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Challenges and Opportunities for Sustainable Rural Development in India: Lessons from the *Unnat Bharat Abhiyan* (Improved India Mission) Programme

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ABSTRACT

The Unnat Bharat Abhiyan (UBA) is an initiative by the Government of India that fosters collaborations between Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) and rural communities to promote holistic rural development. The present study was conducted to examine the experiences, role, functions and perspectives of UBA Coordinators in transforming rural communities through UBA projects. Insights were drawn from a focus group discussion with 50 UBA coordinators from 50 HEIs from 15 districts of Tamil Nadu, a constituent state of India. The findings reveal that the UBA coordinators had made significant efforts to foster trust in community leadership, identify the needs of the community, and establish connections with partner organizations to carry out UBA projects. The findings of the study can be used to enhance UBA strategies, empowering rural communities across India with tailored, technology-driven solutions.

Keywords: Collaborative approach; Higher Education Institution; Holistic development; Rural development; Sustainable solutions.

INTRODUCTION

The Unnat Bharat Abhiyan (Improved India Mission), led by the Ministry of Human Resources and Development, is a notable effort in integrating the SDGs at the local level. Introduced in November 2014 (Bandi and Naik, 2021), the UBA initiative aims to bridge the gap between higher learning institutions and rural areas to address developmental issues through suitable technological innovations. Understanding the operational mechanisms and obstacles faced by the UBA Programme is crucial for making necessary policy adjustments to ensure effective implementation and positive outcomes.

UBA focuses on improving living standards in rural India through sustainable development (Ch et al., 2021). UBA coordinators are essential for executing this initiative in higher education institutions. Their main tasks include establishing connections (Kandakatla et al., 2022; Penta et al., 2024) with specific rural areas, participating in the planning process, and advocating for necessary measures to expedite rural development efforts. UBA coordinators collaborate with local communities and stakeholders to identify development challenges and develop appropriate solutions.

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India's economic development is heavily dependent on rural development, aiming to bring about social transformation and economic improvement in rural areas. The primary goal of rural development is to enhance the quality of life for those residing in rural regions. Various projects and initiatives have been implemented by the Government of India to improve the quality of life for individuals in rural areas through essential services, infrastructure, and job prospects. The programme emphasizes fieldwork and stakeholder engagement, aiming to shape higher education for societal benefits. Higher educational institutions in the UBA programme are tasked with developing a strategic agenda within their campuses to address national needs, particularly in rural areas.

In India, 2,600 higher educational institutions (HEIs) are involved in the initiative, each adopting approximately five villages, resulting in about 13,000 villages engaged in extension activities. These HEIs are categorized into Technical and Non-Technical based on the courses they offer. Tamil Nadu ranks second, following Maharashtra, with 453 institutions and nearly 2,250 villages participating in the UBA project within the state. UBA coordinators, designated by the HEIs associated with UBA, are responsible for facilitating connections between rural communities and the institutions. Despite being initiated in 2014, there is a significant lack of empirical and evaluative studies regarding its impact. Keeping this in view, the authors conducted a study to assess the effectiveness of UBA projects conducted by UBA coordinators within higher education institutions. The focus was on the programme's efficiency, successful outcomes, the challenges faced by the coordinators, and recommendations for improving the programme, particularly from their viewpoint.

Theoretical Framework

Sustainability is an ongoing economic and social framework that is feasible on a worldwide scale. It is not just a superficial claim to give precedence to social, economic, and environmental policies without acknowledging their interconnectedness over time and space; instead, it aims to establish a balanced relationship among these aspects. The sustainability model is based on four pillars: economic, environmental, social, and institutional dimensions, which clearly highlight the interconnectedness among various systems and organizations (Diaz-Iglesias et al., 2021). The examination of system theory in sociology focuses on understanding the complex interactions and interdependencies in social systems. This framework analyzes how various components within a system, such as individuals, institutions, and social structures, interact and influence each other, providing valuable insights into the functioning and changes of social systems over time. The UBA initiative by the Government of India aims to revolutionize higher educational institutions by involving them in social responsibilities and addressing social issues using technology. Therefore, the application of social system theory is highly relevant as it focuses on the operations and dynamics of various social systems such as government, higher educational institutions, Panchayat Raj institutions, and village communities, emphasizing the importance of strengthening relationships and interconnectedness among these systems.

Objectives of the Study

- To describe the challenges and experiences of UBA Coordinators in promoting initiatives for rural communities.
- To analyse the perspectives of UBA Coordinators regarding the engagement of village communities in development activities.

- To outline the function of UBA Coordinators in transforming rural participation and raising awareness.
- To identify the measures implemented by UBA Coordinators to improve living conditions in rural areas.

METHODOLOGY

The study utilized a descriptive research design to outline the issues and difficulties faced by UBA coordinators, as well as the strategies and techniques they employed for implementation and impact evaluation. Qualitative methods, specifically Focus Group Discussions, were employed to examine the perceptions, experiences, and roles of UBA Coordinators in overseeing the UBA initiative in their institutions and project areas. UBA is operational in Tamil Nadu, with 548 higher education institutions actively involved and monitored by regional coordinating institutions such as IIT-Madras, Gandhi Gram Rural Institute, and Tamil Nadu Agricultural University. The respondents were identified according to the information available in the UBA portal. A total of 50 respondents representing 50 Higher Educational Institutions from 15 districts in Tamil Nadu such as Chenglepet, Chennai, Villupuram, Kancheepuram, Thiruvallur, Vellore, Thirupattur, Krishnagiri, Salem, Perambalur, Coimbatore, Namakkal, Mayiladudurai, Tiruchirappalli and Cuddalore were selected randomly representing both technical and non-technical institutions with the help of Regional Coordinating Institutions(RCI). A total of three Focus Group Discussions were conducted, involving 50 UBA coordinators to collect valuable insights. The first discussion involved 18 UBA coordinators, the second included 12 participants, and the third was attended by 20 coordinators, each lasting approximately one hour and thirty minutes.

Out of a total of 50 respondents, 23 (16 Male & 7 female) from technical institutions and 27 (16

Male & 11 Female) from non-technical institutions participated in the FGDs. The outcomes of the focus group discussion were carefully analyzed and organized based on themes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

From Challenges to Solutions: The UBA Coordinators' Journey in Enhancing Rural Community Programmes

The FDG revealed that UBA coordinators found availing permission from village authorities for executing the UBA project was a major constraint since there is lack of awareness of UBA programmes among the village president and other stakeholders which led to a lack of interest and participation in the programme. Therefore, they used different strategies to create awareness among them on the UBA Programme. Despite these efforts, the coordinators encountered challenges with their own capacities and felt uncertain, particularly when facilitating Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). This uncertainty stemmed from their recognition of the delicate balance required to facilitate open dialogue while ensuring that all voices, especially those of marginalized groups, were heard and valued. Besides understanding the cultural context and determining community felt needs were felt as a major challenge by the UBA coordinators. Further, they also stated that transportation, limited fund and academic responsibilities hamper their efforts in executing the programme. These findings are supported by Waylen et al. (2010).

Navigating Complex Social Dynamics: Insights from UBA Coordinators on Engaging Village Communities

It was observed that the UBA coordinators have employed a systematic approach to analyze the challenges encountered by the village community, utilizing various methods such as surveys, interviews, focus group discussions, and

Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) techniques. Furthermore, the coordinators collaborated with department coordinators, experts in various fields, local authorities, and other stakeholders to devise sustainable solutions tailored to the specific needs of the village. This finding corroborates with Kandakatla et al., (2022), Penta et al., (2024) and Ch et al., (2021). It is noteworthy to highlight that the UBA programme coordinators have played a pivotal role in implementing various government initiatives and educational programmes in their community, serving as a bridge between the government and the local populace. Their proactive involvement has resulted in significant accomplishments, such as the establishment of self-help groups that empower women, the provision of gas stoves for school meals which significantly improved nutritional standards, and awareness campaigns on literacy, plastic pollution, and sustainable development that have sparked community dialogue and action. These initiatives have led to the donation of solar lamps, stoves, tree planting efforts that promote environmental sustainability, and specialized subject instruction for children, which collectively contribute to the holistic development of the community. These findings are supported by the works of Raut & Joshi, (2023) . Also, Singh (2018) underscored the importance of sustainable rural development in alleviating poverty and advancing community progress, implying that the success of the UBA programme hinges not only on the support of community leaders but also on the capabilities of the project coordinators in establishing clear project objectives and managing the project effectively. The UBA coordinators' ability to analyze the community's needs, formulate effective strategies, and communicate the project's benefits plays a pivotal role in nurturing community engagement, ensuring that the initiatives resonate with the villagers' realities and aspirations.

From Surveys to Solutions: How UBA Coordinators are Transforming Rural Engagement and Awareness

UBA coordinators conducted a detailed household survey in five adopted villages and shared their findings through various platforms, including the UBA portal. Their approach prioritized transparency and engagement, utilizing oral communication, face-to-face meetings, and personal interactions with Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and Gram Sabha meetings, which allowed them to build trust and rapport within the communities. Additionally, they leveraged college websites and Google Forms to gather reports and enhance visibility, ensuring that the data collected was not only accurate but also easily accessible to stakeholders interested in understanding the local dynamics.

To further amplify their outreach, the coordinators organized comprehensive awareness programmes that spanned a variety of critical topics, including health education, counselling, nutrition awareness, and discussions on prevalent diseases. This finding corroborates with the study conducted by Winham et al. (2016) and Yao (2021). These programmes were not merely one-off events; they comprised a series of awareness camps and student mobilization initiatives designed to actively encourage community involvement and foster collaboration among local residents. The coordinators recognized that community engagement was a key to the success of their initiatives, and thus they encouraged participation from all age groups, ensuring that information was disseminated widely and inclusively.

Moreover, communication among coordinating institutes was maintained through regular meetings, email updates, and collaborative platforms such as WhatsApp Groups, Group Emails, video conferences, webinars, and SMS.

This multi-faceted communication strategy ensured that all parties remained informed and engaged, fostering a sense of unity and purpose among the coordinators. This finding corroborates with the works of Dašić (2024) who posited that proficient management of communication, especially via digital platforms and social networks, plays a significant role in fostering sustainable social and economic development in rural areas. Collaborative projects also engaged a wide array of experts from different organizations, who contributed their insights and best practices, leading to the creation of progress reports that meticulously detailed project activities. These reports were then submitted to the UBA portal and relevant institutions, ensuring that the work being done was transparent and accountable. Additionally, the coordinators sought collaboration with Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) for funding and the dissemination of best practices. This strategic partnership aimed to promote mutual learning and continuous improvement in project delivery and outcomes, ultimately benefiting the communities served by the UBA programme.

It was found that they, primarily had online interactions as preferred mode of communication with coordinating agencies, supplemented by occasional in-person meetings to foster personal connections and deeper discussions.

Measuring Success: How UBA Coordinators Utilize Data-Driven Approaches to Transform Rural Lives

UBA coordinators aim to improve rural communities by developing skills, enhancing employability, and improving quality of life. They monitor and evaluate projects using clear objectives, tracking progress, and assessing impact through a systematic approach that ensures

accountability and transparency. Measurable parameters for success are established by them, incorporating criteria such as effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, sustainability, and impact, which allow the coordinators to gauge the overall success of the initiatives. By utilizing both survey-based methods and data-driven analysis, UBA coordinators can track progress meticulously and make informed decisions that directly influence the direction of their projects. This finding is consistent with the study results of Omidipour et al, (2019), who viewed that Success of projects is best measured by the degree of stakeholder participation, the quality and usability of GIS supporting systems, and the ability to monitor and validate progress. These parameters ensure that efforts are effective, inclusive, and sustainable. They delve into the results of various initiatives, including groundbreaking programmes like the solar light initiative, which aims to provide renewable energy solutions to remote areas, and the Jal Shakti programme, which focuses on water conservation and management in drought-prone regions. In addition to implementing these projects, UBA coordinators recognize the importance of community engagement and education. They organize awareness programmes (Mahila. 2018) designed to train teachers in community outreach activities, empowering them to disseminate knowledge and foster a culture of participation among community members. By equipping educators with the necessary skills and resources, the coordinators ensure that the benefits of their initiatives are sustained and expanded over time.

The UBA coordinators implement monitoring and evaluation by establishing their own parameters tailored to the specific context of each project; however, they also benefit from the support of coordinating agencies that possess the capacity to create a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation framework. This

framework can be utilized effectively by UBA coordinators, providing them with the tools needed to adapt their strategies to the evolving needs of the communities they serve. Ultimately, the collaboration between UBA coordinators and coordinating agencies fosters a synergistic approach that not only enhances the efficacy of their projects but also strengthens the resilience and self-sufficiency of rural communities, paving the way for sustainable development and long-term success. These results are consistent with the findings of Ch et al. (2021).

Implications of the Study

The study's outcomes suggest several ways to enhance the implementation of UBA.

- Since UBA coordinators face challenges in enlisting community leaders' support, understanding the cultural context and determining sustainable participation of the community, the Regional Coordinating Institutions must provide extensive training in community organization, community power relations, resource mobilization, financial management, programme and project administration, impact assessment, and partnership building to effectively tackle issues related to local resource mobilization and garner support from community leaders. Professional Social Workers with expertise in community development should facilitate these programmes, as they will enhance the coordinators' skills and knowledge, thereby promoting community involvement and the execution of sustainable practices effectively.
- Many expressed that limited funding for UBA projects hinders both innovative and long-term initiatives. As a result, they believe the government should enhance financial support for UBA coordinators by customizing assistance to fit the specific needs, collaborative elements, and duration of each project rather than following standard funding protocols. The UBA coordinators also mentioned that their participation in UBA activities, alongside their regular academic responsibilities, considerably adds to their workload. Therefore, higher education institutions should think about reducing the teaching loads of faculty members involved in UBA activities. Additionally, they pointed out that the government funding designated for UBA projects is inadequate and should be increased, or at the very least, educational institutions should allocate extra internal funds to support UBA efforts.
- It has been noted that online communication is primarily utilized for interactions with coordinating agencies. Consequently, it is recommended that the RCIs organize occasional face-to-face meetings to enhance engagement, share experiences, and strengthen the bond between coordinators and RCIs, ultimately contributing to the successful execution of the UBA programme.
- Also, it was observed that UBA coordinators have developed their own methods for monitoring and evaluating the project's success. Therefore, it is essential to establish a thorough monitoring and evaluation framework to measure the impact of the UBA project. The RCIs should support them by providing a detailed framework that UBA coordinators can effectively use, which will facilitate sustainable development and long-term success.
- The UBA coordinators indicated that recognition for their achievements is essential for their motivation and for inspiring others, which in turn enhances their contributions to the initiative. By sharing the success stories of UBA coordinators

from across the state and nation through relevant Regional Coordinating Institutions, a culture of collective learning is cultivated that aids in the effective execution of the UBA programme.

Furthermore, to assess the UBA programme's effectiveness, Regional Coordinating Institutions should establish feedback systems to gather opinions from beneficiaries and stakeholders, facilitating continuous improvement.

The results of the study could contribute significantly to the governance of the UBA scheme/programme and its successful execution. The recommendations provided will assist in the formulation of training materials aimed at improving the competencies of UBA coordinators and fostering greater engagement from the village community to promote sustainable rural development. There exists an opportunity for further study to assess the impact of the UBA project as implemented by the higher education institutions on the adopted village communities from a community standpoint. Furthermore, an exclusive study could be undertaken to evaluate the effects of the UBA project on marginalized groups within the adopted villages.

CONCLUSION

The findings revealed that the UBA initiative has positively influenced rural communities, with coordinators applying a scientific methodology to assess community needs and implement relevant projects. Despite encountering obstacles such as insufficient support from college management and financial limitations, the coordinators' commitment and leadership have resulted in enhanced community participation and successful project outcomes.

It was observed that UBA coordinators have effectively utilized diverse communication

strategies to engage with stakeholders in the decision-making processes that affect their lives. The study findings highlight the necessity for comprehensive training and ongoing support from experts to further develop UBA coordinators' skills and knowledge, which is crucial for sustaining momentum and enhancing the impact of their initiatives. The UBA coordinators implemented various projects such as renewable energy, water management, livelihood development, skill development, education and welfare services. Therefore, it is essential to promote the sharing of best practices and innovative concepts by UBA coordinators, in the workshops, conferences, and collaborative platforms where coordinators can exchange experiences will not only empower these individuals but also cultivate a culture of continuous learning and adaptation. The results of this study highlight the importance of enhancing the effectiveness of UBA initiatives and it is observed that the UBA has the potential to transform into a strong institutional framework that promotes rural development.

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