

An exploration of self-help groups as an alternative mode of public service delivery in rural India

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Self-help groups (SHGs) as a mode of community-based and driven development has been increasingly adopted within international development practice as a platform for broader community engagement. SHGs have been mobilized to promote government programs and local development initiatives because of their perceived ability to empower participants in ways that externally implemented programs cannot. In India, SHGs have been actively utilized to promote rural micro-financing and micro-enterprise initiatives with the intent of improving financial empowerment, livelihood creation, and gender empowerment. The existing literature on SHGs is heavily dominated by case studies focusing on the financial and economic outcomes of such interventions. This research explores the role of SHGs as an alternative mode of public service delivery, specifically in rural communities that suffer from service delivery deficits and institutional constraints. It asks if SHGs can help bridge existing service delivery gaps and what are the associated benefits and challenges surrounding this approach? To address this, a qualitative analysis was conducted with 171 SHG members, policy makers, and key informants through focus group and individual interviews in two high-density districts in the Indian state of Kerala. Preliminary data analysis support the role of SHGs as an effective delivery mechanism for rural public services and government poverty alleviation schemes within these communities. The preliminary results of this study seeks to contribute to the knowledge gap that exists on SHGs as a service delivery mechanism while considering outcomes beyond traditional economic variables.

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