

Governance and Institutional Strengthening for Indigenous Populations in India

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India's 104 million indigenous people (8.6% of the population) face unique governance challenges despite constitutional protections. The Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA), 1996 represents the cornerstone legislation for indigenous self-governance, extending Panchayati Raj institutions to Fifth Schedule areas across nine states while recognizing traditional governance systems. PESA empowers the Gram Sabhas with powers over cultural preservation, dispute resolution, land alienation prevention, and management of community resources.

However, implementation remains weak. Tribal village committees often function merely for budget approval without genuine consultation. Political interference undermines Gram Sabha decisions, and conflicts with laws like the Forest Rights Act hinder effective implementation. Many indigenous communities lack awareness of their PESA rights, and Gram Panchayats suffer from limited resources and trained personnel.

The Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP) strategy earmarks proportional financial resources, with allocations increasing from USD 13.92 billion (2014-15) to USD 26.79 billion (2023-24). It is essential to allocate and utilize these financial resources efficiently to improve the well-being of indigenous communities. In this blog, we explore some of the institutional and governance aspects that can improve the efficiency of all other welfare interventions.

Agricultural Governance

Tribal communities have practiced sustainable agriculture for centuries, contributing significantly to India's organic farming expansion. States leading organic farming such as Madhya Pradesh (26%), Maharashtra (22%), Gujarat (15%), and Rajasthan (13%) also have relatively high tribal populations. In addition, indigenous people also practice many traditional agricultural practices that can be classified as nature-based solutions, conserving biodiversity, and contributing to climate mitigation. However, the rigid Participatory Guarantee System (PGS) certification standards don't accommodate traditional farming methods, such as agroforestry, mixed cropping, and sacred groves, creating barriers for tribal farmers despite their inherently organic practices.

Strengthening Strategies to Ensure Climate Justice

Effective institutional strengthening requires community-led, culturally sensitive policies that respect the principles of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC), particularly in consideration of the principles of climate justice. For example, most voluntary carbon offset projects focus on areas such as agroforestry, reforestation, and the restoration of grazing lands. Indigenous people are at the centre of such efforts, and there must be fair benefit sharing and legal protection of community rights.

In sum, realizing the promise of PESA and allied welfare financing demands shifting from token consultations to empowered Gram Sabhas, transparent TSP utilization, and market pathways that recognize indigenous agroecologies; with FPIC, fair benefit sharing in climate projects, and inclusive certification and institutional support, indigenous communities can lead just and climate-resilient rural transformation.

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