

Abstract

COVID-19, first identified in Wuhan, China in December 2019, rapidly evolved into a global public health emergency. India reported its first confirmed case on January 30, 2020, in Thrissur district, Kerala. The state's decentralised governance model, characterised by strong local institutions, a robust healthcare system, and active community engagement, played a critical role in its grassroots-level pandemic management. This study investigates the pandemic response of Elavally Gram Panchayat, a local self-government (LSG) institution in Thrissur, focusing on the strategies adopted and how the community perceived the effectiveness of local governance. Guided by the Social-Ecological Model (SEM), the study adopts an ex post facto mixed-methods approach to examine institutional actions alongside community-level experiences based on fieldwork. Structured interviews with the Panchayat President and Primary Health Centre (PHC) physician examined how state-level directives were implemented, adapted, or modified locally. These were complemented by unstructured interviews with other local government officials, PHC staff, and frontline workers to capture operational realities and coordination mechanisms. A community survey using a Likert scale was also conducted to assess public perceptions of the Panchayat's response. Findings show that the Panchayat optimised roles within the PHC to expand surge capacity, converting community infrastructure into quarantine and isolation centres, and mobilising frontline health workers and volunteers. It adopted a public health approach emphasizing social welfare, equity, and inclusive care at the grassroots level. However, despite the best efforts, community perceptions remained fragmented and varied across demographic groups. Youth felt excluded from decision-making; middle-aged residents faced combined economic and health-related stress; older adults experienced digital marginalisation; and lower-income households struggled to access basic services. While women expressed greater satisfaction due to gender-responsive measures, men noted gaps in psychosocial support systems. The findings underscore the need to institutionalise inclusive, adaptive, and resilient local governance frameworks. Future preparedness needs to prioritise equitable participation, digital inclusion, gender-sensitive planning, and integrated welfare support for vulnerable groups.

Keywords: COVID-19, Decentralised Governance, Response Actions, Challenges, Community Perceptions