



Empowering the elderly: The role of elder self-help groups in enhancing community engagement in rural India

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Abstract

India is undergoing a major demographic shift marked by a rapidly increasing elderly population, expected to reach 319 million by 2050. This change brings numerous challenges, especially in rural regions, such as social isolation, worsening physical and mental health, and inadequate access to essential services. In response, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have become instrumental in supporting older adults through community-centered initiatives. This paper focuses on the impact of Elder Self-Help Groups (ESHGs) established by VOSARD (Voluntary Organisation for Social Action and Rural Development), an NGO working in Kerala's Idukki district. Through a case study method, the research explores how ESHGs empower the elderly by fostering mutual aid, emotional well-being, financial stability, and active community involvement. The study reveals that the creation of 136 ESHGs, involving over 1,800 elderly individuals, led to notable progress in leadership skills, financial education, health awareness, legal rights, and economic stability. VOSARD's comprehensive efforts—including caregiver training, healthcare services, income generation, and legal education—offer a well-rounded model for successful aging. The study concludes that VOSARD's approach provides a scalable example of community-driven elder care, highlighting how participatory methods and local involvement can significantly enhance the dignity, autonomy, and well-being of older people in rural India.

Keywords: Elder self-help groups (ESHG's), VOSARD, elderly population, community-driven initiatives, empowerment, rehabilitation, vulnerable populations, sustainable development, renewable energy, community engagement

Introduction

India is experiencing a demographic transition, with its elderly population expected to reach 319 million by 2050 (United Nations, 2023)^[5]. This rising number of older adults brings forth several challenges, including social isolation, declining physical capabilities, and financial instability—issues that are especially pronounced in rural regions. In addressing these concerns, civil society organizations have played a vital role in creating support networks for the aging population. One notable example is VOSARD (Voluntary Organisation for Social Action and Rural Development), an NGO based in Kerala known for its dedication to improving the lives of rural and marginalized communities. Through its 'Senior Citizen Program,' VOSARD implements participatory development strategies aimed at enhancing the well-being of the elderly. A central component of this program is the creation and support of Elder Self-Help Groups (ESHGs), which are designed to strengthen the emotional, social, and financial stability of older individuals. These groups foster empowerment through peer support, economic security, social engagement, and increased involvement in community life. This article examines the structure and outcomes of VOSARD's ESHGs, illustrating how localized, community-driven approaches can support healthy and dignified aging.

Healthy Ageing and The Elderly

Healthy aging is a comprehensive concept that involves preserving physical health, mental well-being, social connections, and the ability to live independently as people grow older. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2015)^[10], healthy aging is "the process of

developing and maintaining the functional ability that enables well-being in older age." This definition goes beyond simply avoiding illness and highlights the importance of enabling older adults to participate in meaningful activities. In India, the rapid growth of the elderly population presents distinct challenges, including economic inequality, limited healthcare access, and the weakening of traditional family support systems (Rajan & Aliyar, 2016)^[7]. Seniors often face various health problems like chronic conditions (e.g., diabetes, hypertension, arthritis), cognitive decline, and reduced mobility, all of which can impact their overall quality of life (Patel *et al.*, 2021)^[6]. Additionally, emotional and social issues such as loneliness, isolation, and lack of engagement can increase the risk of depression and mental decline. To address these concerns, efforts to promote healthy aging must take an inclusive approach—one that supports physical and mental health, encourages social involvement, ensures financial security, and improves access to essential services. Community-driven initiatives like Elder Self-Help Groups (ESHGs) embody this integrated strategy by promoting peer support, empowerment, and active participation, thereby enhancing the well-being of older adults and supporting the goals of healthy aging (HelpAge India, 2014)^[1].

Elder Self-Help Groups

Elder Self-Help Groups (ESHGs) are voluntary groups formed by older adults who unite to support one another socially, emotionally, and financially. Based on the values of collective action and mutual support, these groups encourage seniors to identify their own needs, establish goals, and actively work toward enhancing their quality of

life. Drawing from the wider self-help group movement, ESHGs are tailored to meet the specific needs of the elderly by organizing regular meetings, promoting savings and credit practices, spreading health awareness, and facilitating intergenerational activities (HelpAge India, 2014) ^[1]. Typically made up of 10 to 20 members, ESHGs promote self-reliance and leadership, especially among older women, empowering them to voice their issues and take part in group decisions. These groups help members access essential services and nurture a sense of belonging and purpose—factors that are crucial in supporting mental well-being and reducing social isolation (Narayan & Mohanty, 2019) ^[2]. In rural areas where institutional support is often limited, ESHGs serve as a crucial lifeline by fostering resilience and upholding the dignity of aging individuals. VOSARD's implementation of the ESHG model showcases how grassroots initiatives can significantly improve the lives of the elderly. By providing ongoing training, skill development, and facilitation, VOSARD has strengthened these groups into active agents of community transformation.

Methodology

This study aims to investigate the role of non-governmental organizations in driving positive change in the lives of elderly individuals, with a particular focus on the initiatives led by VOSARD. The research explores and evaluates the organization's various programs and their broader social effects, especially in improving the psychosocial well-being, economic stability, and community involvement of older adults. Employing a case study methodology, the study seeks to offer a comprehensive understanding of VOSARD's strategies, execution methods, and outcomes in the areas of rural development and elderly care.

Organization Profile

The Voluntary Organization for Social Action and Rural Development (VOSARD) is a non-governmental organization established in 1998 and registered under the Travancore-Kochi Cultural, Scientific, Charitable, and Religious Trust Act XII of 1955 (registration number I-750/98). The organization is dedicated to uplifting marginalized and disadvantaged groups living in the remote and underdeveloped hill regions of the Idukki district and other parts of Kerala. VOSARD envisions a just and inclusive society where vulnerable populations—including the poor, women, children, people with disabilities, and other marginalized communities—are empowered to live independent and purposeful lives. Its main goals include strengthening socially and economically marginalized communities, promoting Self-Help Groups (SHGs), establishing microcredit systems for those in financial need, and enhancing the link between communities and government services. Additionally, VOSARD implements youth development programs, offers specialized support for people with disabilities and the elderly, and carries out initiatives focused on child care and protection.

The Protection and Care of Senior Citizens

While aging is a natural part of life, it often brings a range of difficulties for older adults, such as financial instability, health problems, poor living conditions, neglect, social isolation, and limited access to care and support services. In a survey involving 4,793 seniors aged 55 and above, 500

individuals were chosen as key beneficiaries of a project based on criteria such as economic status, health condition, and family background. This project, supported by Misereor, is being implemented in the Chakkupallam and Erattayar Panchayats of Idukki District. Its primary goal is to improve the overall well-being of elderly individuals by encouraging self-help practices and establishing community-based care systems through the involvement of families and local stakeholders. The initiative also focuses on safeguarding the rights of older adults and enhancing their livelihoods—especially for those who are active or semi-dependent—by improving access to healthcare and social services and promoting their engagement in both family and community life.

Primary Goals of the Initiative

The project is designed to empower older adults by bringing them together into self-help groups and federations, encouraging solidarity and mutual assistance. A key objective is to uphold their right to healthcare and rehabilitation by improving access to affordable, locally available services. The initiative also focuses on creating sustainable income-generating opportunities to boost financial independence and support autonomous living. By working in partnership with government bodies and policymakers, the project aims to protect the rights of the elderly. It further promotes the development of supportive families and age-friendly communities through awareness campaigns and family counseling programs. In addition, the project prioritizes strengthening the skills and effectiveness of both project staff and federation leaders to ensure they can carry out their responsibilities successfully.

Other Primary Areas of Activity

1. Empowerment and Rehabilitation in the Community

Since its establishment, VOSARD has been deeply involved in humanitarian initiatives across some of the most isolated and underdeveloped areas of the Idukki district and other regions in Kerala. The organization's core mission focuses on community empowerment through mobilization, skill development, and rehabilitation efforts. A key component of its strategy involves bringing together economically disadvantaged groups—especially women and individuals with disabilities—into Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and organizing them into larger federations. These grassroots structures equip members with the tools to claim their rights, access development programs, and build resilience through activities such as awareness campaigns, leadership training, income generation, microfinance, and advocacy. In the field of disability rehabilitation, VOSARD has made notable progress since 2002 by establishing multi-tiered Disabled People's Organizations (DPOs), which now support nearly 5,800 individuals. Its Community-Based Rehabilitation (CBR) approach is comprehensive, integrating sustainable livelihood options, home-based care, collaboration with local governance bodies, and mental health support—all aligned with World Health Organization (WHO) standards.

Women's empowerment is another central focus. More than 5,650 rural women have been organized into 315 SHGs, receiving guidance and assistance in leadership development, entrepreneurship, and access to legal and

financial services. These interventions have enabled them to combat poverty and social marginalization.

In addition, VOSARD has been running a Family Counselling Centre since 2004, aimed at providing holistic support to families. This centre addresses a wide range of issues, including domestic disputes, adolescent behavioral concerns, substance abuse, and mental health crises. Supported by both the Central and State Social Welfare Boards, the centre plays a vital role in conflict resolution and promoting strong, value-based family systems.

2. Activities for the Welfare of Children and Youth

VOSARD has demonstrated a strong commitment to the development and protection of children and youth through a range of specialized programs. From 2011, the organization acted as the implementing partner for the national Childline 1098 service in the Idukki district. However, the management of this program has since transitioned to direct control by state governments, and VOSARD is no longer involved. Childline 1098, a 24-hour emergency helpline supported by the Government of India under the Integrated Child Protection Scheme, offers crucial assistance to children in distress. Services provided include emergency shelter, medical assistance, emotional counseling, rescue operations, repatriation, sponsorship, and broader protective support. Operating from its centres in Kattappana and Kumily, the helpline served as an essential safety resource for at-risk children in the region during VOSARD's involvement.

Beyond child protection, VOSARD has placed significant emphasis on empowering rural youth through skill-building programs. In collaboration with the Functional Vocational Training and Research Society (FVTRS), Bangalore, the organization offers vocational training in areas such as tailoring, handicrafts, driving, livestock rearing, welding, and other trades. These initiatives have equipped 150 economically disadvantaged young people with the skills needed to establish sustainable livelihoods and achieve financial independence.

Another impactful program is the Kaval Project, initiated in 2016, which provides psychosocial support and rehabilitation for juveniles in conflict with the law. Operating in the taluks of Peerumedu, Udumbanchola, and Idukki, the project delivers individualized care plans and a structured 17-day training module facilitated by mental health professionals. This initiative is carried out with technical support from NIMHANS and the Kerala Department of Women and Child Development, ensuring a comprehensive, expert-driven approach to youth rehabilitation.

3. Sustainable Development and Rural Livelihoods

VOSARD places strong emphasis on sustainable development by promoting eco-friendly farming methods and the use of renewable energy. In the hilly terrains of Idukki, the organization works with smallholder farmers to implement mixed farming practices aimed at achieving food and nutritional security. This approach includes the formation of farmer groups and clusters, the introduction of user-friendly, low-cost technologies, and the encouragement of natural resource management techniques such as watershed development, rainwater harvesting, soil preservation, and organic cultivation. These sustainable practices have proven effective and adaptable, inspiring

similar initiatives in neighboring districts through community-driven replication.

Another key focus area for VOSARD is the advancement of alternative energy sources, particularly biogas and solar power. Through education campaigns and hands-on training, the organization motivates rural households to embrace clean energy options. One innovative aspect of this initiative is the use of Ferro cement technology for constructing biogas units, which has become popular among local communities due to its cost-effectiveness and long-lasting nature.

4. Support Services for Sanitation and Water

Responding to one of the most essential needs of rural populations, VOSARD serves as a support agency for the JALANIDHI project, a rural water supply and sanitation initiative launched by the Kerala Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Agency (KRWSA). This community-driven program is designed to guarantee the sustainable provision of clean and safe drinking water in rural regions. VOSARD plays a key role in organizing Beneficiary Groups (BGs) and guiding them through the participatory implementation of the project, while also offering ongoing technical and social assistance to ensure its success.

Eshg's Effect on Older Adults

The implementation of the Elder Self-Help Group (ESHG) initiative by VOSARD has resulted in substantial and wide-ranging positive changes in the lives of elderly individuals. A total of 136 ESHGs were established, comprising 1,876 senior members, along with 12 federations at the Panchayat level that help coordinate group efforts and represent the collective interests of older adults. These groups have evolved into important spaces for social connection, peer support, and collective advocacy. Each group initiated a savings and internal lending system to improve members' access to financial resources. As part of this financial empowerment effort, 70 ESHGs and 3 federations successfully opened operational bank accounts, promoting financial inclusion and independence among elderly participants.

All group and federation leaders received leadership training, which enabled them to effectively organize activities, support fellow members, and facilitate access to government schemes and welfare benefits for senior citizens. Leaders confidently represented their groups in 18 advocacy and interface meetings, raising awareness of the rights and needs of older adults before various government bodies. These efforts led to practical achievements, including registration in employment guarantee schemes and access to transportation and other senior citizen benefits. Over time, the ESHGs developed self-sustaining systems, maintaining proper financial records and holding meetings regularly.

Health education became a central component of the project, with 23 awareness programs led by medical professionals to promote healthy living among the elderly. In addition, seven specialized medical camps addressed specific health needs, including general check-ups, cancer screenings, ENT services, eye care, and consultations in traditional medicine systems such as Ayurveda and Siddha.

Caregiver training was also a vital part of the intervention, offering practical skills and support to those caring for the elderly, especially in low-income rural households. These

sessions acknowledged the emotional and physical challenges caregivers face and equipped them with strategies to manage stress and improve care quality. As part of the project's continuing health services, 540 elderly individuals received regular health check-ups from three community health workers and twelve trained volunteers, which significantly contributed to lowering health risks and improving life quality for both mobile and bedridden seniors.

The project also promoted economic self-reliance by distributing livelihood grants totaling approximately ₹42,80,000 to 214 elderly beneficiaries, with each person receiving ₹20,000 to launch small-scale income-generating ventures. Additionally, 14 skill development programs were conducted, enabling many participants to take up productive activities. Currently, 572 members maintain home gardens—some even producing and sharing seeds and saplings with others. Around 55% of the elderly involved are now engaged in small businesses or income-generating work.

Legal awareness among both senior citizens and their caregivers' saws significant improvement. About 70% of the elderly and their families became informed about their rights under the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, empowering them to seek legal remedies and claim entitlements. Overall, the project has successfully promoted dignity, autonomy, financial resilience, and active involvement of older adults in both their families and communities.

Conclusions

VOSARD's diverse range of initiatives reflects its strong dedication to inclusive, sustainable, and community-driven development, particularly in some of Kerala's most disadvantaged regions. By empowering vulnerable populations through self-help mechanisms and rehabilitation programs, and by safeguarding the rights and welfare of children, youth, and senior citizens, the organization addresses key social, economic, and environmental challenges. VOSARD meets urgent community needs through participatory approaches, the promotion of local leadership, and the implementation of sustainable livelihood and renewable energy solutions, all while fostering long-term resilience and independence. As these models continue to adapt and spread, VOSARD exemplifies the profound impact of community engagement and holistic development in rural India.

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