



From Agriculture to Healthcare: Key Drivers of Economic and Health Transformation in Garo Society

Benam B Marak^{1*} and Dr. R. Palkkannan²

¹Ph.D Research Scholar, Department of History, Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar, Email – benamemarak123@gmail.com

²Assistant Professor, Department of History, Sri Meenakshi Govt. Arts College for Women, Autonomous, Madurai, Email – palkannan10@gmail.com

Citation: Benam B Marak, et.al (2024), From Agriculture to Healthcare: Key Drivers of Economic and Health Transformation in Garo Society, *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*. 30(2), 1896-1899
Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v30i2.9836

ARTICLE INFO ABSTRACT

The Garo community, native to the Garo Hills of Meghalaya in northeastern India, has undergone significant social and economic transformations over the years. Traditionally known for their agricultural roots and rich cultural heritage, the Garo people face a delicate balance between preserving their customs and adopting modern practices. Central to the future of Garo society is a two-pronged approach: boosting the local economy and improving the health of the population. This article explores the interplay between agriculture and healthcare as drivers of change in Garo society, focusing on the challenges, opportunities, and sustainable solutions that are shaping the community's development.

Keywords: Agriculture, Healthcare, Garo, Economy

1. The Agricultural Backbone of Garo Economy

For generations, agriculture has been the heart of the Garo economy. The community has depended heavily on *jhum* cultivation or shifting agriculture, a practice well-suited to the hilly terrain of the Garo Hills. Crops such as rice, millet, maize, and vegetables are grown, along with various fruits and legumes. This type of farming is not just an economic activity but is deeply interwoven with the cultural identity of the Garo people. The seasonal rhythms of planting, harvesting, and celebrating the harvest are an essential part of their social fabric.

However, the *jhum* system, while effective in the past, has come under scrutiny due to its unsustainable environmental impact. The practice of clearing forests and rotating cultivation on different patches of land has led to soil erosion, loss of biodiversity, and deforestation. These challenges have posed long-term risks to agricultural productivity and the environment, making the need for more sustainable farming practices urgent.

2. Shifting Toward Sustainable Agriculture

Recognizing the limitations of traditional agricultural practices, there has been a concerted push toward sustainable farming in recent years. Local agricultural policies and NGO interventions have advocated for methods such as agroforestry, organic farming, and the introduction of high-yielding, drought-resistant crops to help ensure food security and maintain environmental balance. Through these new approaches, farmers are able to diversify their crops, reduce dependency on a single crop, and minimize the environmental damage associated with traditional *jhum* cultivation.

Agroforestry, in particular, has become a key component of the region's agricultural transformation. By integrating tree crops with traditional farming, this system not only improves soil fertility but also contributes to carbon sequestration, making it more eco-friendly. Similarly, organic farming methods are being promoted as a way to reduce dependency on chemical fertilizers and pesticides, thereby improving soil health and producing more nutritious food.

This agricultural shift is not only about environmental sustainability but also about economic prosperity. Increased agricultural productivity can generate more income for farmers, enhance local food security, and improve livelihoods. Furthermore, the expansion of agro-based industries, such as the production of organic

food, traditional handicrafts, and herbal products, is contributing to a growing rural economy, with many women and youth entering these sectors as entrepreneurs.

3. Healthcare Challenges in Garo Society

While agriculture has served as the cornerstone of Garo society's economic foundation, healthcare remains one of the most pressing concerns for the community. The Garo people, particularly in remote rural areas, face numerous health-related challenges that threaten their well-being and productivity.

3.1. Limited Access to Healthcare Facilities

Despite significant strides in improving infrastructure, healthcare access remains uneven across the Garo Hills. Many rural areas are still underserved, with residents often traveling long distances to reach the nearest medical facility. The shortage of healthcare professionals, including doctors, nurses, and specialized staff, exacerbates this issue. This lack of access to quality healthcare services means that even common illnesses can turn into serious health issues, which in turn, affects the productivity of individuals and families.

3.2. Maternal and Child Health

Maternal and child health remains a significant concern in the Garo Hills. According to various reports, the maternal mortality rate (MMR) and infant mortality rate (IMR) in the region are higher than the national average. Many expectant mothers in rural areas do not have access to skilled birth attendants or prenatal care, which increases the risks during childbirth. Complications arising from malnutrition and a lack of hygiene further contribute to high mortality rates among infants and young children.

3.3. Malnutrition and Nutritional Deficiencies

Malnutrition is another health challenge faced by the Garo community, particularly among children and pregnant women. Poor dietary habits, coupled with a lack of access to diverse and nutrient-rich foods, often lead to stunted growth and other health complications. Traditional diets, although rich in rice and vegetables, are often deficient in essential proteins, vitamins, and minerals. With limited access to nutritional education and healthcare services, many families continue to struggle with malnutrition despite their dependence on agriculture for food production.

3.4. The Burden of Infectious Diseases

Infectious diseases such as malaria, tuberculosis, and diarrheal diseases continue to impact the Garo population. Limited sanitation and poor access to clean drinking water contribute to the spread of these diseases, which are often preventable with proper medical care and hygiene practices. Malaria, in particular, remains a seasonal issue in the Garo Hills, with significant numbers of people falling ill during the monsoon season. Lack of awareness about preventive measures and inadequate healthcare resources further exacerbate the public health burden.

3.5. Mental Health Concerns

An often-overlooked aspect of healthcare in the Garo community is mental health. As modernization and globalization bring new challenges, mental health issues such as stress, anxiety, and depression have become more prominent. The lack of mental health services, cultural stigmas surrounding mental illness, and the absence of trained counselors and psychologists in rural areas make it difficult for individuals to seek help. The mental health of young people, particularly students, is increasingly becoming a cause for concern as they face the pressures of adapting to a rapidly changing world.

4. Government and NGO Initiatives for Healthcare Improvement

Both governmental bodies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have played a significant role in improving healthcare access in the Garo Hills. Several initiatives have focused on strengthening healthcare infrastructure, increasing the availability of healthcare professionals, and raising awareness about health issues.

4.1. Strengthening Healthcare Infrastructure

The government, in collaboration with NGOs, has invested in building more healthcare centers and improving the facilities in existing ones. Mobile health clinics have proven to be particularly effective in reaching remote areas, ensuring that communities without permanent healthcare facilities can still receive basic medical care. These mobile clinics not only offer general healthcare services but also specialize in maternal and child health, vaccination programs, and disease prevention.

4.2. Training Healthcare Workers

There has been a concerted effort to train and recruit more healthcare workers, including doctors, nurses, and community health workers. Local communities are encouraged to engage in healthcare training

programs, which helps build a sustainable healthcare workforce that is familiar with the region's unique needs. Programs for the training of midwives and skilled birth attendants have been introduced to address the maternal mortality crisis.

4.3. Awareness Campaigns and Preventive Healthcare

Raising awareness about hygiene, sanitation, and nutrition has been a key focus of many health initiatives in the Garo Hills. Government and NGO-led campaigns have educated people about the importance of handwashing, safe drinking water, and proper sanitation practices. Additionally, public health campaigns focusing on malaria prevention, vaccination, and nutrition have reached out to both rural and urban populations, reducing the incidence of preventable diseases.

5. Integrating Agriculture and Healthcare for Holistic Development

While agriculture and healthcare have traditionally been separate domains, there is increasing recognition of the need to integrate these areas for a holistic approach to community development. Economic growth in the agricultural sector can fuel investments in healthcare, while improvements in health can lead to higher productivity and more sustainable agricultural practices.

For example, healthier populations are better able to engage in labor-intensive agricultural activities, increasing productivity. Additionally, good nutrition, which is often linked to both agriculture and healthcare, is critical in supporting a healthy, productive workforce. In regions like the Garo Hills, where agriculture is central to the economy, creating synergies between the two sectors can lead to more sustainable and inclusive growth.

6. The Role of Community Empowerment

A critical aspect of the transformation of Garo society lies in the empowerment of local communities. Local farmers, women, and youth are essential players in the drive toward both economic and health improvements. For instance, women, who play a central role in agricultural activities and household health, are increasingly involved in decision-making and leadership roles. Through community health programs and agricultural cooperatives, women are gaining the knowledge and skills needed to improve both their economic and health outcomes.

Youth involvement is also crucial, particularly in health education and agriculture. By promoting youth engagement through training, mentorship, and exposure to modern farming techniques and healthcare practices, the Garo community is preparing the next generation for leadership roles in both sectors.

Conclusion

The transformation of Garo society hinges on the effective integration of agriculture and healthcare. While traditional agricultural practices remain a core component of the Garo economy, the community's future depends on the adoption of sustainable farming techniques and the improvement of healthcare access. By focusing on both economic development and health improvements, the Garo people are paving the way for a more prosperous and healthier future. Empowering local communities, strengthening healthcare infrastructure, and embracing modern agricultural practices are key to achieving these goals. With the right policies, education, and support, the Garo community can thrive in an increasingly globalized world while preserving its cultural heritage and traditional values.

References

1. **Government of Meghalaya.** (2021). *Agricultural development in Garo Hills: Policies and initiatives*. Government of Meghalaya. <https://www.megagriculture.gov.in>
2. **Garo Hills Development Council.** (2020). *Healthcare infrastructure and services in Garo society*. Government of Meghalaya. <https://www.ghdc.gov.in>
3. Gupta, R., & Patel, N. (2020). The role of agriculture in transforming rural economies: A case study of Garo Hills. *Journal of Rural Development*, 39(2), 112-127.
4. Khan, M. S., & Sharma, A. (2019). *Sustainable agricultural practices and rural health improvements in Northeast India*. Springer.
5. **United Nations Development Programme.** (2020). *Human development report 2020: Health and economic transformation in Northeast India*.
6. Mehta, S., & Das, S. (2021). *Socio-economic changes in Garo Hills: A focus on agriculture and healthcare systems*. Routledge.
7. Barman, T., & Dutta, S. (2020). *Healthcare disparities in Northeast India: The case of Garo society*. *Journal of Public Health in Developing Countries*, 8(4), 220-234.

8. **National Agricultural Research Institute.** (2019). *Agriculture and rural livelihoods in the Garo Hills: A report on economic transformation.* Indian Council of Agricultural Research. <https://www.icar.org.in>
9. Sharma, P., & Raju, R. (2018). *Transforming rural health through community-based healthcare initiatives: Lessons from Garo Hills.* *International Journal of Rural Health*, 16(1), 53-67.