



POLICY BRIEF

UBA-SEG on Rural Livelihoods

International Expert Dialogue on Reimagining Rural Livelihoods through UBA and Higher Education: Towards a Gandhian Pathway to Viksit Bharat @ 2047



Dr.K.Ravichandran

Executive Summary

- ✦ Institutionalise HEIs under UBA as decentralized hubs for advancing climate-resilient, technology-enabled agriculture by integrating traditional ecological knowledge with digital innovations.
- ✦ Position women-led rural enterprises as a core economic strategy by embedding skill development, enterprise mentoring, and value-chain support within HEI-anchored UBA village clusters.
- ✦ Scale green, non-farm rural livelihoods through UBA by enabling HEIs to incubate and converge sustainable village enterprises with Government schemes and local markets.

Overview

This International Expert Dialogue positions Higher Education Institutions under Unnat Bharat Abhiyan as strategic national actors in advancing climate-resilient agriculture, women-led enterprises, and green rural livelihoods. Grounded in Gandhian principles and aligned with NEP 2020 and Viksit Bharat @ 2047, it presents a scalable policy pathway for integrating knowledge, governance, and community action for sustainable rural transformation. The Dialogue translates evidence and expert insights into actionable directions for policymakers to institutionalize inclusive, locally rooted development models across rural India.

Jointly Organized by
 UBA-SEG Rural Livelihood &
 Department of Gandhian Thought & Peace Science
 The Gandhigram Rural Institute (DTBU) Gandhigram, Tamil Nadu

1. Introduction

India's aspiration to become a Viksit Bharat by 2047 requires a paradigm shift in the way institutions of knowledge, governance, and society interact with one another. Rural India—home to nearly two-thirds of the population—remains at the heart of this national transformation. While the higher education system has expanded significantly over the last two decades, the connection between academic institutions and rural realities remains weak. Leading scholars such as Amartya Sen and Jean Drèze (2002) argue that inclusive development requires the systematic alignment of knowledge systems with local social and economic conditions. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), despite their vast intellectual and infrastructural resources, have only partially integrated rural engagement, community-based research, and experiential learning into their core functions. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 recognizes this gap, emphasising the need for multidisciplinary education, field immersion, and socially responsible research. Against this backdrop, there is a growing national recognition that HEIs must play a catalytic role in strengthening rural livelihoods, enabling sustainable local economies, and facilitating community empowerment.

Link to Watch Video:
www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Hsou5WusRw

2. Unnat Bharat Abhiyan

Unnat Bharat Abhiyan (UBA), launched by the Ministry of Education, directly addresses the need to reconnect higher education with the lived experiences and developmental challenges of rural communities. UBA provides a structured national platform through which HEIs identify clusters of villages, undertake need-based assessments, facilitate participatory planning, and collaborate with Panchayati Raj institutions. In doing so, UBA operationalises the NEP 2020 mandate for experiential learning, community engagement, and socially relevant research. Scholars in the field of community–university engagement, such as Hall and Tandon (2017), highlight that meaningful partnerships between academic institutions and local communities contribute to grassroots innovation, strengthen local governance, and democratise knowledge production. UBA embodies these principles by bringing together HEIs, rural households, regional institutions, Government Departments, and civil society organisations into a shared developmental framework. Its design aligns with Atmanirbhar Bharat, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the Viksit Bharat @ 2047 vision.



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3. UBA – Subject Expert Group on Rural Livelihoods (SEG–RL)

Within the overall governance structure of UBA, the Subject Expert Group on Rural Livelihoods (SEG–RL) performs a critical function. Rural India today faces deep livelihood vulnerabilities shaped by agrarian distress, rising climate uncertainty, declining soil health, limited non-farm employment, and inadequate market linkages. Research by the National Council of Applied Economic Research (2022) underscores that smallholder farmers struggle with low productivity and unstable incomes, while the Ministry of Rural Development repeatedly notes the limited upward mobility within informal rural work. Women’s entrepreneurship is further constrained by restricted access to credit, technology, extension services, and markets. Youth out migration, the digital divide, and weak rural value chains add to livelihood precarity.

In this context, SEG–RL provides scientific direction to HEIs by identifying sustainable livelihood opportunities, developing training modules, facilitating technology demonstrations, and integrating rural enterprises with Government schemes and CSR initiatives. It encourages convergence with institutions such as Krishi Vigyan Kendras, MSME development centres, NABARD, and NRLM. By embedding evidence-based models within village ecosystems, SEG–RL ensures that livelihood initiatives are not merely activities but become pathways for long-term income enhancement, socio-economic resilience, and community empowerment. Its guidance enables HEIs to transition from passive observers to active innovators in the rural development sector.

4. Mahatma Gandhi's Development Philosophy

Any discussion on rural livelihoods in India is incomplete without engaging with Mahatma Gandhi's developmental philosophy, which continues to inform debates on self-reliance, sustainable development, and ethical economics. His concept of Gram Swaraj, articulated in *Young India* (1925), emphasized local self-governance, community autonomy, and decentralized decision-making—principles that remain central to contemporary studies on Panchayati Raj and participatory development. Likewise, Swadeshi, as elaborated in *Hind Swaraj* (1909), stressed strengthening local production systems to meet local needs, a theme directly relevant to present-day rural value chains, micro-enterprises, and community-based manufacturing.

Gandhi's educational philosophy of *Nai Talim*, outlined in *Basic Education* (1937), advocated integrating intellectual, manual, and community work, resonating strongly with experiential learning, rural immersion programmes, and skill-oriented education promoted under NEP 2020. His *Constructive Programme* (1941) offered an early comprehensive framework for rural livelihood enhancement, encompassing khadi, village industries, sanitation, women's empowerment, and agricultural improvement—elements reflected today in sustainable agriculture, women-led SHGs, organic farming, and green rural enterprises.

Gandhi's doctrine of trusteeship, articulated in *Harijan* (1939), provides a moral foundation for contemporary sustainability discourse by emphasizing responsible stewardship of resources. This aligns closely with current approaches to climate-resilient agriculture, circular economy models, renewable energy adoption, and natural resource management. As Kumarappa (1945) argued, Gandhian economic philosophy is not merely ethical but also offers practical pathways for stabilizing and diversifying rural livelihoods. Reinterpreting Gandhi in contemporary contexts thus enriches theoretical understanding while offering actionable strategies for integrating tradition with modern rural livelihood systems.



5. Tasks Ahead

As India moves toward 2047, a coordinated strategy is essential to integrate HEIs, UBA mechanisms, SEG–RL expertise, and Gandhian principles into a unified development framework. Higher Educational Institutions must institutionalize rural engagement through curriculum reforms, village immersion programmes, and interdisciplinary research. UBA should expand its village development model, strengthen cross-sector convergence, and create replicable livelihood clusters, while SEG–RL deepens its role in designing livelihood toolkits, building capacities, identifying high-potential enterprises, and integrating green and digital technologies. At the policy level, clear roadmaps are needed to define UBA's contribution to *Viksit Bharat @ 2047*, supported by measurable indicators and impact strategies.

In this context, an International Expert Dialogue was organized online on 9 December 2025 to translate strategy into action. Bringing together national and global experts, the Dialogue addressed agrarian distress, low women's economic participation, and sustainable non-farm enterprises. Focused on climate-resilient farming, women-led enterprises, and rural entrepreneurship, it supported evidence-based, scalable, and tradition-sensitive UBA–SEG rural interventions aligned with *Viksit Bharat @ 2047*.

6. Expert Deliberation

6.1: Technical Session – 1:

Climate-Resilient and Technology-Enabled Agricultural Transformation

A critical theme for expert discussion is the urgent need to strengthen farmers' livelihoods through climate-resilient, technology-supported, and ecologically sustainable agricultural systems. The theoretical grounding for this theme draws on traditional ecological knowledge, agroecology, digital agriculture innovation frameworks, and Gandhian principles of appropriate technology (Agarwal & Narain, 2019; Singh et al., 2020; Altieri & Nicholls, 2020; Pingali & Aiyar, 2019). Growing evidence shows that Indian agriculture—traditionally characterized by diverse cropping patterns, indigenous seed systems, organic soil management, and community-managed irrigation structures—was inherently climate-resilient and self-sustaining (Agarwal & Narain, 2019; Singh et al., 2020). However, the transition to monocropping, chemical intensive farming, and reliance on externally procured inputs has weakened these traditional resilience mechanisms, contributing to soil degradation, groundwater depletion, and financial stress among smallholders.

Contemporary research highlights that rejuvenating traditional ecological practices—such as mixed farming, tank irrigation rejuvenation, seed diversity conservation, agroforestry, and organic nutrient cycles—can significantly enhance sustainability, especially when integrated with modern technologies (Altieri & Nicholls, 2020). Simultaneously, digital agriculture innovations—AI-based crop advisories, climate information services, precision irrigation, drone-based monitoring, and ICT-enabled FPO models—are redefining productivity and risk management (Pingali & Aiyar, 2019). This hybrid model of traditional ecological wisdom combined with modern technological innovation aligns with Gandhiji's vision of revitalizing rural production systems through locally appropriate technologies and community-centric decision-making. HEIs, UBA clusters, and students can play a transformative role by documenting indigenous practices, validating them scientifically, and facilitating their adoption in villages.



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www.youtube.com/watch?v=qm1qnSyO6XY

For delivering a lecture on the above theme, Dr. K. Ravichandran invited Mr. Bakul Chandra Joshi, President and COO, T. Stanes & Company Ltd. Mr. Joshi emphasized the urgent need for a climate-resilient transformation of Indian agriculture, drawing on his personal experience as a farmer and over 32 years of engagement with rural communities, guided by Gandhian values of sustainability and ethical production.

He highlighted the dual challenge of rising global food demand and declining domestic productivity, noting that while nearly 50% of India's population depends on agriculture, the sector contributes only about 18% to GDP, and crop productivity remains below global benchmarks. Climate change-induced floods, droughts, and heatwaves have caused significant losses in recent years, with projections indicating a 15–20% decline in major crop yields by 2050. Shrinking landholdings, high post-harvest losses, pest-related yield losses, deteriorating soil health, and the spread of counterfeit agricultural inputs further threaten farmers' livelihoods.

Mr. Joshi advocated improving soil biology, adopting appropriate modern technologies, and ensuring access to quality inputs, while reaffirming Gandhiji's principle that agriculture must serve human needs rather than greed. He concluded by calling for coordinated efforts among academia, Government, and industry to build a sustainable, technology-driven, and climate-resilient agricultural ecosystem that secures farmers' livelihoods and national food security.

6.2: Technical Session - 2

Empowering Rural Women through Skills, Enterprise Development, and Social Transformation

Rural women's livelihoods are central to sustainable development, community resilience, and inclusive growth. The theoretical foundation for this focus draws from feminist development theory, SHG-based collective action, microenterprise development frameworks, and Gandhian principles of dignity, self-reliance, and social transformation (Kabeer, 2020; Datta & Kornberg, 2022; Swain & Varghese, 2021). Empirical studies show that women-led enterprises in food processing, mushroom cultivation, livestock-based activities, crafts, and microenterprises significantly improve household income and nutritional security.

Despite these gains, women continue to face constraints such as limited access to credit, restricted mobility, inadequate digital literacy, and weak integration into value chains. Research on SHG-based empowerment demonstrates that collective action, capacity building, and digital financial inclusion can effectively enhance women's economic participation and agency (Swain & Varghese, 2021). Within the UBA ecosystem, Higher Educational Institutions and students play a structured role through skill training, enterprise mentoring, digital literacy support, and value-chain facilitation. This integrated approach resonates with Gandhian ideals of Sarvodaya—upliftment of all through community-centred empowerment—and contributes to the national vision of Viksit Bharat @ 2047, positioning rural women as central agents of sustainable and inclusive rural development.



Link to Watch Video:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=rprVF6Z-kYw

Based on the theme of rural women's empowerment, Dr. R. Mani, Senior Professor, Department of Gandhian Thought and Peace Science, GRI, invited Dr. Jill Carr-Harris to deliver a lecture. Dr. Carr-Harris expressed her gratitude to dignitaries, including Vice Chancellor Prof. N. Panchanatham, Shri T. Ravichandran, Prof. K. Ravichandran, and Prof. R. Mani, for organizing a programme that connects Higher Education Institutions with rural communities, especially UBA villages. She highlighted how such engagement enables students to learn from grassroots realities while supporting rural development and women's empowerment.

Drawing from her early work with women's groups in Uttarakhand, Dr. Carr-Harris shared her personal connection to Gandhian philosophy, emphasizing its relevance to skill development, enterprise promotion, and social transformation. She noted the decline in women's labour force participation from 34% to 27% and persistent economic inequality, where 10% of the population holds 77% of national wealth, despite women's critical contributions. Highlighting Gandhian economic principles, she stressed the importance of small-scale, village-based industries for inclusive development rooted in women's agency and dignity.

She cited successful initiatives such as the Keystone Foundation in Kotagiri, which supports Adivasi women through forest-based livelihoods and market linkages; Charaka Weaves in Karnataka, empowering Dalit women with weaving skills and natural dye-based textile markets; and New Dawn Enterprises in Canada, which reinvests community profits into local development. She urged HEIs to support women-led enterprises through participatory learning, skill training, enterprise mentoring, and market facilitation. Concluding, she emphasized that strengthening rural women's entrepreneurship is essential to achieving Viksit Bharat @ 2047.



6.3: Technical Session – 3

Promoting Sustainable Rural Enterprises and Green Non-Farm Livelihoods

Non-farm rural enterprises and green livelihoods are increasingly recognized as essential pathways for diversifying household incomes and reducing rural poverty. This perspective draws from development economics, green livelihood frameworks, sustainable rural enterprise theory, and Gandhian Constructive Programme principles that emphasize self-reliance, local production, and ecological harmony (Lanjouw & Murgai, 2020; Mehrotra & Parida, 2023). Research shows that non-farm activities contribute a growing share of rural household incomes, driven by expanding demand for eco-friendly products and renewable energy-based enterprises.

Green enterprises—such as biomass-based industries, waste-to-wealth innovations, natural fibre products, and sustainable crafts—hold significant potential for promoting low-carbon, resource-efficient rural development (Mehrotra & Parida, 2023). Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs), UBA clusters, and students can play a supportive role by incubating rural entrepreneurs, facilitating local innovations, strengthening market linkages, and connecting communities with appropriate government schemes. This integrated approach reflects Gandhian values of Swadeshi and sustainable village industries, while contributing meaningfully to India's journey towards Viksit Bharat @ 2047.

Green enterprises—such as biomass-based industries, waste-to-wealth initiatives, natural fibre products, and sustainable crafts—offer substantial potential for low-carbon and resource-efficient rural development (Mehrotra & Parida, 2023). Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs), UBA clusters, and students can support these enterprises through entrepreneur incubation, facilitation of local innovations, strengthening of market linkages, and connecting communities with relevant government schemes. This approach is closely aligned with Gandhian ideals of Swadeshi and sustainable village industries, while contributing directly to India's vision of Viksit Bharat @ 2047.



Link to Watch Video:

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Dr. T. Ravichandran, Senior Faculty Member of the Department of Gandhian Thought and Peace Science at GRI, welcomed Dr. R. Rajagopal to deliver a lecture on the above theme. Dr. R. Rajagopal appreciated the powerful ideas shared earlier and expressed that the theme of connecting university knowledge with local community wisdom is deeply meaningful, especially for empowering marginalized groups. He reflected on India's long struggle for land reforms and highlighted the success of organic farming movements where thousands of families transformed their lives after gaining land rights. He emphasized that land reform must go beyond allocation to include the retrieval of lost land, regularization, and the resolution of land conflicts. He also highlighted the need to reassess current development models that displace Adivasis and compel them to migrate to cities. He stressed that rural communities are socially, culturally, and spiritually rich, and their knowledge must be respected by educated youth. Universities, through initiatives like UBA, can play a vital role in transferring skills, promoting sustainable livelihoods, and creating economic opportunities, as seen in examples such as women-led beekeeping in Chambal and Lantana-based craft enterprises in Gudalur. He concluded by urging collective action that protects land, revitalizes rural strengths, and enables self-reliant, green livelihoods across India.



7. Conclusion

The deliberations reaffirmed that achieving Viksit Bharat @ 2047 depends on strengthening rural livelihoods through community-led, environmentally sustainable, and locally rooted development models inspired by Gandhian principles. Green, non-farm, and circular economy-based rural enterprises, aligned with Swadeshi and local resource use, were identified as viable pathways to address agrarian distress, gender inequality, and ecological challenges while building resilient regional economies.

The discussions highlighted the critical role of Higher Education Institutions under the UBA in translating knowledge into action by supporting rural entrepreneurship through technology transfer, value-chain linkages, incubation, and participatory research. In his concluding address, Dr. K. Ravichandran emphasized academia's responsibility to work closely with rural communities, especially Adivasi groups and women, through social and solidarity economy approaches. With Gandhigram Rural Institute's extensive UBA network, the insights from the Dialogue are expected to guide actionable interventions in 2026–2027, reinforcing a collaborative pathway toward self-reliant rural communities aligned with Viksit Bharat @ 2047.

8. Notes:

- 1) This Policy Note is the outcome of International Expert Dialogue on Reimagining Rural Livelihoods through UBA and Higher Education: Towards a Gandhian Pathway to Viksit Bharat @ 2047, which is jointly organized by UBA-SEG Rural Livelihood & Department of Gandhian Thought & Peace Science, The Gandhigram Rural Institute (DTBU) Gandhigram, Tamil Nadu
- 2) Gram Swaraj refers to Gandhi's vision of autonomous, self-governed village republics with economic and political self-reliance.
- 3) Nai Talim (Basic Education) integrates productive work with learning, promoting holistic education combining intellectual, manual, and social development.
- 4) Gandhi's Constructive Programme is a practical action plan designed to strengthen rural society through village industries, sanitation, and women's empowerment.
- 5) Trusteeship is Gandhi's ethical economic doctrine emphasizing responsible stewardship of wealth and natural resources for collective welfare.
- 6) Rural Livelihood are the set of activities that the socio-economic systems constitute to determine employment and income generation in rural areas.
- 7) Unnat Bharat Abhiyan is flagship programme of Ministry of Education, Government of India. The programme was launched on 11th November 2014. UBA 1.0 was the Invitation Mode in which PIs were invited to be a part of UBA. During this first phase, 143 Higher Educational Institutions joined with UBA as PIs. UBA 2.0 was launched on 25th April 2018 with the Challenge Mode, wherein all Higher Educational Institutions are required to serve in at least five villages willingly. IIT, Delhi is the National Coordinating Institute for UBA. The Gandhigram Rural Institute is a Regional Coordinating Institute and Coordinator for UBA-Subject Expert Group on Rural Livelihood. More details about UBA are at: <https://unnatbharatabhiyan.gov.in>
- 8) Higher Education Institutions includes polytechnics, colleges, universities, and other academic institutions
- 9) Vikshit Bharat @ 2047 envisions a developed India rooted in equity, sustainability, and self-reliance, echoing Gandhian ideals of human dignity, community wellbeing, and balanced development.

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Programme Schedule

Time (IST)	Programme / Title	Name of the Resource Person	Rural Livelihood Topic
15.00-15.05	Welcome Address	Prof.K.Ravichandran Senior Professor & Coordinator, UBA-SEG – Rural Livelihood GRI (DTBU), Gandhigram	
15.05-15.15	Inauguration of the Programme	Prof.N.Panchanatham, Vice Chancellor GRI (DTBU), Gandhigram	
Technical Session -1			
15.15-15.20	Moderator	Prof.K.Ravichandran Senior Professor & Coordinator, UBA-SEG – Rural Livelihood GRI (DTBU), Gandhigram	
15.20-15.35	Resource Person	Mr.Bakul C Joshi President and COO, T.Stanes Company Ltd., Coimbatore Professor of Practice, GRI (DTBU), Gandhigram	Climate Resilient and Technology Enabled Agricultural Transformation
Technical Session -2			
15.35-15.40	Moderator	Prof.R.Mani Senior Professor & Head Department of Gandhian Thought and Peace Science, GRI (DTBU), Gandhigram	
15.40-15.55	Resource Person	Dr.Jill Carr-Harris Director, International Gandhian Institute for Non-Violence and Peace – CESCI, Canada & Madurai	Empowering Rural Women through Skills, Enterprise Development and Social Transformation.
Technical Session -3			
15.55-16.00	Moderator	Dr.T.Ravichandran Faculty Department of Gandhian Thought and Peace Science, GRI (DTBU), Gandhigram	
16.00-16.15	Resource Person	Dr.P.V.Rajagopal Founder, Ekta Parishad, Bhopal	Promoting Sustainable Enterprises and Green Non-Farm Livelihoods
16.15-16.30	Concluding Remarks	Dr.Meenakshi, Senior Scientist, UBA, NCI, IIT Delhi	

GRI - SEG on RL

UBA-SEG for Rural Livelihoods supports and uplifts livelihood projects across UBA network villages throughout India.

GRI - RCI

Since March 6, 2019, GRI serves as the **Regional Coordinating Institute (RCI)** for UBA in Southern Tamil Nadu. In this role, GRI guides 179 PIs in integrating rural realities into academic curricula and facilitates development interventions in over 895 villages.

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