

Impact of State-Sponsored FOCUS Scheme on Sustainable Agriculture, Rural Development and Women Empowerment in West Garo Hills District of Meghalaya



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ABSTRACT

A survey study was conducted in West Garo Hills district of Meghalaya, India to assess the impact of the FOCUS (Farmers' Collectivisation for Upscaling Production and Marketing Systems) program with a special emphasis on sustainable rural development and poverty alleviation in the state. The survey was selectively conducted in three blocks of West Garo Hills, Meghalaya—Rongram, Selsella, and Gambegre. A total of 347 respondents from 26 producer groups from across 23 villages were interviewed regarding fund utilisation and the impact of the FOCUS scheme on their livelihoods and agricultural upscaling. The study found that the main agricultural activities undertaken by the Producer Groups (PGs) include piggyery, cashew nut nursery, black pepper nursery, fruit and vegetable plantations, and turmeric and ginger cultivation. The financial assistance provided by the FOCUS program has contributed to income generation and enhanced the agricultural potential of the region. It stands as a strong example to the country to reflect the role of the state government in the upliftment of rural society and women's empowerment through systematic policy implementation. However, the study also identified several challenges, including insufficient funding, lack of technical support, and limited market access. Despite these obstacles, the commitment of the farmers and the extension services provided by Meghalaya Basin Development Agency (MBDA) have played a crucial role in the program's implementation. This study sheds light to future planning and decision-making for sustainable rural development.

Keywords: Rural Development, Agriculture, FOCUS, Meghalaya, Women Empowerment

INTRODUCTION

Mahatma Gandhi once said, 'India lives in Her Villages' and 'the development of the Country depends on the development of village communities' (Singh, 2015). India is demographically and geographically dominated by rural areas,

and agriculture has been the main occupation of the majority of the population. Thereby, rural development is not a luxury, but a necessity for the country. Rural development encompasses various attributes such as education, health, sanitation, social structure, sociology, economics, agriculture, connectivity, empowerment and employment (Atkinson, 2017). It stresses delivering a level playing field in terms of opportunities and accessibility to resources. The present state of rural development is not primarily farm-focused; considerable emphasis has been placed on what is an increasingly interdependent continuum between rural and urban places (Atkinson, 2017). Sustainable rural development involves strategies that promote economic growth, social equity, and environmental protection in rural areas. Conventionally, India's policies were centred on improving the economic and social conditions of agrarian society's vulnerable groups, particularly emphasising agricultural productivity (Solagberu, 2012). There are many government initiatives focused on various sectors, such as health (NRHM), education (SSA), and livelihood (NREGA, NRLM). Government initiatives play a crucial role in facilitating this development by empowering local communities, investing in infrastructure, and aligning policies with sustainable development goals (SDGs). State interventions in sustainable rural development are vital for socio-economic upliftment, community empowerment and overall sustainable development.

The economy of Meghalaya is primarily agrarian and rural-based, with agriculture playing a crucial role in its economic structure. Most farmers in the state are marginal and smallholders (Kurien *et al.*, 2019), which makes it challenging for them to generate substantial income. There is a need for new paradigms and solutions to address the challenges faced by farmers in Meghalaya, including recurring price fluctuations, high marketing, storage, and transportation costs, the lack of adequate storage facilities, post-harvest losses, and the absence of a competitive marketing system (Hatai, 2018). The state has launched various government-backed initiatives aimed at enhancing agricultural productivity, improving market accessibility, and ensuring economic resilience for its farming communities. Among these initiatives, the Farmers' Collectivization for Upscaling Production and Marketing Systems (FOCUS) program emerges as a flagship scheme designed to empower farmers by fostering collective action and market-driven agricultural practices (Government of Meghalaya, 2025). Launched in September 2021 by the Chief Minister of Meghalaya, Conrad K. Sangma, in the state of Meghalaya, FOCUS operates with a projected budget of ₹200 crore to support producer groups (PGs) through financial assistance and value-chain interventions (Times of India, 2022; North Eastern Society for Sustainable Solutions Meghalaya, 2025). The initiative is structured to strengthen agricultural productivity through a multi-faceted approach, including funding assistance, value chain enhancement, provision of machinery, establishment of market linkages, transportation support, and aggregation of produce. Additionally, it incorporates training and technical assistance through partnerships with organizations such as the Meghalaya Basin Development Authority (MBDA) and PRIME Hub, focusing on value addition, processing, and packaging. The implementation strategy of FOCUS emphasizes a participatory approach, encouraging farmers to collaborate and leverage

shared resources for mutual benefit. With a long-term vision of transforming Meghalaya's agricultural sector, the program integrates governmental and private sector partnerships to establish a resilient ecosystem conducive to sustainable farming. Over its operational period, FOCUS is projected to benefit approximately 450,000 farmers across Meghalaya, equipping them with the necessary tools and resources to optimize production capacities and enhance marketability.

Government interventions such as FOCUS would play a vital role for the welfare of rural India. It is essential to assess the magnitude and direction of the impacts FOCUS has generated, as the act has the potential to have wide-ranging consequences, especially for poverty reduction and rural development. This paper makes a critical contribution to the debate on the nature and effects of rural development policies through an empirically informed analysis FOCUS scheme. The paper explores whether the scheme contributes to genuine transformative social empowerment. Hence, in order to assess the outcome of the scheme in the study area an impact analysis was conducted on selected beneficiaries with the following objectives: to analyse the tangible and intangible benefits of the interventions and to identify challenges perceived by the beneficiaries.

METHODOLOGY

Study Area

The study was conducted in three developmental blocks of West Garo Hills District: Rongram, Selsella, and Gambegre. These areas were selected due to their significant agricultural engagement and participation in the FOCUS program. West Garo Hills district (25°34'4.57" N, 90°13'28.08" E) forms part of the western boundary of Meghalaya, India. Bordered by East Garo Hills to the east, South Garo Hills to the southeast, Goalpara district of Assam to the north and northwest, and Bangladesh to the south, this remote district covers an area of 3,614 sq. km with a population of 643,291 and a moderate density of 175 persons per sq. km (Census of India, 2011). Administratively, it comprises four subdivisions, eight blocks, 1,209 villages, and one municipal corporation, with Tura as the district headquarters and the second-largest town in Meghalaya after Shillong. The district is predominantly inhabited by the Garos, a Tibeto-Burman ethnic group that follows a unique matrilineal system of inheritance, family structure, and succession. Other indigenous communities include the Hajongs, Rabhas, Koches, Rajbansis, Meches, Kacharis, and Dalus.

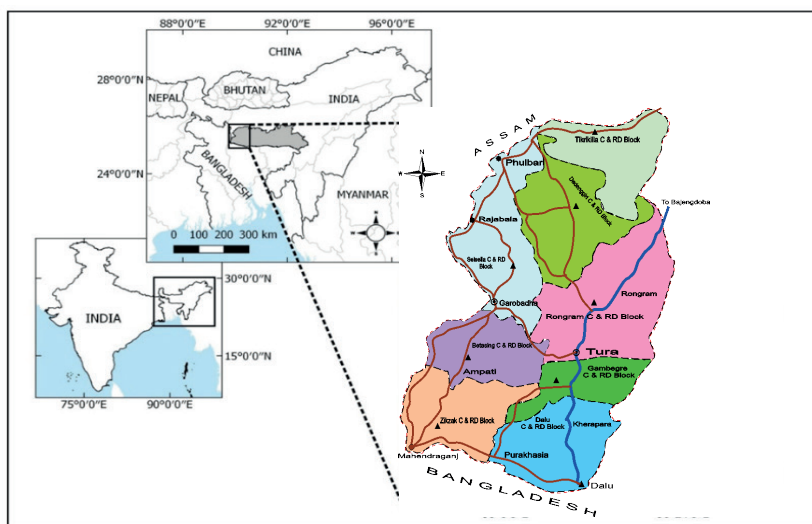


Fig. 1: Map of West Garo Hills District of Meghalaya

Data Collection

Secondary data on the beneficiaries of each of the selected blocks were gathered from MBDA. The villages for data collection were identified with the help of officials taking into account accessibility for the survey. The baseline survey and Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) exercises were conducted in 23 villages namely Silsekgre, Makkragre, Watregre, Anogre, Jongdikgre, Marakapara, Urenggre (Rongram Block); Balamagre, Dola Mandagre, Jongbu Chiring, Chura Budigre, Aminda Rangsa, Gambegre, Darak Adinggre, Boldorenggre, Okkapara Songgitcham (Gambegre Block); and Tongtangpara, Galwanggre, Apalgre, Agipenggre, Asimgre, Nokatgre, Songkapara (Selsella Block) of West Garo Hills district of Meghalaya. A total sample of 347 respondents belonging to 26 PGs was drawn from the different blocks. Simple Random Sampling technique was followed to select the respondents from the sampling frame.

Primary data was collected in the year 2022 and 2023 through group discussion and structured interviews with producer group members and direct observations of their activities. The survey assessed fund utilisation, major challenges faced, and plans of the PGs. The collected data were tabulated and analysed using appropriate statistical tools in MS Excel Version 2507. The study exhibited certain limitations. The sample size was limited to 347 respondents from 26 producer groups due to resource constraints, which may affect the generalizability of findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Characteristics of Producer Groups and Demographic Profile

A total of 26 PGs participated in the study, comprising 347 members. The size of the PGs varied, with membership ranging from 10 to 20 individuals, with an average of 13.35. Most members of PGs were female (72.62 per cent) and middle

aged group (26-35 years) (44.09%), with low educational attainment (Table 1). Most respondents engaged in multiple livelihood sources, including daily wages, seasonal crop cultivation, and arecanut farming. They have access to various government schemes such as MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act), National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), etc. These initiatives aim to enhance rural livelihoods by providing employment opportunities, skill development, financial assistance, and improved housing. State-led initiatives like Chief Minister’s Special Rural Development Fund (CMSRDF), Sustainable Land Management Meghalaya Project (SLM), Mission Organic Value Chain Development for Northeastern Region (MOVCNDR) further support grassroots development by fostering community participation in infrastructure and livelihood enhancement projects.

Financial initiatives targeting self-help groups (SHGs) and PGs rather than individuals can significantly improve members’ livelihoods through collective economic empowerment, risk mitigation, and enhanced financial discipline (Wong & Guggenheim, 2018; Barooah *et al.*, 2019). Additionally, these groups promote a culture of savings and mutual support, helping members pool resources, withstand economic shocks, and reinvest in community development (Barooah *et al.*, 2019). SHGs serve as platforms for implementing livelihood interventions, particularly through collectivising farmers into producer organisations. Collective approaches improve market access and profitability, social cohesion and community bonding, thereby strengthening socio-economic resilience (Barooah *et al.*, 2019).

Table 1. Demographic profile of the members of PGs.

Demographic Variables		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	95	27.38%
	Female	252	72.62%
	Others	0	0.00%
Age Group	Below 25	7	2.02%
	26-35	153	44.09%
	36-45	131	37.75%
	45 and above	56	16.14%
Education	Illiterate	90	25.94%
	Primary	88	25.36%
	High School	128	36.89%
	Higher secondary	37	10.66%
	Graduate and above	4	1.15%
Total		347	100.00%

Benefits of interventions through FOCUS scheme

Tangible and intangible benefits of the interventions rendered through the FOCUS scheme may be discussed in various aspects. The assessment highlighted that there were potential increments in economic, social and

physical upliftment of the tribal communities of the region. For instance, the scheme helped beneficiaries diversify their income sources while at the same time establishing microenterprises and other community assets. Through training and extension measures, and experiences through collective activities in the PGs, the beneficiaries enhanced their awareness, financial literacy, skills and overall quality of life. Details of impacts of the FOCUS scheme in the West Garo Hills of Meghalaya are discussed below.

Activities of PGs and Fund Utilisation

The participation of PGs in various agricultural activities highlights a diversified approach to livelihood and income generation. Among the key activities, black pepper nursery and pig rearing were the most prevalent, each engaging 26.92% of the PGs. Cashew nut cultivation followed at 19.23%, while ginger production accounted for 15.38%. Comparatively, turmeric, fruit plantations, and vegetable cultivation had lower participation rates, each involving 3.95% of the PGs. This distribution underscores the emphasis on high-value crops and livestock rearing, reflecting local agro-climatic suitability and market-driven preferences. The variation in engagement levels across activities suggests strategic diversification to enhance economic resilience and sustainability in the agricultural sector. The relatively lower engagement in fruit and vegetable cultivation may indicate market constraints, climatic limitations, or prioritisation of perennial and high-revenue crops.



Fig. 2: Activities of PGs in each of the three blocks under study.

The distribution of activities funded under the FOCUS scheme across Gambegre, Rongram, and Selsella revealed distinct farming preferences influenced by agro-climatic conditions and market awareness. In Gambegre, plantation crops were the main focus, with cashew nuts (40%) and black pepper (40%) being the dominant crops, along with turmeric (10%) and pig farming (10%). This indicates

a balanced mix of crops and livestock. Rongram, on the other hand, leaned heavily towards ginger cultivation (50%), supported by black pepper nursery and plantation (25%), cashew nuts (12.5%), and jackfruit (12.5%). This suggests a strong emphasis on spices and horticulture in the area. In contrast, Selsella showed a significant focus on pig farming (75%), with only minor contributions from black pepper (12.5%) and vegetables (12.5%). This indicates a livestock-driven economy with limited engagement in crop production. The variation in farming activities across these regions reflects differences in land use, resource availability, and economic priorities, highlighting how local conditions can influence agricultural decision-making. There is a high prospect in commercial crops such as cashew nut, arecanut, ginger, turmeric, black pepper, mandarins, dragon fruit and strawberry in the region.

The pattern of fund utilisation varied based on the activities of the producer groups. The funds were primarily used for procuring agricultural inputs such as planting materials, polybags, fertilisers, and tools, as well as for daily wage payments for labour and various intercultural activities. In the case of livestock rearing, the funds helped in purchasing piglets, building pigsties, providing feed for the pigs, and covering additional expenses like medicine. This initiative has opened up business opportunities and entrepreneurial ventures within the community. It empowered people to work collectively towards improving their sources of income, with the support of government resources at various stages. Furthermore, it fostered an understanding of the vast agrobiodiversity present in the region and provided an alternative to deforestation and the destructive practices associated with primitive farming systems. Despite these efforts, 96.15% of respondents reported that the allocated funds were insufficient for sustainable business growth. There is a strong demand for improved and high-quality seeds and planting materials for various crops in the state. Farmers have shown particular interest in obtaining information about seeds for crops and pig management. The information gathered through agro-advisory services has proven to be very useful and beneficial to the farmers (Singh *et al.*, 2015).

All respondents in the study reported having bank accounts at Meghalaya Rural Bank (MRB). Regional Rural Banks (RRBs) were established to help mobilise rural savings and utilise these funds for the development of the village economy through sectors like agriculture and small industry, thereby making effective use of local resources (Ahmed, 2014). RRBs are essential for providing credit access to rural communities in India. They play a key role in fostering financial inclusion and supporting rural economic development initiatives (Singh, 2023). Establishing connections with banks and other financial institutions is critical for accessing additional funding. The SHG Bank Linkage Programme in India has been instrumental in providing credit support to SHGs, thereby enhancing their financial capabilities (Arora & Singh, 2017). Meghalaya Rural Bank has increased banking participation and interest among the people of Meghalaya, contributing to socio-economic development (Ahmed, 2014).

Agricultural marketing in Meghalaya remained underdeveloped, with most PGs lacking strong market linkages. At the time of the study, Songgital PG (Urenggre) successfully marketed its cashew nuts to industries in Phulbari,

earning over Rs. 50,000 profits from 50 quintals of produce. The Meghalaya State Agricultural Produce and Livestock Marketing (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020 aims to enhance market access through transparent and technology-driven mechanisms. However, a structured Agricultural Marketing Information System (AMIS) is needed to provide timely market data and support farmers in Meghalaya's hilly regions (Hatai & Panda, 2015). Meghalaya's marketing system includes regulated, unregulated, and weekly markets, with the Garo Hills' rural markets playing a crucial role (Akoijam, 2021). The Meghalaya State Agricultural Marketing Portal and FOCUS scheme support market access, but stronger agency coordination and information dissemination are needed for sustainable agricultural trade. Future plans among beneficiaries of the FOCUS scheme in Meghalaya indicated strong aspirations for business expansion, with most of the members aiming to scale up, diversity and venture into various processing activities.

Extension and Training

Respondents learned about the FOCUS scheme through extension service and mobilization of MBDA extension workers and through recommendations of the members of PGs. Initial training focused on bookkeeping and financial management, but there was limited exposure to advanced agricultural training, field visits, and marketing strategies. With the help of the extension workers, the producers' Groups were formed to take off venture of the scheme. MBDA provides various supports like financial grant, training, infrastructures, value addition, marketing system etc. Thus, agricultural extension services play a crucial role in enhancing rural development and improving agricultural productivity. One of the primary functions of extension services is to facilitate the transfer of innovative agricultural technologies from research institutions to farmers (Hamasalih & Layeeq, 2023). Through training sessions, workshops, and demonstrations, extension services strengthen the skills and capabilities of farmers. This capacity-building enables farmers to effectively apply modern farming methods, leading to improved agricultural outcomes (Talib *et al.*, 2018). To improve their livelihoods, they must connect with other actors in agri-food markets and value chains. Extension services empower farmers with knowledge for informed decision-making, fostering community resilience and adaptability (Zwane, 2012). Participation often improves livelihoods through diversified income and increased resilience to economic shocks. Farmers engaging with extension services tend to enjoy better market access and higher profits (Dube, 2017). Additionally, extension services promote sustainable farming practices that conserve resources and enhance productivity, which is critical for long-term agricultural viability (Hamasalih & Layeeq, 2023).

Finance and bookkeeping are crucial for the operation of any organization. For SHGs, maintaining accurate records of financial transactions-such as savings, loans, repayments, and expenditures-is essential for transparency and accountability (Arora & Singh, 2017). Regular updates to accounts help members monitor their financial status and manage group funds effectively. SHGs pool members' savings to provide internal loans, fostering a culture of saving and reducing reliance on external borrowing (Arora & Singh, 2017).

Training is vital for agricultural development, enhancing farmers’ knowledge, skills, and productivity, and improving their economic conditions and social recognition (Medhi *et al.*, 2017). Additionally, enterprise training on skills like market analysis and business management helps small farmers understand and seize opportunities (Davis *et al.*, 2007).

Challenges



Fig.3. Challenges perceived by the farmers and beneficiaries of West Garo Hills, Meghalaya.

The study identified several key challenges affecting PGs (Fig. 3). Most PGs found their initial grants inadequate for scaling up operations. Additionally, limited market access hindered many PGs due to a lack of knowledge about potential buyers and market networks. Water scarcity, stemming from inconsistent irrigation facilities, further impacted agricultural productivity, while poor transportation infrastructure increased market access costs. The lack of machinery also restricted efficiency due to limited mechanization, and piggery units faced significant struggles with livestock diseases. Moreover, farmers often lacked access to adequate veterinary support for their livestock, compounding their challenges. Elite capture and weak local institutional support persist in the study area. These findings concur well with previous studies in Meghalaya and Northeast India (Mohanty *et al.*, 2015; Meetei *et al.*, 2024; Meetei & Tara, 2025; Lyngdoh & Singh, 2025).

FOCUS Scheme and Sustainable Rural Development

Government investment in rural areas must adopt a holistic approach that considers ecological, economic, social, and physical aspects while prioritizing collective action and community empowerment (Taleshi *et al.*, 2020). State interventions, particularly through targeted investments, can play a decisive role in transforming rural communities by strengthening local economies and fostering self-sufficiency (Taleshi *et al.*, 2020). By empowering local populations through financial support and skill-building initiatives, government schemes can

restore traditional livelihoods, enhance entrepreneurial capacity, and promote sustainable economic models (Panakaje *et al.*, 2023). The FOCUS scheme aligns with this vision by providing financial assistance to rural communities, enabling them to diversify their income sources while fostering social and economic resilience. Through activities initiated with the financial backing of the FOCUS program, individuals were successfully generating income and tapping into the agricultural potential of the region. The program also fostered teamwork, ensuring the effective implementation of the plans, and the training provided had been beneficial in various ways.



Fig. 4. Alignment of FOCUS scheme with Sustainable Development Goals

FOCUS scheme directly or indirectly caters to Sustainable Development Goals viz. SDG 1 (No poverty), SDG 2 (Zero hunger), SDG 5 (Gender quality), SDG 8 (Decent work and economic growth), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), SDG 13 (Climate action), and SDG 15 (Life on land) (United Nations Sustainable Goals, 2025) (Fig. 4). A notable feature of the FOCUS scheme is its commitment to gender equality, as both male and female beneficiaries receive equal financial support. This initiative plays a crucial role in reducing gender disparities in wages and employment, aligning with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets. Women, particularly in Meghalaya's matrilineal society, have shown high participation in producer groups (PGs), further strengthening economic inclusivity and empowerment (Bhutia & Liarakou, 2018). By promoting income diversification through agriculture and allied sectors, the scheme also contributes to sustainable agricultural practices, addressing concerns related to shifting cultivation, which has long been criticized for its environmental impact (Biswal & Kumar, 2013). In the face of climate change, resource depletion, and food security challenges, sustainable agriculture remains a cornerstone of rural development (Rusdiyana *et al.*, 2024). By aligning with these broader goals, the FOCUS scheme improves living standards and advances Meghalaya's vision of economic self-sufficiency while preserving its rich biodiversity.

CONCLUSION

The study assessed the impact of FOCUS scheme on the socio-economic standard and rural development aspects of the people of West Garo Hills of Meghalaya. The FOCUS program has the potential to improve sustainable agricultural and rural development in Meghalaya by promoting collectivization and financial assistance to farmers. However, main constraints such as inadequate funding, marketing limitations, and infrastructural constraints hinder its full potential. Addressing these issues through enhanced financial support, training, and market linkages can further strengthen the program's impact on rural livelihoods in Meghalaya. This model can be implemented in other states as well. There is scope for future studies in various aspects of the scheme such as implementation, elaborated action research, collaboration, motivation factors, training models, etc.

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