some of their responsibilities. Depending on their abilities or interests, each member may be assigned specialised tasks, such as project management, community welfare program supervision, or local village problems. They play a vital role in sustaining positive community relations by ensuring that decisions are appropriately conveyed and carried out. The village council oversees all aspects of local government, including enacting laws,

upholding the peace, and resolving conflicts within the community. Villagers have a forum to express their thoughts and participate in decision-making through regular meetings that plan new initiatives, evaluate the status of present projects, and address emerging issues. These events are critical to promoting accountability, openness, and community involvement. Besides its managerial duties, the council is strongly dedicated to safeguarding and advancing cultural heritage. This entails planning customary festivals, celebrations, and ceremonies that honour the beliefs and practices of the local community. The council enhances the village's social cohesiveness and cultural identity by proactively promoting the passing of traditional knowledge and customs to the next generation. This commitment to cultural preservation ensures that the community's customs and history are upheld and valued, which adds to the general cohesion and continuity of village life.

7. VILLAGE COUNCIL AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES

The Village councils play an essential role in Nagaland's overall rural development, encompassing infrastructure, education, healthcare, economic expansion, and agriculture. These councils play a key role in guaranteeing that development is all-encompassing and sustainable, impacting every facet of rural existence. Building and maintaining infrastructure, which is the foundation of rural development, is one of the most essential duties of village councils. Significant is the building and maintenance of the roads that connect villages to towns, marketplaces, and other economic hubs. These roads facilitate local trade, the flow of people and goods, and the accessibility of vital services like markets, healthcare, and education for rural communities. Enhancing regional economic growth by integrating rural communities into more significant economic systems also requires improved transportation infrastructure. The village councils handle road safety, weather resilience, and maintenance concerns to guarantee that these transportation networks are dependable, safe, and long-lasting. Promoting connectivity improves rural residents' quality of life and sets the stage for more extensive economic development. Village councils play a crucial role in developing and improving the education infrastructure. To create classrooms and libraries essential for generating conducive learning environments, they supervise the building of new schools and the rehabilitation of existing ones. The councils ensure these schools have all the tools, supplies, and technology needed to deliver high-quality instruction. These initiatives frequently involve the community, with locals providing labour, supplies, or other resources for building and remodelling projects. Further, village councils often work with government agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to obtain the financial backing, expert assistance, and extra resources required for educational projects. Higher literacy rates, better academic results, and greater access to school are all results of these efforts, especially in impoverished and distant communities. Village councils are investing in their communities' future by placing a high priority on education. This will ensure that the next generation is better educated and prepared to contribute to the socioeconomic growth of the area. Village councils are also significantly essential in healthcare, enhancing access and quality in rural and isolated locations where healthcare resources are frequently scarce. They set up medical facilities like clinics and health centres, offering essential medical services, including immunisations, care for expectant and young patients, and general consultations. These establishments frequently serve as the initial point of contact for rural residents needing medical care. The councils ensure that these health centres have enough supplies

of essential medications and equipment and are manned by trained medical professionals. Village councils arrange medical camps and health outreach initiatives to provide healthcare services to underprivileged and isolated communities, treating critical medical needs and encouraging preventative care. These programs considerably lessen the need for rural populations to travel great distances to receive healthcare services, improving health outcomes and raising community living standards in general.

The Village councils also actively encourage the creation and extension of small and medium-sized firms (SMEs) by offering local entrepreneurs financial support, business training, and development support. This helps to grow and diversify the local economy. Village councils provide prospects for jobs and revenue development by encouraging entrepreneurship. Additionally, by setting up fairs, establishing marketing routes, and getting local manufacturers in touch with potential customers, they assist them in reaching larger markets. Besides promoting regional goods, these initiatives help raise rural enterprises' profile and level of competition in local, state, and federal marketplaces. Additionally, village councils are essential in setting up programs for vocational training that upskill the local workers, increase their employability, and facilitate more effective participation in the local economy. This enhances the community's overall sustainability and economic resilience. Village councils give agriculture, the primary source of income for many people in rural Nagaland, much attention. They are crucial in advancing contemporary farming methods that boost output and sustainability. Village councils encourage the construction of irrigation infrastructure necessary to increase crop yields and make high-quality seeds, fertilisers, and other agricultural inputs more easily accessible. They support the establishment of farmer cooperatives and associations, which allow farmers to pool resources, exchange information, and bargain for higher crop prices. In addition to increasing output, this team approach gives farmers more financial power. The village councils support environmentally friendly and sustainable farming methods like crop diversification, organic farming, and soil conservation, all essential to preserving agriculture's long-term profitability. Village councils contribute to the overall economic stability of rural regions, improve agricultural resistance to climate change, and guarantee food security by supporting these activities. Village councils in Nagaland are the cornerstone of rural development, steering and carrying out programs that tackle short-term and long-term objectives. The basis of a self-sufficient and sustainable rural community where economic possibilities, healthcare, education, and agriculture are all intertwined and supportive of one another is laid by their efforts. Village councils are creating the foundation for a bright and sustainable future by taking a comprehensive strategy that raises the living standard for present generations and sets the stage for future success.

8. CASE STUDY

In 2024, the researcher visited Auching Village in Nagaland, Longleng District, part of the Shakshi Administrative Block. An in-depth grasp of the village's governance, development initiatives, and difficulties was gained from this study. Like many Naga communities, the village is run by the local governing body, the Village Council. Important local officials, such as the village council chairman, the village development board (VDB) secretary, and committee members, were interviewed in-depth during the visit. Furthermore, a more comprehensive understanding of the area's issues and development dynamics was obtained through conversations with the inhabitants of neighbouring

communities. With a population of about a thousand, Auching Village is located in a remote section of Nagaland and has been dealing with serious problems, especially in healthcare and education. The village's development was hampered by its restricted access to basic amenities. The Village Council has recently launched several renovation projects to address these issues. The main subject of this case study is the Village Council's crucial role in promoting the prosperous construction of healthcare and educational facilities in Auching Village in partnership with the local government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and the community.

Addressing the Healthcare Crisis

The inaccessibility of healthcare was one of Auching Village's most significant problems. Before the most recent upgrades, residents had to drive more than 40 kilometres to the closest medical institution. Delays in getting prompt medical assistance resulted from this distance, which was particularly problematic in situations involving medical emergencies, prenatal care, and routine health check-ups. Acknowledging this need, the Village Council led a campaign to build a health centre in the village. An NGO focusing on rural health and the local government worked together on this initiative. They hired medical staff to manage the health centre, built a new structure, and furnished it with the necessary medical equipment. The project was financed by local community donations, government grants, and NGO financial assistance. Since opening in 2022, the health centre has offered locals essential medical services. Its basic healthcare services, immunisation programs, maternity and child health care, and general medical consultations considerably lessen the need for inhabitants to travel great distances. In addition to improving general health outcomes, the village's access to these services has helped treat illnesses promptly, guaranteeing everyone has access to necessary care. The Village Council and its partners understood the importance of raising the villagers' health knowledge to establish the health centre. Lack of health education can frequently result in avoidable health problems in rural areas. With the NGO's help, the health centre started several health awareness initiatives to address this. With an emphasis on maternal health, healthy eating, disease prevention, and hygiene, these initiatives sought to raise community awareness of the value of preventive healthcare. Through workshops, neighbourhood gatherings, and home visits, the programs increased accessibility to healthcare information. As a result, the village's health practices significantly improved, decreasing avoidable illnesses and improving public health outcomes overall.

Improving Educational Infrastructure and Opportunities

The educational system in Auching Village likewise needed much work. The elementary school's decaying infrastructure and poor physical state made it difficult to learn and, as a result, lowered the standard of instruction. The Village Council and student bodies took quick action to remedy the situation after realising the potential long-term effects of inadequate educational facilities on the community's future. The council started a project to improve the school's infrastructure with funding from various educational initiatives, government education subsidies, and local donations. Building additional classrooms, establishing a working library, and supplying instructional materials and tools were all part of the 2023 restoration project. Due to the more favourable learning environment, these enhancements produced increased student attendance, academic performance, and overall educational outcomes. In addition to improving the standard of instruction, the new facilities inspired teachers and students, creating a more

active and effective learning environment. The Village Council understood the necessity of offering alternative educational opportunities for youth who could not continue formal education and improving the school's physical facilities. The council established skill development programs, collaborating with vocational training institutions to solve this issue. These courses taught practical skills like tailoring, carpentry, and computer literacy. The recently rebuilt school served as the venue for the classes, and the programs gave many young people employable skills that allowed them to look for work or launch their enterprises. Since then, the skill development program has raised the standard of living for many families in the village and helped the local economy thrive by generating new job opportunities.

The Role of Community Participation and Partnerships

The community's collaboration and active participation have been crucial to the success of Auching Village's healthcare and education programs. During the project's planning, decision-making, and execution phases, the village's citizens were instrumental. Their participation ensured the development initiatives closely matched the community's unique needs and goals. The villagers' opinions were gathered through frequent meetings and consultations, which helped to modify the initiatives to address the most urgent issues. Practical cooperation with external stakeholders was essential to the program's success, in addition to the active participation of the community. While government organisations provided much-needed financing and policy support to ensure the programs' viability, NGOs offered resources, training, and technical knowledge. A strong foundation for sustainable development projects in the village was produced by combining local expertise, community involvement, and outside partnerships.

A Model for Rural Development

Auching Village has undergone a tremendous transition due to advancements in healthcare and education. While the refurbishment of the school has improved educational outcomes for the children of the community, opening a health centre has dramatically increased access to medical treatments. In addition to meeting the community's immediate needs, these initiatives have aided in long-term growth by giving the next generation the information and skills they need to better their chances in the future. Because of these initiatives, citizens' general quality of life has improved. Auching Village is now an exemplary instance of community-driven development, serving as a model for other rural villages throughout Nagaland and beyond. The village's success is a reminder of the significance of vigorous community involvement, capable Village Council leadership, and cooperative relationships with governmental organisations, non-governmental organisations, and other stakeholders. The Auching Village case demonstrates how focused initiatives in vital areas like healthcare and education can result in notable and long-lasting improvements in rural communities. For other towns aiming for sustainable development, it serves as an inspiration and a monument to the strength of group effort.

9. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Healthcare: From Crisis to Accessibility: An important turning point was the construction of a health centre in 2022, which removed the need for locals to travel more than 40 kilometres for medical attention. In order to ensure prompt

medical interventions, the hospital currently offers necessary services such as immunisation programs, maternity and child healthcare, and general consultations. In addition, health awareness campaigns that emphasise diet, hygiene, and sickness prevention have promoted healthier lifestyle choices and decreased avoidable illnesses. Better community health outcomes and easier access to healthcare, especially for vulnerable populations like children and pregnant women, are clear indicators of the impact. This change emphasises how crucial it is to combine infrastructure with health education. Preventive healthcare is as important in rural areas as curative services, as demonstrated by the awareness programs that ensure long-term behavioural change. At the same time, the health centre attended to urgent medical needs.

Education: Building a Foundation for the Future: Higher attendance and improved academic achievement resulted from the 2023 school refurbishment, which included new classrooms, a working library, and upgraded learning resources. In addition to formal schooling, implementing skill development programs (such as computer literacy, carpentry, and tailoring) has given young people alternate sources of income, lowered unemployment, and promoted regional economic growth. These advancements emphasise the dual function of education: teaching information while also giving young people employable skills. In addition to improving student morale, transforming the village's deteriorating infrastructure into a thriving learning centre has improved its chances for the future by producing a trained labour force.

The Power of Community and Partnerships: Three crucial elements contribute to these efforts' success:

1. *Community Involvement:* By actively participating in planning and decision-making, villagers ensured that initiatives met their requirements.
2. *Strong Local Leadership:* The Village Council was crucial in organising activities and bringing resources to bear.
3. *Strategic Partnerships:* The foundation for sustainability was supplied by cooperation with NGOs (technical know-how, training) and the government (financing, policy assistance). Other rural communities can use this multi-stakeholder approach as a model, demonstrating that outside assistance enhances rather than replaces local efforts.

Sustainable rural development

1. *Local Ownership Guarantees Longevity:* Community-based projects are more likely to be successful and lasting.
2. *There are ripple effects from holistic interventions.* When education, skill development, and healthcare combine, socioeconomic advancement is more comprehensive.
3. *Partnerships Are Essential:* Local initiatives should be complemented by support from government and non-governmental organisations, not taken over.

10. CONCLUSION

In Nagaland, village councils are essential to the rural development of the area since they are the central pillar of local government and community development. These councils play a critical role in enforcing customary rules, administering and supervising local government, settling conflicts, and efficiently managing communal resources.

They are essential in developing projects suited to particular community requirements, such as road construction and health initiatives like medical camps. Furthermore, mobilising local resources and knowledge promotes social and economic advancement by fostering community engagement and collaboration. However, they confront many difficulties, such as scarce material and financial resources, administrative and political roadblocks, and balancing customs and contemporary progress needs. Logistical and technical problems, such as insufficient infrastructure for transportation and communication, further complicate their efficacy. Notwithstanding these obstacles, the councils' committed work in community development, project execution, and governance is priceless. Their efforts significantly improve rural Nagaland's quality of life, encourage resilient growth, and support sustainable development, all of which highlight their crucial role in the advancement and welfare of the area.

11. RECOMMENDATION

- Giving village council members comprehensive and continuous training is essential to improve their management and governance skills. Developing financial planning, project management, dispute resolution, and legal framework comprehension skills can enable council members to carry out their duties more successfully. Councils can better meet the community's needs and carry out development projects by providing members with current information and valuable skills. Council members are better equipped to handle challenging governance issues because of this ongoing commitment to training.
- Promoting increased community involvement is a crucial component in enhancing village council efficacy. Decision-making processes become more inclusive and representative when women, young people, and underrepresented groups are actively encouraged to participate. By establishing public forums, consultations, and cooperative planning sessions, councils can ensure that development projects align with the populace's requirements and objectives. This strategy increases the council's credibility and produces more significant and pertinent development results.
- Village councils' capacity for management and planning can be further improved by utilising contemporary technology. Council efficiency and decision-making can be significantly enhanced by digital tools such as Geographic Information Systems (GIS), online communication platforms, and software for resource management and project execution. Technology makes better information access, streamlined administrative procedures, and increased accountability and openness possible. Village councils may better manage their resources, carry out projects more successfully, and use data-driven techniques to address community challenges by investing in digital infrastructure and training council members.
- Ensuring the proper use of finances within village councils requires implementing robust financial management systems. Monitoring spending and avoiding poor management can be achieved by implementing transparent accounting, budgeting, and auditing procedures. Frequent financial reporting and audits increase accountability and transparency, building community confidence in council operations. These procedures increase the council's legitimacy and guarantee that funds are allocated wisely for the good of the community.

- Establishing alliances with outside groups like non-governmental organisations, development agencies, and commercial partners can provide village councils access to more resources and knowledge. Financial resources, technical support, and creative answers to regional development problems may become available through these partnerships. By incorporating sustainable methods into their development initiatives, councils can also help their communities in the long run. Putting conservation efforts, eco-friendly methods, and local lifestyles in line with sustainable development goals guarantees that projects are both ecologically and socially responsible. Roads, schools, and medical facilities are just a few examples of the vital infrastructure that must be maintained and invested in for citizens to receive better services and live better overall.

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