

Smart Village Digest

Sustainable and Prosperous Communities



ABOUT THIS ISSUE

Human-centric ideas for sustainable rural futures.

The Smart Village Digest is an endeavour by The Learn and Uplift Foundation (LAUF) to share experiences of communities across the globe in learning and implementing local solutions. Combining traditional and Indigenous knowledge with modern concepts, *smart* communities harness their limitless human potential to become self-reliant and prosperous. This inaugural issue presents the context and starts conversations for thinkers, policy makers, administrators, grassroots organizations and rural communities worldwide.

Editor's Note

Poverty and inequality continue to be global challenges with millions living in extreme poverty. People living in rural and remote areas with impoverished conditions are the worst affected. They often lack access to basic services and infrastructure. Many, especially youth and men, are forced to migrate to cities in search of livelihoods within their country or abroad. Additional factors such as violent conflict and environmental stress result in intra-continental mass migration and displacement, as observed across Africa.

Rural–urban migration affects all three stakeholders negatively — the migrants, rural people, and city dwellers. Rural areas suffer from depopulation and reduced access to services due to the absence of scale. Cities become overcrowded; resources are stretched to their limits and quality of life diminishes. While several global endeavours continue to address these challenges, a scalable and sustainable solution remains elusive.

Over the last two decades, policy makers across many countries have been developing Smart Villages as a solution. Though described differently, the approach is often machine-centric, using information and communication technology (ICT). The European Union promotes Smart Villages to overcome the digital divide and develop the potential of connectivity and digitization in rural areas. India — home to about 64% of the rural population across approximately 650,000 villages — similarly focuses on ICT and infrastructure development.

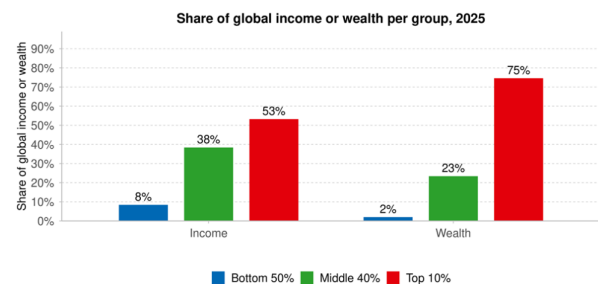
Infrastructure development and digitization are necessary interventions for rural development. However, they are resource-intensive and take considerable time to implement. As a result, the desired outcomes of eliminating poverty and minimizing inequality remain elusive. Globally, serious concerns exist about achieving the SDGs of 'No Poverty' and 'Zero Hunger' by 2030. According to the United Nations, some 808 million people were still living in extreme poverty in 2025.

"When individuals and communities discover and leverage their human potential, change is sustainable!"

The Learn and Uplift Foundation (LAUF) is working on a scalable architecture for Smart Villages that is truly sustainable. LAUF's endogenous approach is neither interventionist nor machine-centric — it is human-centric. When individuals and communities discover and leverage their human potential, change becomes sustainable. In this process, people individually and collectively learn continuously, and the knowledge they co-create in their local environment results in long-term solutions that spread and achieve scale.

The Smart Village Digest shares experiences of communities across the globe in learning and implementing local solutions to their problems, combining traditional and indigenous knowledge with modern concepts. Smart communities harness their limitless human potential to become self-reliant and prosperous.

This inaugural issue presents the context and starts conversations that will engage thinkers, policy makers, administrators, grassroots organizations, citizens at large and, most importantly, rural communities themselves. We invite contributions from around the world sharing grassroots experiences of resilience and sustainable local solutions.



Globally, top 10% of the population owns 75% of personal wealth and bottom 50% owns only 2% according to 2025 World Inequality Database.

<https://wii2026.wid.world/insight/executive-summary/>

— The Editorial Team, Smart Village Digest · The Learn and Uplift Foundation (LAUF)

About The Learn and Uplift Foundation

LAUF is a non-profit organization dedicated to empowering rural communities through human-centric, endogenous development. By fostering local knowledge, self-reliance and community-led solutions, LAUF works toward a world where every village is prosperous and sustainable. Learn more at www.learnanduplift.org.

Global Challenge of Poverty and Inequality

Even in the 21st century, 10% of the world population lives below the international poverty line. An ILO 2023 publication states that 7 out of 10 people living in extreme poverty reside in rural areas. The number of people living without healthcare, quality education, employment opportunities and basic infrastructure is significant in both the developed and developing world. Rural communities continue to be disadvantaged and disempowered.

The global poverty rate in rural areas is more than three times higher than in urban areas, demonstrating stark inequalities between rural and urban populations. Children in rural areas are more likely to be out of school and working in agriculture as labour. Rural youth have lower literacy rates than their urban counterparts, with these inequalities further pronounced for girls, perpetuating gender imbalance in power, land ownership, policy awareness and participation in decision-making.

Rural populations rely heavily on natural resources and are therefore more vulnerable to environmental degradation and climate change. Population densities in rural communities often do not provide the economies of scale needed for services and infrastructure. Economically, rural communities engage in less diversified activities, lack productive assets and experience low productivity. Market access remains a persistent challenge, particularly in difficult terrain.

This inequality is not rooted in a lack of ability but is artificially created through a lack of opportunities for underprivileged rural communities, often resulting in intergenerational poverty — what can be described as 'static' inequality. Globally, there are concerns about achieving the SDG of 'No Poverty' by 2030. If current trends continue, 8.9% of the global population will remain in extreme poverty by 2030, underscoring the urgent need for scalable, human-centric, community-driven solutions.

Key Statistics

10%

of world population below the international poverty line

7 in 10

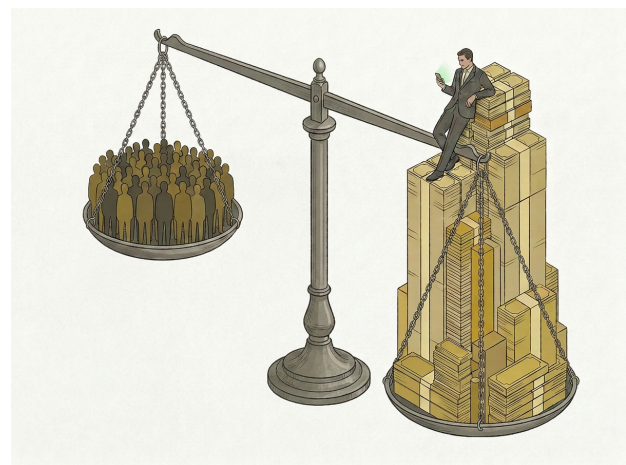
people in extreme poverty live in rural areas (ILO 2023)

3x

higher poverty rate in rural vs urban areas

808M

people in extreme poverty in 2025 (United Nations)



Smart Villages: Towards Minimizing Static Inequality.

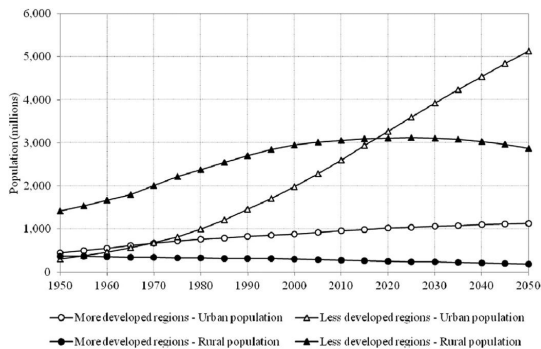
Poverty and Rural Disadvantage

According to the UN, rural poverty affects women and children most severely. Girls in rural areas are twice as likely to be out of school than urban girls. Addressing this structural disadvantage requires community-led, human-centric approaches that build lasting local capacity.

Urbanization and Poverty in Urban and Rural Areas

The last 200 years have witnessed a dramatic increase in urbanization. In 1900, only 15% of the world's population lived in urban areas; by 1950 that figure was under 30%; by 2014 it had reached 54%. This trend is projected to continue, with 72% of the global population expected to live in urban areas by 2050.

In the 21st century, rapid urbanization is primarily occurring in the developing world. Evidence suggests urbanization has played an important role in driving globalization, with cities seen as 'engines of growth'. Economists argue that population concentration brings economies of scale and benefits from specialization. World Bank data confirms a positive relationship between urbanization and economic development — the higher a country's urbanization level, the higher its GDP per capita. However, the urbanization–growth nexus is complex and depends on many parameters; its benefits are not universal. What is universally observed is that rapid and excessive urbanization aggravates poverty in both rural and urban areas.



Urban and rural population growth in developing and developed regions. Source: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

With continuing rapid urbanization, how will we achieve the Sustainable Development Goals related to poverty in both urban and rural areas?

The Smart Village Digest will continue to explore answers to these critical questions in future issues. We invite researchers, policy makers and community leaders to contribute their experiences and insights to shape a more equitable and prosperous world.

One of the primary drivers of urban population growth is rural–urban migration in search of economic opportunity. This migration negatively impacts rural areas through the loss of young people and depopulation. The absence of youth is felt in lower agricultural productivity, reduced community advocacy and diminished resilience to natural disasters. Depopulation also raises the per-capita cost of delivering services to those left behind.

While cities offer better employment opportunities, the cost of living is higher. As urban areas become overcrowded, populations spread to fringe areas — often agricultural land or underdeveloped sites on the urban periphery. Examples of Indian cities experiencing such peripheral growth include Mumbai, Delhi, Pune, Hyderabad, Chennai and Bengaluru.

Overcrowded cities create pockets of poverty commonly referred to as slums. UN-HABITAT estimates that 830 million people worldwide live in slums. Housing for the poor is inadequate and consumes a disproportionate share of their income. Infrastructure constraints in overcrowded cities — including limited access to clean water and sanitation — affect the poor most acutely.



Poverty is not limited to rural places; urban centres also experience poverty as seen in big cities of North America.

In Our Next Issue

Volume II will feature grassroots success stories from communities in Africa, Asia and Latin America — showcasing how local knowledge and human potential are already transforming rural lives. We welcome submissions, case studies and research from practitioners and community leaders across the globe.

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