



Original Article

Digital Broadcasting as Communication Infrastructure: Empowering Indian Self-Help Groups for SDG-Aligned Development

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Abstract

*This paper conceptualizes how digital communication transforms India's Self-Help Groups (SHGs) into participatory media ecosystems aligned with SDGs 5 (Gender Equality), 8 (Decent Work), and 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure). Grounded in Sen's (1999) Capability Approach and Servaes' (2008) Participatory Communication Model, the study reframes communication as both infrastructure and agency. It demonstrates that digital broadcasting—via community radio, mobile apps, and social media—enhances communicative capability, transparency, and gendered participation in rural governance. However, systemic inequities persist: the digital divide (NITI Aayog, 2024), linguistic exclusion (MeitY, 2024), and mediated representation barriers impede equitable engagement. To address these, the paper proposes a **Digital Communication → Empowerment → SDG Alignment** model. This model integrates digital literacy programs, vernacular content production, and participatory feedback mechanisms to foster inclusive communication ecosystems. Policy recommendations include communication-sensitive cooperative frameworks, localized broadcasting hubs, and a Communication Equity Index to quantify inclusivity in SHG ecosystems. The study concludes that communication is not auxiliary but constitutive to development, positioning SHGs as communicative agents driving sustainable, inclusive change.*

Keywords: Self-Help Groups (SHGs); Digital Communication; Participatory Broadcastings; Communication Equity; Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); Capability Approach; India; Community Media

Introduction

India's digital transformation has redefined development paradigms for Self-Help Groups (SHGs)—grassroots collectives central to microfinance, livelihood creation, and community empowerment. With 8 million SHGs and 80 million members nationwide (Ministry of Rural Development, 2025), these groups now operate within a digitally networked public sphere where communication transcends information exchange to enable agency and empowerment.

While initiatives like Digital India and PMGDISHA have expanded digital infrastructure, equitable participation remains uneven. Communication hierarchies continue to marginalize rural women and disadvantaged communities. Here, digital broadcasting—spanning social media, community radio, and mobile platforms—acts as a catalyst for participatory communication, shifting SHGs from passive recipients to active producers of localized knowledge (MeitY, 2024). This paper frames digital mass communication as social infrastructure by integrating participatory communication theory (Servaes, 2008), the capability approach (Sen, 1999), and digital media scholarship. It examines how SHGs use digital tools to enhance transparency, participation, and collective action, aligning with SDGs 5, 8, and 9.

Empirical examples illustrate this shift: Kerala's Kudumbashree employs social media for financial inclusion and participatory governance (Sreeja & Jayalakshmi, 2025), while Maharashtra's Sangli SHGs collaborate with community radio for agricultural advisories (Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 2023). These cases mark a transition from top-down broadcasting to dialogic, community-led communication (Melkote & Steeves, 2015). Revisiting mass communication theory in the digital era highlights decentralized content creation, positioning SHGs as co-creators rather than audiences.

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For these groups, digital media serve as tools of social negotiation—enabling women to assert identity, claim visibility, and reshape rural public life.

This study bridges communication theory with sustainable development policy. Despite SHGs' role in India's SDG agenda, research seldom centers on communicative dimensions of empowerment. Communication equity—the fair access, interpretation, and circulation of information—is thus framed as a prerequisite for sustainable development (Hafkin, 2012; Dutta, 2011).

Drawing on secondary data from NABARD, NITI Aayog, and IWWAGE alongside theoretical literature, this paper proposes an integrated framework linking digital broadcasting to communicative empowerment. It identifies three core outcomes: (1) enhanced digital literacy, (2) culturally grounded communicative spaces, and (3) feedback systems reinforcing transparency and accountability.

Objective

To conceptualize how digital mass communication strengthens SHG communicative empowerment, fostering inclusive and sustainable development. By reframing communication as both a mechanism and indicator of empowerment, this paper advances a sociotechnical perspective recognizing communicative capacity as essential to human development.

Research Methodology

This study employs a conceptual-analytical qualitative design, synthesizing theoretical frameworks with secondary institutional analysis to explore how digital communication fosters empowerment and SDG alignment within India's Self-Help Groups (SHGs). Rooted in interpretive traditions of development communication (Servaes, 2008; Melkote & Steeves, 2015), the approach prioritizes understanding communicative processes as catalysts for social transformation over experimental validation.

Methodologically, the study integrates canonical theories—such as Sen's (1999) Capability Approach and Dutta's (2011) Communicating Social Change—with empirical insights from authenticated sources including NABARD (2025), NITI Aayog (2025), and MeitY (2024). Supporting data from IWWAGE (2025) and Piramal Foundation (2025) substantiate digital inclusion and gender empowerment dimensions. Through thematic synthesis, recurring constructs—digital literacy, participatory communication, and empowerment—were mapped into a causal logic model: Digital Communication → Empowerment → SDG Alignment. This framework emerged via iterative interpretation of theoretical and institutional materials, validated through cross-source triangulation (Hafkin, 2012).

The conceptual design is justified by the context-dependent nature of SHG digital systems, necessitating theoretical consolidation prior to empirical testing. While the absence of primary field data limits generalizability, validity is maintained through reliance on verified institutional evidence and

robust conceptual logic. Ethically, the research adheres to transparency standards outlined by UNESCO (2019) and ICSSR (2020) for responsible secondary data use.

By foregrounding communication as both infrastructure and agency, this study advances a sociotechnical paradigm where SHGs emerge as communicative agents driving inclusive, SDG-aligned development. The methodology balances theoretical depth with empirical grounding, ensuring scholarly rigor while preserving the study's focus on transformative communicative processes.

2. Communication and SHG Institutions

Communication anchors cooperation and collective agency in SHGs, functioning not merely as a functional necessity but as a normative process sustaining transparency, participation, and accountability. Dialogue, shared meaning-making, and participatory decision-making serve as both instruments and indicators of empowerment. As Melkote and Steeves (2015) emphasize, communication underpins social change by creating symbolic and relational contexts for participation—a principle critical to India's SHG ecosystem, which depends on constant interaction among members, facilitators, banks, and development agencies.

2.1 Communication as the Core of Collective Functioning

SHGs depend on mutual trust and accountability, reinforced through structured practices like regular meetings, rotational leadership, and transparent record-keeping, which institutionalize participation and governance (NABARD, 2025). These practices align with Servaes' (2008) dialogical model, where information flows interactively rather than hierarchically. Empirical studies show SHGs with robust communication systems excel in financial performance, cohesion, and retention, managing conflicts constructively, sharing leadership equitably, and sustaining partnerships with microfinance bodies and government programs (IWWAGE, 2024). Communication also enables collective learning by facilitating experience exchange, innovation adaptation, and intervention contextualization within sociocultural settings.

2.2 Digitalization and the Transformation of SHG Communication

Digital technologies have reshaped SHG communication, shifting from analogue to digital ecosystems—such as mobile connectivity, WhatsApp groups, and community radio webcasts—expanding interaction reach and continuity (MeitY, 2024). This transformation extends internal communication to wider networks, enabling horizontal exchanges among SHGs and vertical engagement with banks, NGOs, and state institutions. Digital platforms archive and circulate meeting minutes, financial updates, and training content, enhancing transparency. These affordances foster informational empowerment—the ability to access, interpret, and reproduce knowledge independently (Hafkin, 2012). In Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, and Telangana,

community radio and mobile-based learning democratize communication, with women's collectives producing vernacular content on health, livelihoods, and gender equality (Servaes, 2008).

2.3 Communication and Institutional Trust

Institutional trust—the belief in SHG transparency—is fundamentally communicative. It is cultivated through dialogue, feedback, and validation, legitimizing leadership and financial decisions to mitigate mismanagement risks (Dutta, 2011). NABARD (2024) notes SHGs conducting communication audits—regular assessments of participation and transparency—report higher repayment rates and satisfaction, affirming communication as a governance mechanism shaping internal management and external legitimacy.

2.4 The Cultural Dimension of SHG Communication

SHG communication is mediated by cultural idioms, language, caste, and gender norms, which can enable or restrict participation (Hafkin, 2012). Digital broadcasting amplifies women's voices via audio, video, and text but risks reproducing exclusion if dominant languages are privileged. Effective communication must remain culturally contextualized, integrating local idioms, oral narratives, and folk media into digital practices to preserve resonance. Community radio in local dialects strengthens engagement, aligning with Melkote and Steeves' (2015) argument for uniting technological innovation with cultural continuity.

2.5 Communication as Institutional Capital

Communication constitutes institutional capital—a collective asset strengthening SHG capacity to mobilize resources, coordinate action, and influence policy. Communicative capability—producing, distributing, and interpreting information—directly shapes social and economic outcomes. As Sen (1999) argues, development expands human capabilities, with communication as a key enabler. Building communicative competence through literacy, media production, and digital inclusion amplifies SHG agency. Communication thus binds social, economic, and political functions, ensuring adaptive collective action. Reframing SHGs as micro-communication systems—where dialogue generates development—aligns with Ortíz-Hernández's (2020) view that Sen's approach humanizes development by prioritizing substantive freedoms and human potential.

3. Digital Broadcasting and Development Journalism

Digital broadcasting and development journalism intersect to redefine participatory media ecosystems for India's Self-Help Groups (SHGs). This convergence marks a shift from centralized broadcasting to networked communication systems in which SHGs simultaneously function as audiences, producers, and broadcasters. The transformation fundamentally reshapes how development is narrated, negotiated, and implemented at the local level.

3.1 From Mass Media to Digital Broadcasting

Historically, Indian broadcasting—dominated by state-run channels such as All India Radio (AIR) and Doordarshan—emphasized national integration through top-down messaging, leaving minimal room for community participation (Servaes, 2008). The liberalization era, reinforced by internet expansion under BharatNet and *Digital India*, increased rural broadband penetration by nearly 60% between 2019 and 2024, empowering SHGs to utilize affordable platforms like community radio webcasts and YouTube streams (MeitY, 2024). SHGs across Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Telangana now use digital media to broadcast entrepreneurial initiatives, skill tutorials, and advocacy messages—epitomizing decentralized development communication (Melkote & Steeves, 2015).

3.2 Development Journalism in the Digital Age

Development journalism has evolved from elite-driven reporting to participatory storytelling within SHG networks. Digital platforms enable women-led groups to generate localized news, documentaries, and campaigns blending journalistic practice with participatory communication. In Tamil Nadu, SHG federations use YouTube to promote handloom cooperatives, broadening market reach via NITI Aayog's platform (2025). Similarly, Telangana's T-Fiber initiative fosters real-time interaction, illustrating a form of "development journalism from below" that restores representational agency to marginalized voices (Dutta, 2011).

3.3 Digital Broadcasting as Empowerment Infrastructure

Digital technologies now operate as empowerment infrastructure, fostering gendered information networks through which women exchange knowledge, challenge stereotypes, and construct collective identities (Hafkin, 2012). NABARD (2025) links digitally active SHGs with greater participation in governance and stronger financial coordination. Initiatives like Kudumbashree Radio exemplify this by airing narratives on gender rights and women-led enterprises, mobilizing both awareness and social action.

3.4 Bridging Journalism and Participatory Communication

SHG-led broadcasting merges journalistic ethics with participatory communication, producing co-created, culturally grounded content. Interactive tools such as WhatsApp polls and comment sections transform audiences into collaborators, democratizing the very notion of "development" (Melkote & Steeves, 2015). This hybrid communication model replaces sensationalism with inclusivity and transparency, positioning participatory journalism as a pillar of sustainable communication for development.

3.5 The Socio-Developmental Outcomes

Digital broadcasting generates three interlinked outcomes: economic empowerment through expanded market access, informational democracy via community-driven narratives, and institutional accountability through broadcasted

audits and grievance redressal. These outcomes align with Sen's (1999) capability approach, wherein digital broadcasting enhances agency and broadens freedoms. In doing so, it advances gender equity and social justice as integral dimensions of participatory development (Hafkin, 2012; Dutta, 2011).

4. SHGs, Communication, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Self-Help Groups (SHGs) function as vital conduits for realizing SDGs 5, 8, and 9 at the grassroots level. Their communicative practices—ranging from internal deliberation and digital interaction to public broadcasting—play a decisive role in aligning collective action with the UN's 2030 Agenda (United Nations, 2015). This section explores communication as a cross-cutting enabler of SDG attainment, drawing on institutional insights from NABARD, NITI Aayog, and IWWAGE.

4.1 Communication and SDG 5: Gender Equality

Digital platforms such as WhatsApp and community radio empower SHGs to challenge gender norms and foster women's leadership. IWWAGE (2025) documents SHGs in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh employing digital storytelling to amplify women's perspectives, forming gendered communication networks (Hafkin, 2012). Servaes (2008) identifies participatory communication as foundational to empowerment, converting symbolic inclusion into active engagement. Through digital broadcasting, SHGs cultivate solidarity across social boundaries, transforming communication into both a medium of visibility and an infrastructure of empowerment essential for SDG 5.

4.2 Communication and SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth

Digital communication enables SHGs to strengthen economic outcomes and market participation. NABARD (2024) highlights SHG weavers in Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu using WhatsApp groups for design sharing and e-commerce collaboration, boosting productivity and innovation. These networks disseminate technical knowledge and entrepreneurial learning, embodying Melkote and Steeves' (2015) notion of "communication for empowerment," which situates SHGs within a broader communicative economy.

4.3 Communication and SDG 9: Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure

Digital integration has repositioned SHGs as micro-innovation hubs. Initiatives like BharatNet and rural broadband infrastructure (MeitY, 2024) enable SHGs to serve as intermediaries disseminating digital literacy and community-level innovations. In Telangana, broadband-enabled SHGs operate digital kiosks that train others to access online services—illustrating Sen's (1999) capability approach, where information access constitutes a core dimension of human development.

4.4 Communication Equity as a Cross-Cutting SDG Enabler

Communication equity—defined as fair participation in communication processes—is pivotal

to inclusive SDG progress. Dutta (2011) emphasizes dismantling barriers such as digital divides and linguistic exclusion. Embedding vernacular broadcasting and localized digital literacy fosters communicative justice, transforming communication from a technical tool into a measurable indicator of empowerment and institutional vitality.

4.5 Conceptual Synthesis

Communication mediates the translation of global SDG goals into localized, actionable practices. By integrating digital broadcasting and participatory communication, SHGs advance a communication-centered sustainability model that positions them as both economic agents and communicative actors disseminating development knowledge. Communication thereby functions as social infrastructure—anchoring the 2030 Agenda's values of equality, participation, and empowerment within community-led development.

5. Key Communication Challenges

Despite advances in SHG digital transformation, communication's developmental potential remains constrained by structural, cultural, and institutional barriers. These challenges underscore the gap between technological diffusion and communicative empowerment—central to realizing SDG principles of inclusivity (Melkote & Steeves, 2015; Servaes, 2008). This section identifies five key challenges: the digital divide, language exclusion, neglect of traditional media, information gatekeeping, and limited communication literacy.

5.1 The Digital Divide

The digital divide—unequal access to devices, connectivity, and platforms—persists across gender, geographic, and socioeconomic dimensions. NITI Aayog (2024) reports that only 42% of rural women in India use smartphones compared to 78% of men, with states such as Bihar and Jharkhand recording less than 40% female access. NABARD (2025) notes that only 35% of SHGs regularly engage with digital platforms. Structural barriers—mobility restrictions, patriarchal control of devices, and literacy gaps—reinforce existing inequities. Bridging this divide demands prioritizing *communicative access* over mere technological availability.

5.2 Language and Content Exclusion

Linguistic hierarchies and the absence of localized content marginalize regional and tribal language users. Over 60% of SHG members in Karnataka, Odisha, and Assam prefer local-language instruction, yet fewer than 25% of SHG digital materials are available in vernaculars. This perpetuates *epistemic exclusion* (Dutta, 2011), where dominant linguistic codes define legitimate knowledge. A multilingual communication ecosystem is thus essential for inclusive participation and equitable knowledge sharing.

5.3 Neglect of Traditional and Community Media

Policy focus on digital transformation often sidelines traditional media—folk theatre, storytelling, and community radio—that have historically sustained rural engagement. Less than 20% of SHGs

utilize these formats for training or outreach (NABARD, 2024; IWWAGE, 2024), leading to cultural discontinuity. A hybrid model integrating traditional and digital communication, as advocated by Servaes (2008), is crucial to maintaining cultural relevance and participatory authenticity.

5.4 Information Gatekeeping and Communicative Elitism

External intermediaries frequently mediate SHG narratives, constraining grassroots agency. IWWAGE (2025) observes that many SHG members rely on NGOs to upload or moderate digital content, limiting their autonomy. Genuine participation requires decentralizing communicative authority and fostering self-representation to prevent instrumentalization of SHG voices within hierarchical communication systems.

5.5 Low Communication Literacy and Interpretive Competence

While digital literacy initiatives like PMGDISHA have expanded technical skills, they seldom address *critical media literacy*. Many SHG members access online platforms yet lack the ability to evaluate misinformation or produce persuasive, context-sensitive content (MeitY, 2024). Melkote and Steeves (2015) emphasize bridging the gap between access and agency through targeted investment in ethics, content design, and interpretive skills.

5.6 Toward a Communicative Capability Framework

Technological infrastructure alone cannot guarantee equity or empowerment. A capability-oriented approach (Sen, 1999) is needed to enhance members' abilities to interpret, produce, and negotiate information meaningfully. Moving from digital inclusion to *communicative empowerment* requires gender-sensitive training, locally relevant content ecosystems, and community-led media ownership models that embed participation within the fabric of rural communication systems.

6. Conceptual Framework — Digital Communication → Empowerment → SDG Alignment

This framework conceptualizes digital communication as a structural enabler of empowerment and sustainable development within India's SHG ecosystem, integrating theoretical insights from participatory communication, capability expansion, and digital infrastructure studies. It models the causal

6.1 Framework Logic

Stage	Core Concept	Operational Elements	Empirical Manifestation (India SHG Context)	SDG Linkage
1. Digital Communication Infrastructure	Access to digital tools, broadband, and media networks.	Connectivity (BharatNet), mobile penetration, affordable data plans, social media broadcasting tools.	Rural broadband projects in Telangana and Kerala; digital recordkeeping in NABARD-supported SHGs.	SDG 9 – Industry, Innovation, Infrastructure
2. Communicative	Capability to	Digital literacy	Digital Sakhi (Piramal	SDG 5 – Gender

and relational dynamics linking communication, empowerment, and SDG-aligned outcomes, emphasizing three interdependent pillars:

Digital Communication Infrastructure: Comprising access to devices, broadband networks, and digital platforms (e.g., WhatsApp groups, community radio, mobile apps), this pillar enables communicative participation by bridging spatial and temporal divides. As MeitY (2024) notes, rural broadband expansion under BharatNet has increased SHG access to real-time information exchange, reducing dependency on physical meetings.

Communicative Empowerment: This pillar focuses on expanding SHG members' capacity to access, interpret, produce, and disseminate information—a process aligned with Sen's (1999) *Capability Approach*, which frames development as expanding substantive freedoms. For instance, digital literacy programs like PMGDISHA (2025) have enhanced members' ability to critically engage with online content, fostering agency through self-representation.

SDG Alignment: The translation of communicative capabilities into measurable outcomes tied to SDGs 5, 8, and 9. Digitally empowered SHGs demonstrate higher participation in local governance (SDG 5), improved livelihood diversification (SDG 8), and enhanced access to digital infrastructure (SDG 9). NABARD (2025) links SHG-led digital broadcasting to increased market linkages and financial inclusion, aligning with SDG 8's emphasis on decent work.

The framework synthesizes Servaes' (2008) *Participatory Communication Model*—which positions communication as the social infrastructure of development—with Melkote and Steeves' (2015) emphasis on empowerment as an ongoing communicative process. It further integrates Hafkin's (2012) concept of *communication equity*, underscoring that equitable access to digital tools is insufficient without interpretive competence and content localization.

By framing digital communication as both a mechanism and an outcome of empowerment, this model advances a sociotechnical perspective where SHGs function as *micro-communication systems*—spaces where dialogue generates development. It challenges top-down communication paradigms by centering grassroots media production, ensuring that SDG progress is driven not by state-led messaging but by locally anchored, participatory narratives.

Empowerment	interpret, produce, and exchange information.	training, participatory broadcasting, community radio, vernacular content creation.	Foundation), IWWAGE media training for women entrepreneurs.	Equality
3. Collective Agency	Group-level coordination, deliberation, and social action.	Peer-to-peer WhatsApp networks, online meetings, participatory decision-making forums.	SHG-led grievance redress and local audits via Facebook Live; collaborative microenterprise ventures.	SDG 8 – Decent Work and Economic Growth
4. SDG-Aligned Outcomes	Transformation of communicative capabilities into sustainable development actions.	Policy engagement, visibility, innovation diffusion, livelihood integration.	Enhanced governance participation and market access via digital platforms (NITI Aayog, 2025).	Cross-SDG Alignment (5, 8, 9)

6.2 Theoretical Integration

Sen's (1999) Capability Approach reconceptualises communication as a capability rather than a commodity. Digital media access expands substantive freedoms, allowing SHG members to move from passive recipients of information to autonomous communicators shaping development discourse. Servaes' (2008) Participatory Communication Model highlights dialogic, bottom-up exchange, where platforms such as community radio and WhatsApp foster participatory spaces and equity within SHG networks. Melkote and Steeves (2015) view empowerment as communicative action—rooted in participation, dialogue, and content creation—transforming social relations and sustaining development beyond economic indicators. Collectively, these theories demonstrate that communication-based empowerment is cumulative: digital access enables dialogue, which fosters

collective agency, ultimately driving SDG-aligned transformation.

6.3 Communication–Empowerment–SDG Alignment Model

The simplified causal logic is as follows:

Digital Communication Infrastructure → Communicative Empowerment → Collective Agency → SDG-Aligned Development Outcomes

This integrated model maps how digital communication infrastructure strengthens communicative empowerment, fostering collective agency that translates into measurable outcomes aligned with SDGs 5, 8, and 9. It positions communication as both a mechanism and a marker of sustainable development, consistent with Sen's emphasis on freedom as capability and Servaes' advocacy for participatory equity.

Dimension	Input (Enabler)	Process (Transformation)	Outcome (Empowerment & Development)
Technological	Broadband connectivity, affordable mobile data, digital tools (MeitY, 2024)	Digital broadcasting & data-sharing across SHGs	Enhanced digital participation and innovation (SDG 9)
Social	Gender inclusion, group communication networks (NABARD, 2025)	Peer training, leadership dialogue, participatory journalism	Strengthened institutional trust & governance (SDG 8)
Cultural	Vernacular media, local idioms (Piramal Foundation, 2025)	Culturally resonant communication, local broadcasting	Sustained cultural participation, gender visibility (SDG 5)
Institutional	Policy integration, NGO collaboration (IWWAGE, 2025)	Communication-sensitive governance and accountability systems	Institutional transparency & responsive local governance

6.5 Policy Implications of the Framework Communication as Infrastructure:

Policies should institutionalize communication systems—broadband networks, radio, and digital hubs—as foundational infrastructure equal in importance to financial or physical assets for SHG sustainability.

Localization of Communication Systems:

Promoting vernacular and culturally contextualized broadcasting ecosystems is vital to ensure inclusivity and prevent digital marginalization within SHG communication networks.

Integration into SDG Monitoring:

Incorporating communication equity indicators into SDG progress assessments will enable systematic tracking of access, participation, and representational balance across SHGs.

This framework thus offers a multi-level analytical lens for evaluating SHG empowerment, aligning communicative capacity with measurable indicators of gender equality, economic inclusion, and innovation-driven development.

7. Policy and Practice Implications

Integrating digital communication within India's Self-Help Groups (SHGs) necessitates a coherent, communication-sensitive policy architecture that recognizes communication as both infrastructure and empowerment. Translating this conceptual framework into practice requires coordinated interventions across policy, institutional, technological, and community levels.

The following section outlines a multi-tiered set of policy and practice implications, grounded in authenticated empirical findings and anchored in established theoretical paradigms: participatory communication (Servaes, 2008), empowerment-

oriented development (Melkote & Steeves, 2015), and capability expansion (Sen, 1999).

7.1 Communication as Development Infrastructure

Communication must be redefined as a **core infrastructure of development**, equivalent in importance to financial, physical, or technological infrastructure. The **Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY, 2024)** underscores that India's rural connectivity goals cannot achieve inclusivity without communicative integration. Similarly, **NABARD (2025)** notes that SHGs with structured digital communication systems exhibit stronger governance and accountability outcomes.

Government and institutional stakeholders should therefore invest not only in broadband and hardware but also in *communication processes*—the social architectures through which information circulates, trust is built, and agency is exercised.

7.2 Policy Recommendations Framework

Policy Domain	Recommendation	Implementation Strategy	Expected Outcome / SDG Linkage	Primary Source(s)
1. Governance and Institutional Policy	Integrate <i>communication equity</i> as a measurable development indicator in SHG programs.	NABARD to include "communication audits" in SHG monitoring, measuring participation, access, and feedback mechanisms.	Enhanced transparency and participatory governance (SDG 16 cross-link).	NABARD, 2025; Servaes, 2008.
2. Digital Literacy and Capacity Building	Scale <i>Digital Sakhi</i> and <i>Digital Didi</i> models nationwide, with vernacular media training for women SHG leaders.	Partnership between Piramal Foundation, IWWAGE, and MeitY under Digital India framework.	Improved digital inclusion and women's communicative capability (SDG 5).	Piramal Foundation, 2025; MeitY, 2024.
3. Local Broadcasting Ecosystems	Establish <i>District-level SHG Media Hubs</i> integrating community radio, podcasts, and social video production.	Collaborative funding from state governments and local NGOs under NITI Aayog's SDG localization initiatives.	Strengthened local content ecosystems and cultural participation (SDG 9).	NITI Aayog, 2025; Melkote & Steeves, 2015.
4. Vernacular Content Production	Promote multilingual content generation using AI-supported translation and local media incubators.	MeitY to provide grants to regional language broadcasters and women-led media startups.	Culturally inclusive communication and knowledge democratization (SDG 10).	MeitY, 2024; Hafkin, 2012.
5. NGO and Private Sector Collaboration	Mandate that development partners incorporate <i>participatory communication training</i> in SHG interventions.	CSR-linked capacity-building modules emphasizing media literacy, storytelling, and feedback culture.	Enhanced grassroots representation and empowerment (SDG 8).	Dutta, 2011; IWWAGE, 2025.
6. Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E)	Develop <i>Communication-Sensitive Evaluation Metrics</i> aligned with SDG reporting frameworks.	Introduce "Communicative Empowerment Index (CEI)" tracking access, expression, and participation levels.	Institutionalized measurement of empowerment outcomes (SDG 5, 8, 9).	NITI Aayog, 2025; Sen, 1999.

7.3 Practice-Level Implications

Beyond policy formulation, sustainable transformation depends on institutional practice shifts within SHGs and their federations. Evidence from IWWAGE (2025) and NABARD (2025) underscores that internal

communication cultures critically shape the long-term resilience and inclusivity of SHGs. Practical interventions should encompass:

Communication-Sensitive Governance: Embed structured communication roles (e.g., communication coordinators, digital convenors) within SHGs to

manage digital records, facilitate feedback, and oversee local broadcasting initiatives. These roles ensure systematic information flow and participatory decision-making.

Participatory Media Production: Enable SHGs to produce community radio programs, podcasts, and short-form video content highlighting livelihood initiatives, market innovations, and gender equity. This repositions SHGs from passive beneficiaries to active broadcasters of local development narratives (Melkote & Steeves, 2015).

Feedback and Accountability Mechanisms: Institutionalize digital feedback platforms (e.g., WhatsApp, Telegram, Facebook Live) for grievance redress and public dialogue, ensuring reciprocal communication with local governance systems. As

7.4 Institutional Implementation Pathway

A coherent policy-practice nexus can be achieved through a **four-step implementation cycle**,

Step	Action Focus	Lead Institutions	Time Frame (Indicative)	Expected Outcome
1	Policy formulation: Recognize communication as infrastructure in SHG guidelines.	NITI Aayog, NABARD	Short term (1–2 years)	Institutionalized communication policy for SHGs.
2	Capacity enhancement: Implement national digital literacy and media production training.	MeitY, Piramal Foundation, IWWAGE	Medium term (2–4 years)	Enhanced communicative empowerment and inclusion.
3	Infrastructure expansion: Establish community broadcasting hubs in every district.	State Governments, Doordarshan, All India Radio	Medium term (3–5 years)	Localized content ecosystems and participatory broadcasting.
4	Monitoring and evaluation: Integrate Communication Equity Index into SDG reporting.	NITI Aayog, Ministry of Statistics & Programme Implementation	Long term (5+ years)	Measurable communication-driven SDG progress.

7.5 Communication as Governance Transformation

These shifts redefine SHGs as grassroots communication institutions—nodes of participatory governance. A communication-centered policy framework ensures empowerment functions as both a means and an outcome of development. As Sen (1999) emphasizes, genuine development occurs when individuals attain substantive freedom to express, decide, and act. Within SHGs, communicative capability translates this freedom into practice through the ability to articulate needs, challenge inequities, and co-create solutions via digital platforms.

8.1 Communication as Capability and Infrastructure

Communication operates simultaneously as a capability (Sen, 1999) and as social infrastructure (Servaes, 2008). Digital systems—community radio, mobile platforms, and local broadcasting—create environments conducive to agency, deliberation, and inclusion. Evidence from NABARD (2025) and IWWAGE (2025) indicates that SHGs with structured communication processes exhibit higher

Servaes (2008) notes, communication without feedback constitutes mere transmission rather than genuine participation.

Cross-Sector Partnerships: Cultivate collaborations between SHGs, media departments, and NGOs to co-develop localized communication toolkits integrating traditional forms (folk theatre, storytelling) with digital technologies, strengthening cultural relevance and digital inclusivity.

Institutional Capacity Building: Integrate communication management modules into SHG leadership training under NABARD's Micro Enterprise Development Programme (MEDP), emphasizing media ethics, participatory facilitation, and content design for social impact.

aligning communication interventions with measurable development outcomes:

levels of trust, transparency, and member retention. This positions communication as an institutional asset essential for cohesion and equitable development.

8.2 From Participation to Representation

Digitalization transforms SHGs from passive recipients to active narrators of their development experiences. Through platforms such as YouTube and community radio, members broadcast entrepreneurial achievements, governance practices, and social innovations, reclaiming representational control (Dutta, 2011). This evolution exemplifies Sen's (1999) notion of "freedom as development," where communicative rights are directly translated into empowerment outcomes and social recognition.

8.3 Communication Equity and the SDG Nexus

Communication acts as an enabling force across SDGs 5, 8, and 9. Under SDG 5, SHG-led broadcasting amplifies women's visibility and leadership. For SDG 8, it facilitates knowledge exchange and supports digital entrepreneurship. Under SDG 9, community media hubs nurture innovation ecosystems. Communication equity—defined as the fair distribution of communicative opportunities—is critical; without it, digital

advancement risks reinforcing preexisting social and gender inequalities.

8.4 Persistent Structural Challenges

Despite progress, systemic barriers endure—most notably the digital divide, linguistic exclusion, and information gatekeeping (NITI Aayog, 2025; Piramal Foundation, 2025). These are epistemic challenges rooted in unequal access to representational power. Institutional frameworks often depend on NGO intermediaries, which can perpetuate communicative hierarchies. Addressing these issues requires prioritizing autonomous communicative capability and institutionalizing communication-sensitive instruments such as a Communication Equity Index.

8.5 Theoretical Implications

This study advances three interrelated propositions:

From Diffusion to Capability: Communication is an internalized human capability, not an external input. Empowerment occurs when individuals interpret and act autonomously (Sen, 1999; Melkote & Steeves, 2015).

From Access to Agency: Communication development fosters interpretive, dialogical, and representational agency (Servaes, 2008). Digital broadcasting embodies this by transforming communication into participatory practice.

From Information to Infrastructure: Communication constitutes development infrastructure, sustaining governance, innovation, and cultural continuity (NABARD, 2025; MeitY, 2024).

8.6 Toward a Communication-Sensitive Development Paradigm

The evidence supports a paradigm in which communicative access, participation, and feedback are institutionalized as integral dimensions of empowerment. SHGs emerge as micro-communication ecosystems—producing localized content, facilitating horizontal information exchange, and modeling participatory governance. This actualizes “empowerment through dialogue” (Melkote & Steeves, 2015), repositioning SHGs from beneficiaries to communicators of sustainable transformation. Institutionalizing communication equity bridges digital expansion with social justice, affirming communication as the foundation of the SDGs’ inclusive vision.

9. Conclusion

The evolution of digital mass communication within India’s SHG ecosystem redefines development as a communicative process. This study demonstrates that communication—viewed as infrastructure, capability, and agency—transcends its instrumental role to become a constitutive dimension of empowerment and sustainable development. Integrating Servaes’ (2008) participatory communication model, Melkote and Steeves’ (2015) empowerment paradigm, and Sen’s (1999) capability approach, digital broadcasting emerges as a transformative social mechanism that enables SHGs to shift from passive recipients of information to active producers of knowledge, shaping both governance and public discourse.

9.1 Synthesis of Findings

Communication as Structural Empowerment:

SHGs that institutionalize communication practices such as community radio and digital storytelling display higher levels of transparency, trust, and collective agency (NABARD, 2025; IWWAGE, 2025). Communication thus serves as the structural connective tissue fostering cohesion and participation.

Digital Broadcasting as Social Infrastructure:

Through MeitY’s (2024) Digital India initiatives, community-driven broadcasting has empowered women-led SHGs to expand economic participation, articulate social issues, and engage more effectively with governance systems.

SDG Alignment:

Communicative empowerment within SHGs aligns with SDG 5 (gender equality), SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth), and SDG 9 (innovation and infrastructure), enhancing visibility, collaboration, and digital inclusion (NITI Aayog, 2025).

Barriers and Inequities:

Persistent divides—digital, linguistic, and representational—highlight the need to prioritize communicative capability-building beyond infrastructure investment (Piramal Foundation, 2024; NITI Aayog, 2024).

9.2 Scholarly and Practical Contributions

Theoretical:

Reconceptualizes communication as developmental infrastructure, moving beyond diffusion models toward capability-based and participatory paradigms.

Empirical:

Identifies pathways through which digital communication transforms SHG functioning—enhancing gendered participation, institutional accountability, and localized innovation.

Policy:

Proposes a communication-sensitive framework emphasizing vernacular inclusion, critical digital literacy, and participatory broadcasting to position SHGs as decentralized agents of SDG advancement.

9.3 Communication-Driven Development Paradigm

Communication functions simultaneously as both the means and measure of empowerment. Digital broadcasting provides the infrastructure for agency, participatory communication enables dialogue, and empowerment manifests as collective capability and transformative social action—resonating with Sen’s (1999) principle of development as freedom.

9.4 Future Research Directions

Conduct comparative state-level studies (e.g., Kerala, Tamil Nadu) to assess correlations between communicative capability and SHG performance.

Develop Communication Equity Indices to evaluate inclusivity, feedback mechanisms, and access to media ecosystems. Investigate intersectional determinants—caste, age, education—affecting digital participation among women in SHGs. Examine longitudinal impacts of digital broadcasting on collective agency, institutional trust, and policy responsiveness.

9.5 Concluding Reflection

The convergence of digital communication, participatory broadcasting, and SHG organization heralds a communication-centered paradigm of development in India. Empowerment is no longer confined to economic inclusion—it is a communicative process anchored in access, participation, and dialogue. By fostering inclusive, vernacular, and participatory communication ecosystems, SHGs evolve into agents of self-determined progress, amplifying marginalized voices and driving sustainable transformation in alignment with the SDGs.

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Conflicts of interest

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