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Active Communities

Strengthening Sports and Physical Activity in Rural India

Issue Brief #9



Introduction

Physical inactivity has emerged as a significant challenge in India, with wide-ranging implications for public health, economic productivity, and social well-being. As per a 2024 report, an estimated 155 million Indian adults and 45 million adolescents do not meet the World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines for physical activity (PA), while 223 million Indian adults fall short of the South Asian benchmark of 232 minutes per week.¹ If current trends continue, data from the WHO predicts that by 2030, around 60% of adults in India will be inactive.²

This paints a stark picture, particularly in rural India, where participation in choice-based or leisure-time PA is alarmingly low. Several studies have found that, especially in rural areas, engagement in PA mostly revolves around occupational or household activity, rather than voluntary or recreational forms of sports and physical activity (SAPA).

Patterns of SAPA across different domains

There remains a persistent gap in rural SAPA engagement. While rural residents are often engaged in work- or travel-related SAPA, they are significantly less active in recreational or leisure-time activity. For instance, one study

found that rural adults spend twice as much time in SAPA at home or at the workplace compared to their urban counterparts³, yet urban residents reported higher levels of leisure-time SAPA, alongside more sedentary behaviour. This distinction is crucial: much of rural PA stems from necessity, not choice. In many cases, people tend to take up PA only after a medical diagnosis or on the advice of a health professional.⁴

According to an ICMR study, over 90% of respondents reported no engagement in recreational SAPA, with rural respondents (93.2%) faring worse than urban counterparts (88.7%).⁵ These patterns are shaped by overlapping factors: limited awareness about the benefits of SAPA, lack of exposure to diverse ways of being active, long travel times, and, most importantly, restricted access to safe and inclusive spaces for recreation. The impact is visible in the country's growing burden of non-communicable diseases such as obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular conditions, cancers, and respiratory illnesses. Physical inactivity also undermines workforce productivity, inflates healthcare costs, and exacerbates inequalities.

Globally, domains of PA differ by context: in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), PA is concentrated in occupational, household,

¹ SSA-Dalberg, The State of Sports and PA Report (2024), <https://sports-society.org/policyreports/state-of-sports-and-physical-activity-in-india/>

² Strain, Tessa, Seth Flaxman, Regina Guthold, Elizaveta Semenova, Melanie Cowan, Leanne M. Riley, Fiona C. Bull, and Gretchen A. Stevens. "National, regional, and global trends in insufficient physical activity among adults from 2000 to 2022: a pooled analysis of 507 population-based surveys with 5·7 million participants." *The Lancet Global Health* (2024). [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/article/PIIS2214-109X\(24\)00150-5/fulltext#gr2](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/article/PIIS2214-109X(24)00150-5/fulltext#gr2)

³ Ramamoorthy, T., Kulothungan, V., & Mathur, P. (2022). Prevalence and correlates of insufficient PA among adults aged 18–69 years in India: findings from the national noncommunicable disease monitoring survey. *Journal of PA and Health*, 19(3), 150-159.

⁴ Garg, S., & Kutty, V. R. (2019). "Do I need exercise?" A Qualitative Study on Factors Affecting Leisure-Time PA in India. *The Qualitative Report*, 24(5), 1065-1082. Retrieved from <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol24/iss5/10>

⁵ Anjana, R. M., Pradeepa, R., Das, A. K., Deepa, M., Bhansali, A., Joshi, S. R., ... & ICMR-INDIAB Collaborative Study Group. (2014). PA and inactivity patterns in India—results from the ICMR-INDIAB study (Phase-1)[ICMR-INDIAB-5]. *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and PA*, 11(1), 26.

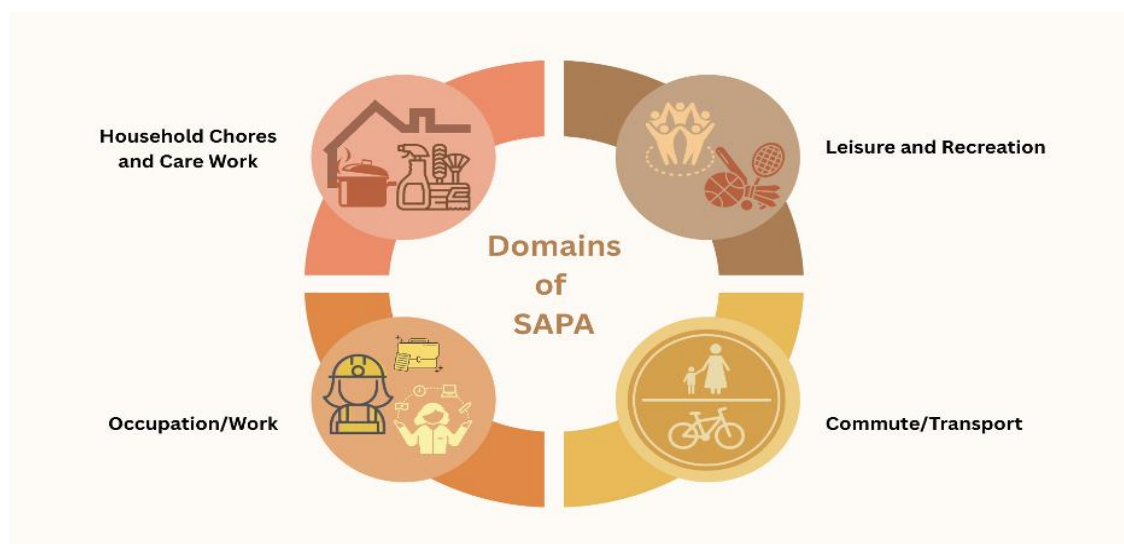
and transport-related activities, whereas in high-income countries (HICs), leisure-time PA is dominant.⁶ Research on SAPA in rural India remains limited, with most studies focusing on urbanisation. Findings from global studies highlight that urbanisation reduces overall PA, with household and occupational PA declining most sharply in LMICs.

A study in rural southern India, for example, found that 75% of SAPA was work-related, 18% transport-related, and only 7% leisure-time.⁷ This reflects the lack of proactive, recreational, or community-based engagement.

Similar rural-urban disparities have been observed elsewhere—for instance, in the United States, rural residents engage in significantly less leisure-time PA than urban counterparts.⁸

Patterns among older adults add further nuance: in rural areas, vigorous activity often takes the form of farm-related work, as many elderly remain engaged in agricultural labour.⁹ Meanwhile, aspirations and lifestyles are changing. A dual pattern is emerging—traditional PA through farming and household labour persists, while newer opportunities for “modern” forms of sports and recreation, such as gym use, are becoming more visible, particularly in peri-urban areas.¹⁰

Figure 1: The different domains of SAPA engagement



⁶ Boakye, K., Bovbjerg, M., Schuna Jr, J., Branscum, A., Varma, R. P., Ismail, R., ... & Hystad, P. (2023). Urbanization and physical activity in the global Prospective Urban and Rural Epidemiology study. *Scientific reports*, 13(1), 290.

⁷ Newtonraj, Ariarathinam; Vincent, Antony; Gowtham, P. J.; Haritha, S.; Ilaveyini, S.. Level of insufficient physical activity among adults in a rural area of South India: A population-based cross-sectional study. *Journal of Current Research in Scientific Medicine* 5(2):p 105-109, Jul-Dec 2019. | DOI: 10.4103/jcrsm.jcrsm_25_19

⁸ Robertson, M. C., Song, J., Taylor, W. C., Durand, C. P., & Basen-Engquist, K. M. (2018). Urban-rural differences in aerobic physical activity, muscle strengthening exercise, and screen-time sedentary behavior. *The Journal of Rural Health*, 34(4), 401-410.; Pickett, A. C., Bowie, M., Berg, A., Towne Jr, S. D., Hollifield, S., & Smith, M. L. (2023). Rural-urban differences in physical activity tracking and engagement in a web-based platform. *Public Health Reports*, 138(1), 76-84.

⁹ Kumar, M., Srivastava, S., & Muhammad, T. J. S. R. (2022). Relationship between physical activity and cognitive functioning among older Indian adults. *Scientific reports*, 12(1), 2725.

¹⁰ Joshi-Reddy, K., Kamble, V., Kunte, P., Hardy-Johnson, P., Fall, C. H., Barker, M., ... & Kehoe, S. H. (2021). Adolescent diet and physical activity in the context of economic, social and nutrition transition in rural Maharashtra, India: a qualitative study. *Public Health Nutrition*, 24(16), 5299-5308. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10195224/pdf/S1368980020002220a.pdf>

Demographic dimensions of SAPA in rural India

● Gendered gaps

Across all domains, a consistent gender gap in SAPA engagement persists. India is among 61 countries where the gender gap in physical inactivity exceeds 10%. By 2030, this gap between men and women could rise to 17%.¹¹ While rural men are among the most active, rural women may be slightly more active than urban women—yet the nature of activity differs significantly. Women’s PA is primarily tied to household or occupational tasks, rather than voluntary or leisure pursuits.

For girls and young women, barriers are particularly acute. Safety concerns and the increasing burden of domestic chores limit opportunities to participate in sports or community-based recreation.¹² Studies also show that among adolescents, rural boys are the most active, while girls consistently lag behind.¹³

Men, across both rural and urban settings, remain more active than women. For instance, 19.1% of rural females report engaging in vigorous activity compared to just 6.3% of urban females—but this is largely occupational or household-related.¹⁴ Structural and cultural barriers compound these disparities: academic pressure, parental expectations, and the lack of safe, welcoming

spaces all restrict participation. These gendered inequalities undermine both equity and social cohesion, preventing the population from realizing the diverse benefits from SAPA participation.

It is also worth noting that much of the global evidence base around PA is shaped by high-income country contexts, which fail to reflect the lived realities of LMICs such as India. As comparative studies highlight, PA in LMICs is often driven by economic necessity rather than recreation, health, or enjoyment—leaving women and girls especially disadvantaged.¹⁵

● Age-based differences

The importance of SAPA extends beyond youth and working-age adults. Studies in India analysing individuals aged 60 and above found that elderly people who engaged in regular PA demonstrated better cognitive functioning, particularly in executive skills and decision-making. Thus, PA is vital for promoting healthy ageing.¹⁶

Some research suggests that rural older adults may appear to be ageing more successfully than their urban peers, though this may be influenced by underdiagnosis and under-reporting of diseases in rural areas.¹⁷

Even so, the evidence points to the need for integrated, context-sensitive strategies that

¹¹ Strain, Tessa, Seth Flaxman, Regina Guthold, Elizaveta Semenova, Melanie Cowan, Leanne M. Riley, Fiona C. Bull, and Gretchen A. Stevens. "National, regional, and global trends in insufficient physical activity among adults from 2000 to 2022: a pooled analysis of 507 population-based surveys with 5·7 million participants." *The Lancet Global Health* (2024).

[https://www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/article/PIIS2214-109X\(24\)00150-5/fulltext#gr2](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/article/PIIS2214-109X(24)00150-5/fulltext#gr2)

¹² SSA-Dalberg, The State of Sports and PA Report (2024), <https://sports-society.org/policyreports/state-of-sports-and-physical-activity-in-india/>

¹³ Kundapur, Rashmi & Baisil, Sharon. (2017). Assessment of difference in physical activities in urban and rural adolescents of Mangalore. *Indian Journal of Community Health*. 29. 75-80. 10.47203/IJCH.2017.v29i01.011

¹⁴ Tripathy, J. P., Thakur, J. S., Jeet, G., Chawla, S., Jain, S., & Prasad, R. (2016). Urban rural differences in diet, physical activity and obesity in India: are we witnessing the great Indian equalisation? Results from a cross-sectional STEPS survey. *BMC public health*, 16(1), 816.

¹⁵ Salvo, D., Jáuregui, A., Adlakha, D., Sarmiento, O. L., & Reis, R. S. (2023). When moving is the only option: the role of necessity versus choice for understanding and promoting PA in low-and middle-income countries. *Annual review of public health*, 44(1), 151-169.

¹⁶ Kumar, M., Srivastava, S., & Muhammad, T. J. S. R. (2022). Relationship between physical activity and cognitive functioning among older Indian adults. *Scientific reports*, 12(1), 2725.

¹⁷ Ibid.

draw on local realities. For example, Primary Health Centres (PHCs) and educational institutions can serve as hubs for community-based SAPA interventions, while natural environments and outdoor spaces can be adapted for recreation.

Children's engagement also provides interesting insights: while urban children report slightly higher overall levels of moderate to vigorous PA (83.4 minutes/day vs. 81.2 minutes/day), rural children are far more likely to use active school transport (62.5% vs. 14.7%).¹⁸ This suggests that mobility-based and commute-linked strategies may be particularly effective in rural contexts and could also support older populations.

The adolescent population is experiencing particularly rapid changes in SAPA engagement, shaped by digitalisation and

urbanisation. Traditional forms of SAPA through farming and household work continues, but newer forms of recreation, such as gyms, are emerging in peri-urban regions.¹⁹ At the same time, sedentary behaviour is rising, with adolescents spending increasing amounts of leisure time on television, social media, and digital platforms. Safety concerns further restrict outdoor activities for girls, deepening gender gaps.²⁰

Regional studies reflect this complexity. In Telangana, rural adolescents were found to engage in relatively low levels of PA, yet the energy spent on household or farm labour mitigated some risks of sedentary behaviour.²¹ In Maharashtra, adequate PA was identified as a key factor in maintaining lower BMI levels among rural adolescents compared to their urban peers.²²

¹⁸ Katapally TR, Patel J, Khadilkar A, Bhawra J. 2024. The critical need for child and youth perceptions of active living in India: capturing context complexity in rural and urban regions. *PeerJ* 12:e18350 <http://doi.org/10.7717/peerj.18350>

¹⁹ Joshi-Reddy, K., Kamble, V., Kunte, P., Hardy-Johnson, P., Fall, C. H., Barker, M., ... & Kehoe, S. H. (2021). Adolescent diet and physical activity in the context of economic, social and nutrition transition in rural Maharashtra, India: a qualitative study. *Public Health Nutrition*, 24(16), 5299-5308. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10195224/pdf/S1368980020002220a.pdf>

²⁰ Bhattacharya, M., Picchioni, F., Zanello, G., & Srinivasan, C. S. (2024). Quantity and quality of physical activity during adolescence: Evidence from a mixed-method study in rural Telangana, India. *Journal of Biosocial Science*, 56(2), 314-337.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Malik, A. S., & Chatterjee, K. (2023). A cross-sectional study to compare levels of physical activity among adolescents in rural and urban areas of Western Maharashtra. *Medical Journal Armed Forces India*, 79, S237-S243. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0377123722001873>

Panchayats: The foundational layer for SAPA in rural India

Panchayats are institutions of self-government for rural areas in India, organised in a three-tier structure: village (Gram Panchayat), intermediate/block/mandal (Block Samiti), and district (Zilla Parishad). Members of all three tiers are elected.

Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) are mandated to formulate and implement socio-economic development plans, particularly for the functions listed in the Eleventh Schedule, thereby advancing local economic growth and ensuring social justice. India currently has over 2.55 lakh village Panchayats (in addition to traditional local bodies in states such as Mizoram, Meghalaya, and Nagaland, and in certain hilly areas such as parts of Manipur, Darjeeling district in West Bengal, Assam, and Tripura), 6,733 block Panchayats, and 674 district Panchayats.²³ On average, each Panchayat serves a population of 4,659 people.²⁴

Given the rising levels of inactivity and the National Sports Policy's (NSP) emphasis on strengthening local sports ecosystems, Panchayats at the district, block, and village levels emerge as critical units for fostering physical literacy. PRIs are deeply embedded in the rhythms of rural life and are closest to local needs, institutions, and actors. This proximity makes them powerful platforms for embedding SAPA into everyday life. With the

right tools, capacity building, and institutional support, Panchayats can serve as engines for localised sports development, play promotion, and activity-based well-being.

According to the Eleventh Schedule of the Constitution, which lists twenty-nine subjects pertaining to rural self-governance, there are several indirect linkages to SAPA, but no explicit mention of SAPA or SAPA-related facilities. In contrast, the Twelfth Schedule for Urban Local Bodies (ULBs), comprising eighteen subjects, explicitly assigns the “provision of urban amenities and facilities such as parks, gardens, [and] playgrounds” as a responsibility of ULBs.²⁵

Panchayats are uniquely positioned to serve as the foundational unit for promoting SAPA in rural India. Mandated to prepare Panchayat Development Plans (PDPs)²⁶ that foster economic development and social justice, they already operate within a governance framework that ensures convergence with schemes from relevant central ministries and state departments linked to the 29 subjects of the Eleventh Schedule.²⁷ While sports is not listed as a distinct subject, its deep intersections with education, health, family welfare, cultural activities, and women and child development make it a natural fit for integration into existing priorities. This creates an opportunity to leverage Panchayat-

²³ Local Government Directory by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj
https://lgdirectory.gov.in/demo/reportonStatewiseEntityDetails.do?OWASP_CSRFTOKEN=CB9N-AB02-IDIO-4XGS-LUHI-HDW4-LOP9-BMIM

²⁴ Know Your Panchayat by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj -
<https://cdnbbsr.s3waas.gov.in/s316026d60ff9b54410b3435b403afd226/uploads/2025/04/202504291855763501.pdf>

²⁵ <https://secforuts.mha.gov.in/74th-amendment-and-municipalities-in-india/>

²⁶ <https://gdp.nic.in/>

²⁷ <https://www.mea.gov.in/Images/pdf1/S11.pdf>

level planning processes to embed SAPA into village life, ensuring that it is not treated as an optional or stand-alone activity, but rather as an essential enabler of multiple development goals.

The PDP 2025-26 already details mechanisms for governance, including nodal officers, appointed facilitators, monitoring through image-based reporting, and budget allocations by sector based on the 2024-25 baseline. Though “sports” is not specifically budgeted for, allocations under health, education, cultural activities, and women and child development may be explored to support SAPA initiatives.

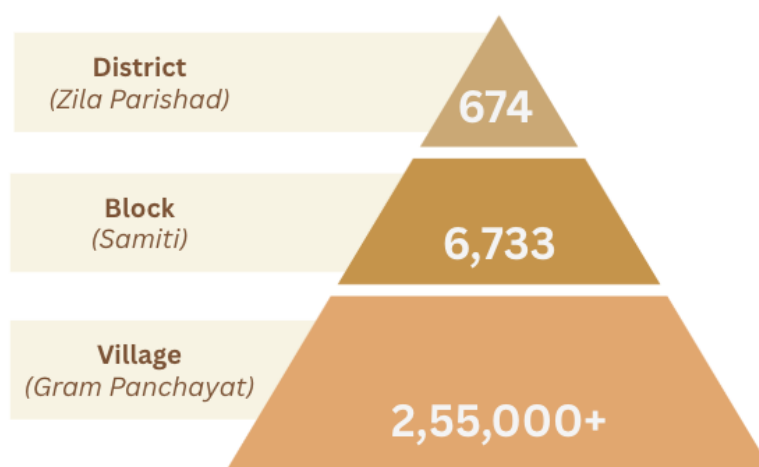
- Reviving traditional and indigenous games

In the broader effort to revitalise and integrate SAPA at the grassroots, Panchayats also hold a unique opportunity to revive traditional and

indigenous games. These games—ranging from those based on physical skill, strategy, and rhythm, to simulation and verbal play—are simple, accessible, and community-driven. They rely on minimal equipment, often use locally available resources, and have straightforward rules that encourage broad participation.²⁸

Reviving these games does more than promote SAPA. It fosters community engagement, intergenerational learning, and the development of critical life skills such as coordination, teamwork, and resilience. Indigenous games can therefore act as cultural and practical bridges between past and present, tradition and modernity—strengthening both social cohesion and sustainable models of active living in rural India.

Figure 2: Number of Panchayati Raj Institutions at different levels



²⁸ Bandyopadhyay, N., & Das, T. (2025). Indian Traditional Games: An Intangible Cultural Heritage to Promote Good Life among Children. / *Adv Sport Phys Edu*, 8(3), 36-40. https://saudijournals.com/media/articles/IASPE_83_36-40_Urgent.pdf

Existing policy frameworks

India already has a range of national and state-level policies that provide a strong foundation for integrating SAPA into rural life. These policies span across ministries and levels of governance, underscoring both the opportunity and need for Panchayats to act as convergence points.



Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports

The NSP²⁹ places strong emphasis on strengthening block- and district-level sports ecosystems through improved access to resources, enhanced talent identification, and capacity-building initiatives. It recognises sports as an integral part of everyday life and leisure, envisioning sports as a “people’s movement” to expand participation and shift public perception.

The policy also calls for the revival and promotion of indigenous games that have historically fostered community engagement and local identity. By focusing on inclusivity and expanding infrastructure even in remote rural areas, the NSP seeks to realise its vision of “Sports for Nation Building – Harness the Power of Sports for Nation’s Holistic Development.” This vision can be grounded most effectively at the Panchayat level through strengthened local ecosystems.

The Khelo India scheme³⁰ provides support for both infrastructure and grassroots competitions. Its guidelines outline:

- *Infrastructure Development:* Grants for playfields and multipurpose halls for sports such as badminton, basketball, volleyball, wrestling, and kabaddi, including facilities like toilets and changing rooms.
- *Grassroots Competitions:* Funding for village-level championships to foster youth engagement and encourage rural and indigenous sports. The scheme also provides financial assistance for indigenous events and support for athletes showing promise.

Sports competitions are also organised under the Nehru Yuva Kendra Sangathan (NYKS)³¹. The Draft National Youth Policy 2023 highlights the importance of encouraging fitness and healthy lifestyles. NYKS, operating in 623 districts including tribal areas, promotes a sports culture among rural youth. Specific initiatives include:

- Provision of sports kits to youth clubs to enable regular activities.
- Organisation of block- and district-level tournaments across football, volleyball, kabaddi, and relay race, with flexibility for districts to include culturally relevant or traditional games.
- Use of the MyBharat platform for registrations and dashboards, improving transparency and monitoring.³²

²⁹ National Sports Policy (Khelo Bharat Niti) 2025 https://yas.gov.in/sites/default/files/Khelo-Bharat-Niti-2025_0.pdf

³⁰ Khelo India Scheme Operational Guidelines (2021-22 to 2025-26) by the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports <https://kheloindia.gov.in/uploads/Khelo-India-Scheme-Operational-Guidelines.pdf>

³¹ <https://www.pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=1842733>

³² https://mybharat.gov.in/mega_events/block-level-sports-competitions ; <https://nyks.nic.in/AnnualActionPlanGuidelines202324/SOPofBlockLevelSportsEvents.pdf>



Ministry of Education

Initiatives by the Ministry of Education also support SAPA at the rural level. The *Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan*,³³ covering 1.16 million schools, 156 million students, and 5.7 million teachers, integrates inclusive and equitable education with SAPA promotion. It provides an annual grant for sports equipment: ₹5,000 for primary schools, ₹10,000 for upper primary schools, and up to ₹25,000 for secondary and senior secondary schools. The scheme's guidelines specify equipment, maintenance, and eligible activities.³⁴ Additionally, the National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCF-SE) highlights collaboration between schools and local authorities, encouraging schools with limited resources to use nearby public spaces for SAPA and physical education.



Ministry of Panchayati Raj and Ministry of Rural Development

Within the *Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan* (RGSA)³⁵, the Ministry of Panchayati Raj (MoPR) has advanced the localisation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). While sports is not directly mentioned among the nine themes mapped to rural priorities, four themes—healthy villages, child-friendly villages, self-sufficient infrastructure, and women-friendly villages—have clear SAPA linkages. The MoPR Expert Group Report (Vol. 2)³⁶ recognises that Panchayats can play a key

role in talent identification, sports promotion, and horizontal as well as vertical collaboration.

Under the child-friendly villages theme, the report suggests recognising children's achievements in academics and sports, supporting events, and creating pathways for talent development. SAPA-related considerations also appear under healthy villages and self-sufficient infrastructure, which assess playgrounds, anganwadi open spaces, and other activity-supporting facilities. Action areas for Gram Panchayats explicitly include organising sports festivals, promoting youth clubs, and supporting sports development.³⁷

Additional opportunities for Panchayats include:

- *Finance Commission Grants*: There may be a possibility to explore untied grants and see if they can be utilised to fund sports infrastructure, equipment, and events through Gram Sabha-approved allocations.³⁸
- *Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS)*: allows construction and maintenance of playgrounds, levelling, fencing, and related infrastructure works.³⁹
- *MoPR research budgets*: can support mapping, assessments, and exploratory studies on SAPA.

³³ <https://dse.education.gov.in/en/scheme/samagra-shiksha>

³⁴ <https://samagra.education.gov.in/sports.html>

³⁵ <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleaseDetail.aspx?PRID=2039629>

³⁶ Localization of Sustainable Development Goals in Panchayat Raj Institutions Report of the Expert Group Volume 2 by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj <https://cdnbbsr.s3waas.gov.in/s316026d60ff9b54410b3435b403afd226/uploads/2023/02/2023021741.pdf>

³⁷ For a comprehensive assessment of Panchayat-level resource mobilisation, the NCAER's study on *Own Source Revenue of Panchayati Raj Institutions* provides actionable recommendation and case studies for enhancing their own revenue capacity.

³⁸ <https://secforuts.mha.gov.in/73rd-amendment-of-panchayati-raj-in-india/>

³⁹ According to the *2024-25 Annual Master Circular* 2025 for Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005, only one playfield can be developed within the village under infrastructure development projects. Under the list of permission work under the scheme, the construction of playfield and maintenance the playfield for school and community is included.

State Sports Policies

Several state sports policies underscore the importance of localised and grassroots sports development, particularly in rural regions. The policies primarily focus on expanding infrastructure and creating opportunities for regular events for mass participation. Local-level sports are consistently recognised as a key area for promoting inclusion and ensuring broad access to sports, with special attention to women and marginalised communities. The state policies emphasize and recognize local sports ecosystems as crucial for talent identification, strengthening the foundation of

talent development, and establishing structured pathways for nurturing sports excellence, and establishing structured pathways for talent identification and nurturing. States have also highlighted the role of decentralised governance and dedicated funding streams to support sports development at the village, block, and district levels. Together, these diverse approaches provide a strong foundation for further advancing sports and physical activity SAPA in rural communities.

Table 1: Select State Sports Policies and Initiatives

State	Description
Haryana	Haryana's Sports Policy (2015) ⁴⁰ strengthens village- and panchayat-level sport by outlining the creation of vyayamshalas and village mini-stadia, promoting indigenous sports (including gatka, bullock-cart racing, kabaddi, judo, karate, wushu, and taekwondo), and launching the Haryana Premier League to ensure competitions at all levels. The 2025–26 budget awards prizes to top akharas from district to state levels and calls for new stadiums in ten underserved villages or towns. To encourage rural sport, the state incentivises Olympic champions to open academies in their home districts. The Khel Nursery Scheme repurposes existing schools and facilities into coaching hubs; as of 2025, the state has 245 mini stadiums and around 1,500 sports nurseries, with plans to expand to 2000 nurseries. ⁴¹
Maharashtra	Maharashtra's State Sports Policy (2012) ⁴² emphasizes the development of sports infrastructure and enabling opportunities at the district and taluka levels.

⁴⁰ Government of Haryana. (2015). *Haryana Sports and Physical Fitness Policy*. Department of Sports. <https://cdnbbsr.s3waas.gov.in/s3e069ea4c9c233d36ff9c7f329bc08ff1/uploads/2023/02/2023022787.pdf>

⁴¹ <https://haryanacmoffice.gov.in/22-april-2025> ; <https://cdnbbsr.s3waas.gov.in/s386e78499eeb33fb9cac16b7555b50767/uploads/2025/03/202503221525770346.pdf> ; <https://pm-vojana.in/en/application-information-eligibility-requirements-and-benefits-for-the-haryana-sports-nursery-scheme-2022-khel-nursery-vojana>

⁴² Government of Maharashtra. (2012). *Maharashtra State Sports Policy*. Department of Sports and Youth Services. https://sports.maharashtra.gov.in/nfsshare/sports/en/about_department/1530855933_sport_policy_-_eng1.pdf

	It introduces District Sports Development Funds to support the creation and maintenance of playfields, gymnasiums, and sports complexes, while also financing competitions and talent development initiatives. Additionally, several district-level sports schemes have also been introduced, which aim to provide regular access to sports, promote local talent, and ensure systematic nurturing of athletes. The state sports budget 2025-26 underscores that a minimum of 1% of the District Annual Plan fund will be reserved for the maintenance and repair of sports complexes. ⁴³
Odisha	Odisha's State Sports Policy Draft (2024) ⁴⁴ underscores the need for rural sports development. It mandates regular sports competitions and events at the village, block, and district levels, alongside the establishment of grassroots training centres and sports nurseries. It specifically highlights district-level infrastructure and events, recognising the district as the foundation layer for sports development. Structured pathways for talent identification and nurturing are being created, with dedicated scouting teams and competitions at the district level to ensure that talent from rural areas is systematically mapped and supported. Further, the state budget for 2025–26 earmarks ₹1,320 crore for the sports sector, of which a substantial ₹825 crore is allocated for developing block-level stadiums. Additionally, the CM Trophy initiative has been launched as a transformative community-level competition to identify and promote grassroots talent. Covering football, athletics, hockey, and badminton, it is expected to draw participation from athletes across villages, blocks, and districts, culminating at the state level. ⁴⁵
Telangana	The Sports Policy of Telangana 2025 ⁴⁶ recognises rural and village-level sports as a foundational element for overall sports development. The policy emphasises local sports governance, with the establishment of village-level sports authority under the Sports Authority of Telangana to oversee and ensure access to playfields and sports infrastructure for residents, supporting both sports and recreation. Further, the CM Cup initiative for grassroots talent development positions villages as key units in the sports ecosystem, with mandal-level competitions progressing up to the international level, providing a structured pathway for athlete development. Additionally, the policy ensures financial support through a District Sports Fund, specifying that 10% of the Crucial Balance Fund (CBF) available with District Collectors will be earmarked for sports development within their respective districts. Further, the state sports budget for 2025–26 shows a positive

⁴³ https://sports.maharashtra.gov.in/sports_web/# ;

<https://cdnbbsr.s3waas.gov.in/s349d4b2faeb4b7b9e745775793141e2b2/uploads/2025/03/20250313968835291.pdf>

⁴⁴ Government of Odisha (2024). *Odisha Sports Policy Draft*. Department of Sports and Youth Services.

<https://sports.odisha.gov.in/sites/default/files/2024-09/Communication%20of%20Draft%20Sports%20Policy%20to%2000A%20and%20others.pdf>

⁴⁵ https://finance.odisha.gov.in/sites/default/files/2025-03/Annual%20Budget%202025-26%20Highlights%20English%20Final_17.02.2025.pdf ; https://finance.odisha.gov.in/sites/default/files/2025-02/Part-II%20General%20Budget%20Speech%202025-26_Eng.pdf

⁴⁶ Government of Telangana (2025). *Telangana Sports Policy*. Department of Sports and Youth Services.

https://satg.telangana.gov.in/public/frontendpages/images/Sports_Policy_English.pdf

	upward trend, with an overall increase in allocations for sports. It also includes dedicated provisions for the development of residential schools with playfields. ⁴⁷
Uttar Pradesh	Uttar Pradesh's State Sports Policy (2023) ⁴⁸ places strong emphasis on rural and district-level sports development. It mandates the appointment of trainers and Physical Education Teachers (PETs) in rural schools with large student populations, while also supporting qualified coaches to establish academies under schemes such as Khelo India. Structured mechanisms for talent identification are prioritised through rural talent hunts, systematic training, and financial support for sports academies. The policy further promotes inclusion by mandating the formation of Women Mangal Dals in village panchayats to increase women's participation in sports. Regular multi-sport competitions are ensured at every tier, from the village level up to the state level, to create continuous competitive opportunities. For infrastructure development, the state focuses on the development of district-level facilities, including mini-stadiums, with plans to establish block-level stadiums as a foundation for rural sports growth. ⁴⁹

⁴⁷ https://prsindia.org/files/budget/budget_state/telangana/2025/Telangana_Budget_Analysis_2025-26.pdf

⁴⁸ Government of Uttar Pradesh (2023). *Uttar Pradesh Khel Niti*. Department of Sports. https://upsports.gov.in/site/writereaddata/UploadNews/pdf/C_202307281435597718.pdf

⁴⁹ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/varanasi/govt-plans-to-build-mini-stadium-in-each-block-of-varanasi-soon/articleshow/123437758.cms> ; <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/sports-facilities-are-being-developed-in-the-cities-as-well-as-villages-across-the-state-says-up-cm-yogi-adityanath/articleshow/113857758.cms?from=mdr>

Insights from global practices

The following table presents examples drawn from international contexts, which are intended to be illustrative rather than prescriptive. While the settings differ from rural India, they may offer ideas and approaches that can be adapted locally. The cases highlight strategies such as resource-efficient designs, context-sensitive solutions,

community-based engagement, cultural mobilisation, collaborative governance, and inclusive infrastructure. These examples can serve as reference points for designing future initiatives, with any application carefully tailored to local socio-cultural and infrastructural realities.

Table 2: Global examples for SAPA at the local level (illustrative)

Initiative/Location	Description	Key Takeaways
Australia ⁵⁰	Victoria's <i>Public Health and Wellbeing Plan 2019–2023</i> and <i>VicHealth</i> initiative focused on building active communities through multi-stakeholder partnerships. Councils were guided by modules with quick wins and long-term goals, including promoting active travel for children, integrating walking and cycling into local strategies, advancing gender equity in sports, and enabling women through <i>This Girl Can – Victoria</i> . To strengthen delivery, local government staff were trained in community-based system dynamics and group model building, equipping them to mobilise communities and design locally driven solutions across 13 local government areas.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Planning in a phased manner can build momentum:</i> Quick wins alongside long-term goals help sustain interest. • <i>Embedding inclusion into campaigns can shift participation patterns:</i> Initiatives like <i>This Girl Can</i> show how focusing on women and children makes active living more equitable. • <i>Investing in local leadership can unlock community ownership:</i> Training municipal staff in systems approaches empowers councils to design and deliver their own solutions.

⁵⁰ O'Halloran, S., Hayward, J., Strugnell, C., Felmingham, T., Poorter, J., Kilpatrick, S., Fraser, P., Needham, C., Rhook, E., DeMaio, A., & Allender, S. (2022). Building capacity for the use of systems science to support local government public health planning: a case study of the VicHealth Local Government Partnership in Victoria, Australia. *BMJ open*, 12(12), e068190. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2022-068190>; https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-08/3CM_Building-Active-Communities.pdf

Canada ⁵¹	<p>Annual competitions are conducted at the local level to encourage SAPA by a non-profit organisation. The ParticipACTION Community Challenge is a month-long event where municipalities compete to become the "Most Active Community." This is incentivised with a national cash prize of CAD \$100,000, motivating councils to organize inclusive programs across age groups and communities. The challenge not only fosters widespread participation but also strengthens community identity and prioritizes equity by engaging marginalized groups.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Incentives and community engagement:</i> Friendly competitions and grants can activate broad community participation. ● <i>Equity by design:</i> Embedding inclusion as a part of the incentives from the start can ensure no groups are not left behind. ● <i>Simple metrics for sustained action:</i> Clear, easy-to-track indicators can encourage ongoing local commitment.
Finland ⁵²	<p>In Finland, municipalities (309 in 2022) are central to promoting SAPA, with autonomy to design services and maintain facilities for residents. SAPA is considered a basic municipal service, supported by national <i>On the Move</i> programmes funded by the Ministry of Education and Culture. These initiatives—such as <i>Schools on the Move</i>, <i>Families on the Move</i>, and <i>Adults on the Move</i>—create age-appropriate opportunities for lifelong activity. National-level assessments every two years ensure accountability and continuous improvement in local delivery.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Decentralised planning:</i> Empowering local governments to prioritise SAPA as well as engaging schools for SAPA promotion can ensure continuity. ● <i>Tailored interventions for different life stages:</i> Age- and group-specific programmes embed activity throughout the life course. ● <i>Assessments and accountability:</i> Regular monitoring and feedback loops ensure effectiveness and adaptation.

⁵¹ <https://www.participaction.com/programs/community-challenge/>

⁵² Mikkonen, M., Korsberg, M., Lehtonen, K., & Stenvall, J. (2022). Sport policy in Finland. *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 14(4), 715–728. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19406940.2022.2127837> ; <https://okm.fi/en/promotion-of-physical-activity> ; <https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki/chapters/finland/73-sport-youth-fitness-and-physical-activity>

<p>New Zealand⁵³</p>	<p>Hamilton City has placed a strong emphasis on accessibility and upgrading recreational infrastructure, positioning itself as a citywide playground. The city has invested in facilities such as the <i>Magical Bridge Playground</i> in Claudelands Park, a fully inclusive play space designed for people of all ages and abilities. It also conducts community events like <i>Open Streets Hamilton</i>, which temporarily transforms streets into recreational spaces to promote walking, cycling, and play. In addition, Hamilton City Council has developed online dashboards and repositories with detailed information on recreational facilities, enabling residents to easily access and book community spaces.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Reimagining urban spaces can unlock low-cost activity zones:</i> Initiatives like temporary walk paths and inclusive playgrounds make activity part of daily life. • <i>Making information transparent can boost facility use:</i> Dashboards and notice boards help residents discover and access resources easily. • <i>Tapping into cultural and community events can sustain participation:</i> Linking recreation to festivals and open streets can create resonance and repeat engagement.
<p>Singapore⁵⁴</p>	<p>Two districts in Sembawang and Choa Chu Kang, identified as the Healthy Community Ecosystem, demonstrate how health-promoting infrastructure and programmes can be embedded into everyday life. The initiative brings together multiple agencies, including the transportation authority and the Ministry of Education, and others, to create accessible infrastructure such as cycling paths, fitness corners, “Walk2Ride” sheltered walkways, and barrier-free access for the</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Strengthening community ecosystems to enhance SAPA:</i> Multi-agency partnerships can drive promote interlinkages with other sectors such as transport, education, housing, and health. • <i>Inclusive designs can ensure SAPA for all:</i> Barrier-free walkways and fitness corners create safe, accessible options for all ages and abilities. • <i>Mass participation activities and events in public spaces:</i> Regular park workouts and dance sessions keep public spaces socially alive and engaging, promoting a culture of wellness.

⁵³ <https://hamilton.govt.nz/parks-recreation-and-community-spaces/playgrounds> ; [https://hamilton.govt.nz/parks-recreation-and-community-spaces/playgrounds/detail/magical-bridge-playground/#:~:text=Magical%20Bridge%20Playground%20\(in%20Claudelands.members%20of%20the%20disability%20community](https://hamilton.govt.nz/parks-recreation-and-community-spaces/playgrounds/detail/magical-bridge-playground/#:~:text=Magical%20Bridge%20Playground%20(in%20Claudelands.members%20of%20the%20disability%20community).

⁵⁴ https://www.hpb.gov.sg/docs/default-source/annual-reports/hpb-annual-report-2015.pdf?sfvrsn=42c3ec72_2 ; <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/building-healthier-singapore>

	<p>elderly and differently abled. These are complemented by community activity programmes like “Sundays-at-the-Park”, which include group workouts, dance, and low-intensity activities tailored for seniors. The approach ensures that residents of all ages, from children to the elderly, have safe, convenient, and culturally relevant opportunities to be active.</p>	
<p>South Africa⁵⁵</p>	<p>South Africa hosts the annual National Indigenous Games Festival, celebrating nine traditional games that reflect the country’s cultural heritage. Organized at provincial and district levels through local committees, the festival takes place during Heritage Month (September). It serves as a vibrant platform to revive indigenous sports, promote recreational activities, and foster social cohesion. By blending cultural preservation with PA, the initiative strengthens community bonds while ensuring the survival of traditional games for future generations.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Activating culture as a driver can strengthen identity:</i> Reviving indigenous games ties physical activity to heritage and pride. • <i>Empowering local committees can enhance scalability:</i> District- and provincial-level organizing ensures initiatives reach diverse communities. • <i>Using festivals for cohesion can build unity:</i> Leveraging celebrations to create shared experiences that foster both social bonds and active living.

⁵⁵ <https://www.dsac.gov.za/2023-Indigenous-Games-Festival> ; <https://www.westerncape.gov.za/cas/article/wc-indigenous-games-festival-2024-celebrating-our-collective-heritage#:~:text=There%20are%20over%20700%20participants,Festival%20to%20provide%20oversight%20support>

Enhancing SAPA at the panchayat level

'Active Communities' can be understood as environments where SAPA is seamlessly integrated into daily life, enabling individuals of all ages, genders, abilities, and socio-economic backgrounds to participate in regular SAPA. These communities foster well-being, social cohesion, and economic resilience by providing sustainable infrastructure, inclusive programmes, and collaborative opportunities for active living. The aim of active communities is also to foster and nurture aspirations of those who wish to engage in SAPA competitively. Active Communities are designed to address the unique needs and aspirations of their populations, promoting health, equity, and long-term sustainability. This means that they

promote physical literacy, providing age-appropriate opportunities and ensuring lifelong participation of their residents in SAPA.⁵⁶

Built on six interconnected pillars, the framework offers a holistic and adaptable approach to planning, implementing, and evaluating SAPA initiatives. These pillars together enable stakeholders to design impactful and community-driven programmes that address local needs while fostering long-term benefits. In the long term, they aim to empower individuals, leaders, and communities to lead healthier, more connected, and active lives.

Figure 3: Interconnected pillars for active communities



⁵⁶ Read more about the Active Series by the Sports and Society Accelerator - [Benchmarking Active Cities in India](#); [Taking the Lead on Active Workplaces](#); [Active Transit for India](#); [Active Schools – An emerging framework for India](#); [Active Campuses – Integrating Sports and Physical Activity in India's Higher Education Institutions](#)

- **Accessibility and Inclusion:** Access to safe, inclusive, and affordable spaces is the foundation for ensuring that everyone in the community, particularly women, girls, children, persons with disabilities, the elderly, and underrepresented groups, can participate in SAPA. Active communities must prioritise open and barrier-free environments, build or improve playgrounds, and ensure basic infrastructure such as toilets and lighting. Affordable equipment and opportunities for community-wide participation, alongside representation in leadership and governance, make SAPA more equitable and welcoming for all.
- **Cultural Relevance and Community Identity:** Sports initiatives rooted in local culture have greater acceptance and sustainability. Active communities place a significant value on celebrating traditional games such as kabaddi, Kho kho, or indigenous play forms, which carry cultural pride and familiarity. Reviving and integrating these activities fosters community ownership, while blending them with athletics or modern sports broadens exposure. Emphasizing cultural identity through sports strengthens local bonds, ensures resource-efficient solutions, intergenerational participation, and preserves heritage while promoting active, healthier lifestyles.
- **Sustainability and Use of Local Resources:** Sustainability in rural sports depends on maximizing what is locally available rather than relying solely on external funding or infrastructure. Community spaces such as school grounds, common lands, or post-harvest fields can serve as play zones. Locally sourced materials can be adapted into low-cost equipment, reducing dependency on expensive alternatives. Building programs around community volunteers, youth leaders, and local champions ensures continuity, cost-effectiveness, and ownership, creating long-term pathways for active lifestyles.
- **Collaboration and Collective Ownership:** Strong sports ecosystems thrive on collaboration across institutions and stakeholders. Active communities can convene panchayat members, schools, anganwadis, self-help groups, youth clubs, and local sportspersons to co-create programs. This collective and collaborative approach ensures resources are pooled, duplication is avoided, and diverse perspectives are included. Collaboration also builds accountability and a shared sense of pride in outcomes, making sports a community-driven initiative that aligns with education, health, and development goals.
- **Monitoring, Learning, and Community Feedback:** Tracking progress and integrating community feedback are essential for making rural sports programs impactful. Without structured reflection, initiatives risk being symbolic rather than effective. Active communities can adopt simple tools like community scorecards, annual reviews, or participatory feedback forums to assess facilities, participation rates, and inclusivity. These mechanisms not only identify gaps but also build transparency and trust. Continuous learning allows the community to refine strategies and ensures that programs remain responsive to evolving needs.
- **Technology and Innovation for Engagement:** With increasing digitalisation in India, technology can be

leveraged to enhance participation and awareness. Active communities can utilise mobile platforms and messaging groups for mobilization, share training resources digitally, and create local storytelling initiatives to showcase achievements. Low-cost innovations, such as virtual

challenges or hybrid play models, can keep youth engaged while complementing offline activities. Technology also connects rural communities to wider networks, opportunities, and recognition, amplifying the reach and sustainability of local sports efforts.

Towards Building Active Communities at the Panchayat Level

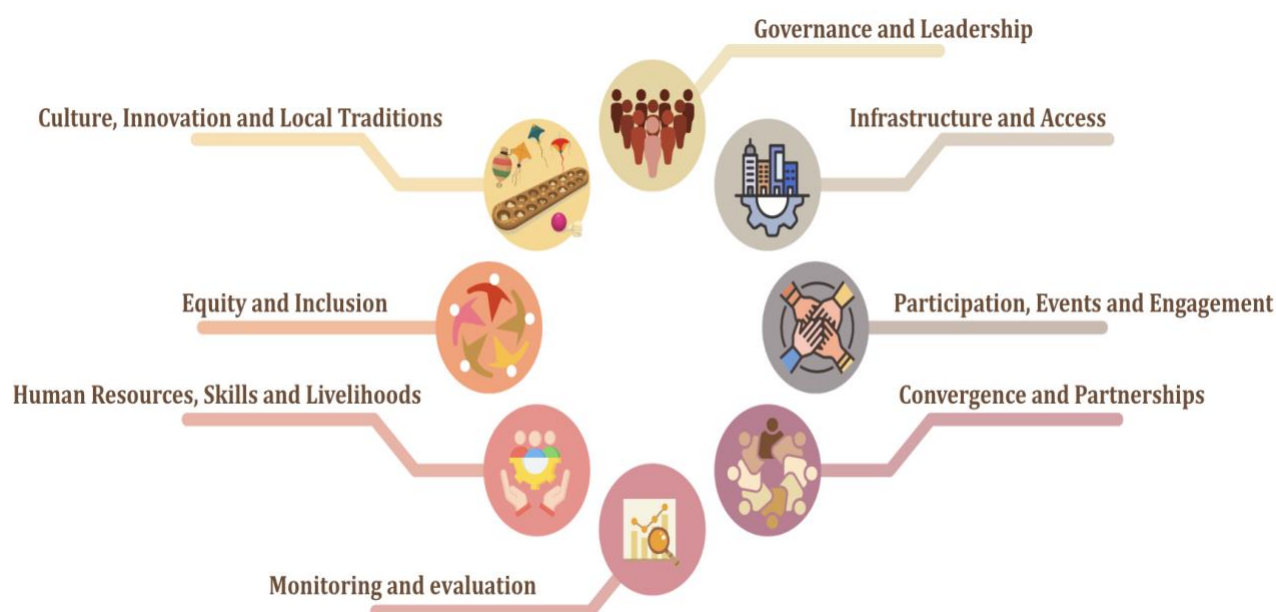
Building active communities at the panchayat level can be done through a multi-pronged and phased approach. Activating Panchayats as hubs of SAPA integration can be achieved by strengthening local ecosystems through strong and committed local leadership. Aligned with the vision of NSP 2025 and key initiatives of the MoPR, a phased approach can be implemented through local Panchayats.

This framework can focus on strengthening local sports governance, building capacity and skills, ensuring inclusive and accessible infrastructure, celebrating local culture and

traditional games, promoting the inclusion of underrepresented sections, raising awareness about the importance of sports, and fostering collaborative approaches among all stakeholders.

The aim is for every individual to be healthy, engage in recreational activities, integrate SAPA into daily life, and access talent development pathways for those who aspire to excel. The active communities framework adopted at the Panchayat level may be structured around the focus areas outlined in Figure 4 below.

Figure 4: Key focus areas for building active communities at the Panchayat level



Building active communities in rural areas requires empowered leadership, informed citizens, and collaborative planning at the grassroots. Panchayat leaders must be equipped to assess, plan, and implement SAPA interventions using simple tools for planning, community engagement, and assessments.

In the long term, strengthening SAPA at the Panchayat level can be achieved by integrating SAPA-related indicators into digital governance platforms such as Gram Sabha Nirnay⁵⁷, Meri Panchayat app⁵⁸ and the Panchayat Advancement Index.⁵⁹ These indicators can capture aspects such as access to safe play spaces, use of schools as community centres/hubs, women's participation, and mobility infrastructure—making SAPA measurable and visible within rural governance systems.

Collaborative approaches that recognise schools as key spaces for promoting physical literacy across the country and enabling generations to engage in lifelong SAPA. Schools, in particular, can serve as strong platforms for promoting SAPA within the community, especially in areas where infrastructure and opportunities for SAPA may be limited.

Capacity-building programmes for Panchayat leaders, SHG women, NSS/NCC volunteers, and youth champions are vital to equip them with strategies for activating local spaces, mobilising citizens, and linking SAPA with health, education, and skilling. Partnerships with the Ministry of Skill Development & Entrepreneurship (MSDE) and the Sports, Physical Education, Fitness & Leisure Skills Council (SPEFL-SC) can strengthen these

efforts by creating hybrid skilling programmes that train local instructors, coaches, and community mobilisers—offering livelihood opportunities while ensuring long-term sustainability of SAPA initiatives. Citizens and communities must be empowered with space for ownership, reform, and feedback. Platforms like Gram Sabhas can enable collective decision-making on playgrounds, equipment, and inclusive programming. State governments can incentivise Panchayats to embed SAPA by linking it to existing priorities such as nutrition, women's empowerment, environment, and livelihoods.

The path towards a sports-forward India begins with positioning Panchayats as foundational units. With multi-stakeholder engagement across ministries, state departments, the private sector, and civil society, SAPA can evolve into a true people's movement aligned with the NSP's vision. This whole-of-system approach can ensure lifelong participation in SAPA, transforming rural communities into engines of national health, identity, and resilience.

As a next step, practical toolkits for Panchayat leaders can be developed to unlock the potential of rural communities all across the nation. These tools can help translate this vision into action. The toolkit will provide simple planning templates, assessments, and participatory models to help Panchayat leaders and communities assess their current standing, set goals, and design context-specific interventions. By bridging policy aspirations with ground-level implementation, this toolkit will empower Panchayats to become active champions of SAPA and sustain change for generations to come

⁵⁷ <https://meetingonline.gov.in/homepage>

⁵⁸ <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1985345>

⁵⁹ <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2120320>



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