

# Socio-economic Transition and Livelihood Transformation among Tribal Communities in Tamil Nadu: A Multi-Tribe Analysis

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## Abstract

Tribal communities in Tamil Nadu have experienced gradual but uneven socio-economic change as traditional livelihood practices increasingly interact with wage employment, education, markets, migration, state-supported development programmes and new forms of economic activity. The process cannot be understood as a simple replacement of traditional occupations by modern employment. Instead, households frequently combine agriculture, forest-based activities, livestock rearing, agricultural labour, casual wage work, small-scale enterprise and migration according to their access to land, natural resources, skills, infrastructure and markets. This article examines these processes through a multi-tribe analysis of tribal communities in Tamil Nadu. The study is based entirely on secondary sources, including Census of India 2011 data, Government of Tamil Nadu publications, Ministry of Tribal Affairs documents, statutory and policy documents, and selected academic studies. The review shows that livelihood diversification has become a prominent feature of tribal economic life, while agriculture and forest-related activities continue to retain importance in many locations. Education has widened occupational aspirations, although geographical isolation, household poverty, limited educational facilities and weak access to formal employment continue to constrain mobility. Migration functions as an additional livelihood strategy where local employment is inadequate, but its benefits may be accompanied by employment insecurity and weak social protection. The literature also indicates that women make substantial contributions to household livelihoods, while their economic participation remains constrained by unequal access to assets, markets, skills and decision-making.

**Keywords:** Tribal communities; Tamil Nadu; Scheduled Tribes; socio-economic transition; livelihood transformation; livelihood diversification; forest dependence; migration; education; tribal development

## **Introduction**

Tribal communities form an important part of India's social and cultural diversity. Their institutions, languages, ecological knowledge and livelihood practices have developed through long-term interaction with specific landscapes. At the same time, many tribal communities have experienced persistent disadvantages in relation to land access, education, employment, infrastructure, healthcare, markets and participation in formal economic institutions. These structural conditions shape the ways in which households respond to economic and social change.

Livelihood is therefore a useful entry point for examining socio-economic transition. A household livelihood is rarely confined to a single occupation. It may include cultivation, livestock rearing, forest-product collection, agricultural labour, casual wage employment, petty trade, handicrafts, salaried work and migration. The combination of activities may vary by season, ecological conditions, household labour availability, access to productive assets and local market opportunities. Consequently, livelihood change is better understood as a process of diversification and reorganisation than as a complete shift from a traditional to a modern economy.

Tamil Nadu provides an important setting for such an analysis because its Scheduled Tribe population is relatively small in relation to the total population of the state but is internally diverse. Census 2011 provides separate information for numerous Scheduled Tribe communities and shows that tribal populations are distributed across different ecological and administrative settings. The official Census catalogue identifies communities including Irular, Kattunayakan, Kurumans, Malayali, Palliyar, Paniyan, Sholaga, Toda, Kota, Kanikkar and others. The geographical distribution of these communities is relevant because access to land, forests, roads, education, health services, employment and markets varies considerably across locations. The present article examines socio-economic transition and livelihood transformation from a multi-tribe perspective. It does not claim to provide primary survey estimates. Instead, it synthesises secondary evidence in order to identify broad patterns in livelihood change, occupational diversification, education, migration, market participation, women's economic contribution, infrastructure and access to government programmes. The purpose is to develop an analytical understanding of continuity and change across tribal communities while recognising differences between communities and locations.

## **Objectives of the Study**

- To examine the major dimensions of socio-economic transition among tribal communities in Tamil Nadu.
- To review changes in traditional and contemporary livelihood strategies, including agriculture, forest-based activities, livestock rearing, wage employment and migration.

- To examine the role of education, market participation, infrastructure and government programmes in shaping livelihood opportunities.
- To understand the importance of livelihood diversification and the continuing constraints faced by tribal households.
- To identify policy directions for sustainable, inclusive and community-sensitive tribal development.

## Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative and descriptive secondary-data research design. The analysis draws on official Census of India tables, Government of Tamil Nadu statistical and policy publications, Ministry of Tribal Affairs reports and selected peer-reviewed or scholarly literature concerning tribal livelihoods, natural-resource dependence, livelihood diversification, education, health, migration and socio-economic vulnerability. Census 2011 is used as the principal population and occupational reference point because it provides detailed information on Scheduled Tribes at the state and district levels. The official Census catalogue confirms the availability of separate Scheduled Tribe tables for Tamil Nadu, including population, religious composition, mother tongue and district-level

information. [cite](#) [turn1search0](#) [turn1search1](#) [turn1search10](#)

The literature was reviewed thematically rather than through a formal systematic-review protocol. The major themes were: (i) traditional livelihood systems and natural-resource dependence; (ii) occupational change and livelihood diversification; (iii) education and socio-economic mobility; (iv) migration and labour-market participation; (v) women's contribution to livelihoods; (vi) market integration and infrastructure; and (vii) government interventions and institutional support. The multi-tribe approach is used to avoid treating Tamil Nadu's tribal population as a homogeneous social category.

The study has important limitations. Census 2011 remains the principal comprehensive population benchmark, and the present article does not generate new household-level estimates. In addition, published studies differ in geographical coverage, methods and time periods. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted as a synthesis of broad patterns rather than as a single statistical estimate applicable to every tribal community in Tamil Nadu.

## Review of Literature

The livelihood-diversification literature indicates that rural and tribal households do not necessarily abandon traditional livelihood activities when new economic opportunities emerge. Instead, households often combine farm and non-farm activities to manage economic risks, respond to seasonal employment opportunities and maintain household consumption. **Ellis (2000)** explains that livelihood diversification involves the process by which households develop a range of income-

generating activities and social-support mechanisms to improve or protect their livelihood security. Similarly, **Barrett, Reardon and Webb (2001)** argue that rural households diversify their livelihood portfolios in response to changing economic opportunities, risks and constraints. Their work suggests that diversification should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of upward socio-economic mobility, since households may diversify either because new opportunities are available or because existing livelihood sources are inadequate.

In the context of tribal communities, **Rasul, Karki and Sah (2008)** examined the role of non-timber forest products in poverty reduction and showed that forest-based resources can contribute to household income and employment. However, the sustainability of such livelihoods depends on resource availability, institutional arrangements and access to markets. This perspective is particularly relevant to tribal communities whose economic activities continue to be connected with forests and natural resources.

More recent research has strengthened the importance of context-specific livelihood interventions. **Kakati (2026)**, in a study of an Integrated Tribal Development Project in Assam, found that agricultural diversification and livelihood interventions could create employment and expand economic opportunities, including opportunities for women. Although the study was conducted in Assam rather than Tamil Nadu, its findings demonstrate the importance of connecting livelihood programmes with locally appropriate production systems, skills, training and institutional support. The study also indicates that livelihood interventions are more effective when they respond to the specific socio-economic and ecological conditions of tribal communities.

Tamil Nadu-specific studies further demonstrate considerable variation among tribal communities. **Palaniappan, Balakrishnan and Kaspar (2026)** examined the relationship between nutritional intake and socio-economic status among the Irular community and found that socio-economic conditions are closely associated with household nutritional well-being. Their study indicates that tribal socio-economic development cannot be assessed solely in terms of employment or income, as nutrition and other dimensions of household well-being are also important.

Research on the Kattunayakan community has similarly highlighted the importance of considering socio-economic conditions, cultural practices, living conditions and health-seeking behaviour. **Yoganandham (2023)** examined these dimensions among the Kattunayakan tribes of the Nilgiris and emphasised the importance of understanding tribal communities within their specific cultural and socio-economic contexts. Such community-specific research demonstrates that findings from one tribal group cannot automatically be generalised to all Scheduled Tribe communities in Tamil Nadu. Recent research has also drawn attention to the emerging digital dimension of tribal livelihoods. **Thomas and Karlekar (2026)** examined the intergenerational socio-economic and digital challenges

experienced by the Paniyan tribal community and discussed their implications for livelihood capital. Their study is significant because digital connectivity is increasingly associated with access to education, employment information, government services, financial services and markets. At the same time, unequal access to digital technologies may create an additional dimension of socio-economic exclusion among remote and economically disadvantaged communities.

The broader policy literature also supports a multidimensional understanding of tribal development. The High Level Committee on Socio-Economic, Health and Educational Status of Tribal Communities in India **(Government of India, 2014)** highlighted the continuing disadvantages experienced by tribal populations in relation to land, forests, education, health, employment and access to public services. The report emphasised that tribal development cannot be assessed only through income indicators and should also consider access to productive resources, human capabilities, social services and institutional rights.

The reviewed literature therefore reveals three broad conclusions. First, tribal livelihood transformation is generally characterised by continuity, adaptation and diversification rather than the complete replacement of traditional occupations. Second, the contribution of livelihood diversification to socio-economic security depends on access to productive assets, education, infrastructure, markets, skills and supportive institutions. Third, considerable differences exist among tribal communities because of variations in ecological setting, cultural practices, resource dependence, geographical location and economic opportunities. The present study builds on these insights by bringing together evidence relating to several tribal communities in Tamil Nadu and examining socio-economic transition through a multi-tribe perspective.

#### 4.1 Selected Literature and Its Relevance to the Present Study

| Source                                            | Focus                                         | Key contribution                                                                                        | Relevance                                                               |
|---------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| High Level Committee on Tribal Communities (2014) | Socio-economic, health and educational status | Shows that tribal disadvantage is multidimensional and linked to assets, services and institutions.     | Provides the broad structural context for analysing transition.         |
| Rasul, Karki & Sah (2008)                         | Non-timber forest products                    | Highlights livelihood and poverty-reduction potential as well as sustainability and market constraints. | Supports analysis of forest-based livelihoods and market vulnerability. |

|                                           |                                                                |                                                                                                       |                                                                           |
|-------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Wilson, Mignone & Sinclair (2014)         | Livelihood diversification                                     | Shows that diversification is shaped by local context and may have different sustainability outcomes. | Supports the distinction between resilience and distress diversification. |
| Kakati (2025/2026)                        | Integrated tribal development and agricultural diversification | Shows how locally relevant livelihood interventions can expand employment and women's participation.  | Informs policy discussion on targeted livelihood programmes.              |
| Palaniappan, Balakrishnan & Kaspar (2026) | Irular socio-economic and nutritional conditions               | Connects socio-economic status with household well-being among Irular communities.                    | Demonstrates the need for tribe-specific evidence.                        |
| Thomas & Karlekar (2026)                  | Paniyan socio-economic and digital challenges                  | Highlights intergenerational and digital dimensions of livelihood capital.                            | Supports inclusion of digital access in contemporary livelihood analysis. |

#### **Conceptual Understanding of Socio-economic Transition and Livelihood Transformation**

The present study consequently treats socio-economic transition as a multidimensional process involving economic, social, institutional and cultural change. It does not equate modernisation with the disappearance of traditional practices. Instead, it recognises that traditional knowledge, community institutions and cultural practices may continue alongside new forms of employment, education and market participation.

#### **Tribal Population and Diversity in Tamil Nadu**

Census 2011 provides detailed official information on Scheduled Tribe populations in Tamil Nadu. The state-level Census tables identify numerous communities, including Adiyar, Aranadan, Eravallan, Irular, Kadar, Kanikkar, Kattunayakan, Kota, Kurumbas, Kurumans, Malayali, Mannan, Mudugar/Muduvan, Palliyar, Paniyan, Sholaga, Toda and Uraly, among others. The official district and state tables demonstrate that the tribal population is distributed across multiple ecological and administrative settings. The original manuscript reports a Scheduled Tribe population of 794,697 in

Tamil Nadu according to Census 2011. This figure is retained here as a source-based figure from the manuscript; it should be checked against the exact Census table used for final publication if the journal requires a table-level citation. The official Census catalogue confirms that Tamil Nadu has separate Scheduled Tribe datasets and district-wise tables. The geographical distribution of tribal communities is important for interpreting livelihood differences. Communities living in hill and forest areas may have stronger links with forests, livestock and rain-fed cultivation, while communities located closer to towns may have greater access to wage employment, education, transport and markets. A multi-tribe analysis must therefore consider both community identity and location.

## **Traditional Livelihood Systems**

### **Forest-based Livelihoods**

Forests have historically supported several tribal communities through food collection, fuel, medicinal resources, honey, fruits, roots, tubers and other non-timber forest products. Forest dependence is not merely an economic relationship; it also involves ecological knowledge concerning plant species, seasonal cycles and environmental conditions. However, changes in forest governance, conservation arrangements, resource access and markets have altered the economic role of forest products. Research on non-timber forest products in India indicates that such resources can support income and employment but that sustainability and market access remain critical concerns.

### **Agriculture**

Agriculture remains important for several tribal households, although its form and importance differ by geography, landholding, rainfall and irrigation. Where households possess cultivable land, farming can contribute to food security and income. For land-poor households, agricultural labour may be more important than cultivation. Small holdings, inadequate irrigation, input costs, climatic uncertainty and weak market access can reduce the stability of agricultural income.

### **Livestock and Pastoralism**

Livestock contributes to household livelihood through food, income, manure and savings. It may also have cultural significance. The Toda community of the Nilgiris is particularly associated with buffalo-based pastoral traditions. Contemporary livelihood diversification has expanded the range of economic activities available to households, but pastoral practices continue to have cultural importance.

### **Wage Labour**

Wage labour has become increasingly significant where households have limited productive assets. Agricultural labour, plantation work, construction and other casual employment provide cash income, but such work may be seasonal, insecure and poorly protected. The growing importance of wage labour therefore reflects both greater market integration and continuing economic vulnerability.

## **Changing Occupational Patterns**

Census worker classifications distinguish cultivators, agricultural labourers, household-industry workers, other workers, main workers, marginal workers and non-workers. These categories demonstrate that tribal employment cannot be reduced to traditional occupations. Agriculture remains important in many locations, but wage labour and non-farm employment have gained importance. Education has widened occupational aspirations, particularly among younger generations. Formal employment, skilled work, services, teaching, healthcare and small enterprises may provide alternatives to traditional livelihoods. Nevertheless, occupational change should not automatically be interpreted as improvement. A transition from subsistence cultivation to casual employment may increase cash income while simultaneously increasing exposure to employment insecurity.

## **Livelihood Diversification**

Livelihood diversification is a central feature of contemporary tribal economic life. Households may combine cultivation, agricultural labour, livestock, forest collection, wage employment and migration. Diversification can reduce risk when one activity is affected by drought, seasonal unemployment or market fluctuations. It can also help households meet education, health and consumption expenses.

## **Multi-Tribe      Perspective**

### **Irular**

The Irular are one of the major Scheduled Tribe communities identified in Tamil Nadu. Their livelihood histories include relationships with forests, agriculture and wage labour. Contemporary economic change has increased interaction with market-oriented activities and labour markets. Recent research also indicates the importance of socio-economic conditions for household nutrition and well-being, reinforcing the need for tribe-specific development interventions.

### **Malayali**

Malayali communities are strongly associated with the hill regions of northern Tamil Nadu. Agriculture has historically been important, while changes in education, infrastructure, markets and employment have contributed to livelihood diversification. The community illustrates how agricultural livelihoods can coexist with emerging non-farm opportunities.

### **Kattunayakan**

Kattunayakan communities have strong historical associations with forest environments. Changes in access to forest resources and the increasing importance of cash income have influenced livelihood practices. Recent research has examined their socio-economic conditions, cultural practices, living conditions and health-seeking behaviour, indicating the importance of integrating livelihood, health and cultural dimensions in development planning.

### **Kurumba**

Kurumba communities are particularly associated with the Nilgiris. Their livelihood systems have been influenced by forests, agriculture and local ecological knowledge. Education and employment opportunities have gradually expanded the range of livelihood strategies, while cultural and ecological knowledge remain important.

### **Toda**

The Toda community is distinguished by its pastoral heritage in the Nilgiris, especially buffalo-based pastoralism. Modern education, market participation and employment have diversified contemporary household economies, but pastoral traditions retain cultural significance.

### **Kota**

Kota communities have historically been associated with agriculture, craft production and service-related activities. The expansion of education and formal employment has created additional occupational possibilities, while traditional skills continue to contribute to cultural identity.

### **Paniyan**

Paniyan communities are associated particularly with the Nilgiris and adjoining regions. Agricultural and plantation labour have historically been important. Recent scholarship also points to intergenerational socio-economic and digital challenges, indicating that contemporary livelihood analysis must consider digital access alongside conventional assets and employment.

### **Kanikkar**

Kanikkar communities are associated with the southern Western Ghats. Their livelihood systems have been influenced by forests, agriculture and changing markets. Improved access to education and public services can create new opportunities, while sustainable natural-resource management remains important.

### **Education and Socio-economic Mobility**

Education is one of the most important pathways through which tribal households can expand access to information, formal employment and social institutions. Higher levels of education may alter occupational aspirations and increase interest in skilled or salaried employment. However, educational participation is influenced by distance to institutions, household poverty, transportation, availability of hostels, quality of schooling and continuity of support. Government measures such as scholarships, residential facilities and educational support are therefore important. The High Level Committee on Tribal Communities emphasised the continuing educational disadvantages experienced by tribal populations and the need for interventions that address structural barriers rather than only

enrolment. Education should consequently be viewed as both a social capability and an economic investment that can influence long-term occupational mobility.

## **Youth and Changing Aspirations**

Younger tribal people are increasingly exposed to educational institutions, digital technology, media and urban labour markets. These influences may generate aspirations for government employment, professional work, entrepreneurship and skilled occupations. Such aspirations do not necessarily imply rejection of community identity. Cultural practices, family networks and traditional knowledge may continue alongside new educational and occupational trajectories.

## **Migration and Livelihood Strategies**

Migration can function as an important livelihood strategy when local employment is insufficient. Seasonal or temporary migration may involve movement to agricultural areas, plantations, construction sites or nearby towns. Migration can increase household income and diversify livelihood opportunities, but workers may also face insecure employment, inadequate accommodation, occupational risks and limited access to social protection. Children's education may be disrupted when households migrate seasonally.

## **Market Integration**

Tribal households are increasingly connected to cash-based markets through the sale of agricultural products, livestock, forest products and labour. Market participation can create income opportunities, but producers may have weak bargaining power because of limited access to transport, storage, processing, market information and institutional buyers. Research on forest products similarly demonstrates that resource availability alone does not guarantee improved incomes; value chains and market institutions influence the returns received by producers.

## **Women and Livelihood Transformation**

Tribal women have long contributed to household economies through cultivation, forest-product collection, livestock care, wage labour, food processing and household production. Contemporary livelihood diversification has expanded opportunities for participation in self-help groups, wage employment and small-scale economic activities. Women's earnings can strengthen household resilience and increase their role in financial decision-making. However, paid work is often combined with unpaid domestic and care responsibilities. Women's economic empowerment therefore requires more than participation in income-generating activities. Access to education, skills, credit, productive assets, markets, technology and collective institutions is also necessary. Recent evidence from tribal livelihood interventions elsewhere in India suggests that targeted training and diversification can contribute to women's workforce participation, although outcomes remain context dependent.

## **Housing, Infrastructure and Basic Amenities**

Improved housing, electricity, drinking water, roads, communication and digital connectivity can reduce the geographical disadvantages experienced by remote tribal settlements. However, the

existence of physical infrastructure does not automatically ensure effective access. Travel time, transport frequency, service quality and affordability also matter. Digital connectivity is increasingly important because information about education, employment, markets and public services is increasingly delivered through digital platforms. Recent scholarship on the Paniyan community highlights the relevance of digital inequality to intergenerational livelihood challenges. **Health and Social Well-being**

Health is closely connected to livelihood security. Illness can reduce household labour availability while increasing expenditure. Remote settlements may face difficulties in reaching healthcare facilities because of distance, transport constraints and limited service availability. Maternal health, child nutrition, communicable diseases, chronic conditions and regular access to medical care are therefore relevant to socio-economic well-being. Traditional health knowledge remains important in some communities and can be recognised as part of cultural knowledge, while accessible and appropriate modern healthcare remains essential. Recent research among Irular communities demonstrates that socio-economic status is associated with nutritional well-being, illustrating the need to consider health and livelihood conditions together rather than in isolation.

### **Government Development Programmes**

Government intervention has an important role in tribal socio-economic development. The Ministry of Tribal Affairs supports programmes addressing education, livelihoods, infrastructure and social protection. Current initiatives also emphasise the saturation of basic facilities and sustainable livelihood opportunities in Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group habitations. PM-JANMAN, launched in 2023–24, seeks to improve housing, drinking water, education, health and nutrition, road and telecommunications connectivity, electrification and sustainable livelihood opportunities for PVTG communities. The effectiveness of programmes depends not only on formal availability but also on awareness, documentation, transportation, administrative assistance, local institutional capacity and community participation. The broader tribal policy framework therefore needs to address the last-mile barriers that can prevent households from converting programme entitlements into actual improvements in livelihood security.

### **Major Socio-economic Challenges**

- Limited productive assets: Small or insecure landholdings and limited access to productive resources can restrict livelihood choices.
- Employment insecurity: Casual and seasonal employment may provide cash income without adequate job security or social protection.
- Educational barriers: Distance, poverty, transport constraints and limited facilities can reduce educational continuity.

- Geographical isolation: Remoteness can increase the cost of accessing schools, hospitals, markets and government offices.
- Market vulnerability: Weak bargaining power and limited processing and storage facilities can reduce producer returns.
- Resource constraints: Changes in access to forests and natural resources can affect households that depend on them.
- Migration risks: Temporary migration may create income opportunities while also exposing workers to insecure employment and service-access difficulties.
- Gender inequality: Women contribute substantially to livelihoods but may have limited control over assets, income and decision-making.
- Cultural pressures: Economic change can place pressure on language, knowledge systems, customary practices and community institutions.

### **Major Findings**

- Tamil Nadu's tribal population is internally diverse, and livelihood patterns vary across communities and ecological settings.
- Traditional activities such as agriculture, forest-based work and livestock rearing continue to coexist with wage labour and other market-oriented activities.
- Livelihood diversification is a major feature of contemporary tribal economic life, but diversification may represent either resilience or coping with inadequate income.
- Education has widened occupational aspirations and can support long-term socio-economic mobility, although educational barriers remain.
- Migration can supplement household income where local employment is limited, but migrant workers may face insecure working and living conditions.
- Women make significant contributions to household livelihoods, while unequal access to assets, markets and decision-making continues to constrain their economic empowerment.
- Market integration can create opportunities, but better transport, information, value addition, collective marketing and institutional support are required to improve returns.
- Infrastructure and public programmes can improve living conditions, but access is uneven and last-mile implementation remains important.
- Sustainable tribal development requires policies that combine economic security, social services, environmental sustainability and cultural continuity.

### Discussion

### **Discussion**

The findings indicate that socio-economic transition among tribal communities in Tamil Nadu involves continuity, diversification and gradual change. Traditional livelihoods continue alongside wage employment, education, migration, market participation and government programmes. Livelihood diversification can strengthen resilience for households with access to land, skills, markets and institutions, but may also reflect vulnerability when activities are insecure and low-paid. Differences in ecology, land access, infrastructure, culture and market connectivity create varied experiences among Toda, Irular, Kattunayakan, Paniyan and Malayali communities. Therefore, tribal development requires context-specific strategies that integrate sustainable livelihoods, education, infrastructure, healthcare, digital access, women's empowerment and effective government support. **Policy Implications**

Tribal development in Tamil Nadu requires a comprehensive, community-specific approach that considers differences in ecology, livelihoods and local needs. Policies should promote sustainable agriculture, forest-based livelihoods, education, skill development and women's economic empowerment. Improved market access, decent employment, migrant protection and social security are also essential. Infrastructure development should strengthen roads, electricity, healthcare, communication and digital connectivity in remote settlements. Health and nutrition programmes should receive greater attention, particularly for vulnerable groups. At the same time, development planning should protect tribal languages, traditional ecological knowledge, cultural practices and community institutions. Participatory planning and effective implementation of welfare programmes are essential for achieving sustainable livelihoods, social inclusion and improved quality of life.

### **Conclusion**

The socio-economic transformation of tribal communities in Tamil Nadu reflects both continuity and change. Traditional livelihoods coexist with wage employment, education, migration and market participation. However, livelihood diversification has not eliminated vulnerability arising from limited assets, insecure employment, educational barriers and unequal access to services. Sustainable tribal development therefore requires inclusive, community-specific strategies that promote secure livelihoods, education, women's empowerment, healthcare, infrastructure, social protection and cultural preservation. Progress should be assessed through livelihood security, social inclusion, human capabilities and improved quality of life.

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